



**Odair Pedroso Mateus**

**Beyond Confessionalism:**  
**Essays on the Practice of**  
**Reformed Ecumenicity**

**Emblema**  
**São Paulo**  
**2010**



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Layout and Cover: Marcos Gianelli

**Dados Internacionais de Catalogação na Publicação (CIP)**  
(Câmara Brasileira do Livro, SP, Brasil)

Mateus, Odair Pedroso  
Beyond confessionalism: essays on the practice of reformed ecumenicity / Odair Pedroso Mateus. - São Paulo: Emblema, 2010.

1. Aliança Mundial de Igrejas Reformadas  
2. Ecumenismo 3. Igrejas Congregacionais  
Presbiterianas 4. Igrejas reformadas 5. Igrejas  
reformadas - doutrinas 6. Renovação da igreja  
I. Título

ISBN 978-85-98820-08-8

10-06390

CDD-285

**Índices para catálogo sistemático:**

1. Igrejas Reformadas, Ecumenismo: Cristianismo  
285

**emblema**

Rua Eugênio da Silva, 301 02378040 São Paulo, SP Brasil



[55 11] 3582 4187

www.emblema.art.br



**For Katharina,  
after all these years...**





Our greatest difficulty lies in getting our eyes off the Communion of which we are parts and seeing only Jesus Christ, the crucified and glorified Son of God. Our denominationalism has obscured him (and I am using the word denomination as applied to all divisions of Christendom). Denominational loyalty is a foreign phrase in these days of an agonising world, Christ is supreme and to Him our loyalties belong. My denomination must grow less in my eyes if I am to grow more towards Christ. I am willing that my denomination shall be forgotten if thereby may be hastened the unity of the Church of our Lord. That denomination is most prophetic that is willing to disappear as deliberately as Christ went to His crucifixion.

**Peter Ainslie**  
**at the First Faith and Order World Conference,**  
**Lausanne 1927**





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## Preface

The aim of the four essays gathered in this book is to give evidence to the fact that a constitutive element of the self-understanding of the World Alliance of Reformed Churches (WARC) has been the unique way in which it has understood its engagement in the modern search for the visible unity of the one Church of Jesus Christ.

Why am I calling “unique” the WARC’s historical understanding of its ecumenical engagement?

Because for decades, in different ways and on number of occasions recorded in this book WARC has supported the view that the search for organic church union is the appropriate (and costly...) way of being obedient to the ecumenical imperative of making visible the unity given by God in Christ through the Spirit.

In other words, WARC has fostered the conviction that United churches should be seen as the natural destination of Reformed and Presbyterian churches; that therefore mutual recognition between churches should be envisaged as a stage on the way to full visible communion; that WARC itself, somewhat like John the Baptist, would inevitably diminish as its member churches would hopefully grow in ecumenicity.

Is this “unique way” coming of age?


I believe it is not. In late modernity, organic union translates the ecumenical imperative in all its costly radicality. It is at the same time an important rampart both against the recurring temptation of confessionalism and against the globalised temptation to dissociate the search for communion from the critical practice of compassion.

**Bossey,**

**Feast of Epiphany**

**2010**





**I**

**Towards an alliance of  
Reformation churches?  
The confessional and the ecumenical  
in the origins of the  
World Alliance of Reformed Churches**

*A confession which would intensify Presbyterianism and loosen the ties which unite us to the other branches of Christ's kingdom I would regard as a calamity. (...) We want a declaration of union, not a platform of disunion. Much as we esteem doctrinal unity, there is a higher unity, the unity of spiritual life, the unity of faith, the unity of love which binds us to Christ, and to all who love him, of whatever denomination or creed.*

**Swiss-American theologian Philip Schaff  
at the Alliance's first general council, Edinburgh, 1877**

*If we get our hearts large enough to embrace all our Presbyterian brethren, the proofs of enlargement will go on, and we shall begin to long earnestly for wider fellowship. I, for my part, never desired that this Alliance should end, as it were, with itself: but rather that it should be a step towards an Alliance that one day would have a vastly larger constituency, and that would form a more important contribution than we can make toward the swifter fulfilment of our Saviour's prayer – "That they all may be one".*

**William Blaikie, founder, secretary, then President of the Alliance, at the Belfast general council, 1884**

The purpose of this article – hopefully the first of a series of three – is to attempt a description of the interplay between what is confessional and what is ecumenical in some of the foundational expressions of the World Alliance of Reformed Churches' self-understanding as an institution that gathers churches sharing special bonds of communion, briefly what one calls in today's ecumenical language a Christian world communion.

My attempt is not primarily historiographic. I am not deploying here a set of agreed procedures in order to make sense of the past. Nor is it exhaustive. What I have just called "the foundational expressions" of the Alliance includes, for instance, documents from the International Congregational Council which I have not dealt with in preparation for this enquiry. My attempt is inspired and shaped by the question of the present and future of the ecumenical movement in general and the role that the World Alliance of Reformed

Churches, known as one of the Christian world communions, might play in it in particular.

One of the questions which translates the concern just mentioned is the following: How has the Alliance articulated at crucial points of its history those particular bonds of communion that supposedly constitute its institutional specificity with the call to the discipline of Christian communion, with the call to transform traditional confessional boundaries into gates of exchange of spiritual gifts? I am addressing this question to three constitutions adopted successively when the Presbyterian Alliance was created in 1875, when it reorganised itself following World War II and the creation of the World Council of Churches, in 1954, and when it merged with the International Congregational Council in 1970.

I am aware of the fact that this is a question widely debated within the ecumenical movement in the 1950s and 1960s and that ecumenical theology has come to terms with it by rejecting, for instance, the opposition between organic unity and reconciled diversity.<sup>1</sup> However, the perception, arguable as it might be, that a certain neo-confessionalisation of the ecumenical space might be one of the constitutive elements of the future ecumenical configuration suggests that, at least for the World Alliance of Reformed Churches, this should be dealt with as a question of the future rather than a question of the past.

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<sup>1</sup> Cf.: H. Fey, "Confessional Families and the Ecumenical Movement". H. Fey (ed.), *The Ecumenical Advance - A History of the Ecumenical Movement*, Geneva, WCC, 1986 (2nd ed.), pp.124-130; O. P. Mateus, "The Alliance, the Christian world communions and the ecumenical movement (1948-1957)". *Reformed World*, 54(2), June 2004, p.91-106; Y. Ishida, H. Meyer, E. Perret (eds), *The History and Theological Concerns of World Confessional Families*, Geneva, LWF, 1979, 80 pp.

How does the Alliance understand itself in 1875? What makes churches eligible for membership in the Alliance and points, therefore, to its confessional and institutional specificity? Are there elements and impulses that intentionally point to Christian fellowship beyond and above the Alliance's confessional and institutional specificity? In what follows, these three questions will be addressed to the Alliance's first constitution.

### **I. The Constitution of 1875**

The first constitution of the Alliance was adopted by representatives of twenty-one churches from Britain, United States and Western Europe who gathered in London in July 1875 to found "The Alliance of Reformed Churches throughout the World holding the Presbyterian System". It drew to a large extent on the results of preparatory discussions held in Edinburgh and New York, November and early December 1874.

In an age in which Protestantism had just become a world-wide phenomenon – thanks particularly to the British colonial empire and the related unparalleled missionary expansion that marked the 19th century – the Presbyterians from the heart of the Empire were unsurprisingly among the first ones to conceive and carry out the idea of what they then called a "Pan-Presbyterian Council" or an "ecumenical council" (in the geographic sense) in order to exhibit their "substantial unity" and promote "harmony of action" in mission.<sup>1</sup> Mission,

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<sup>1</sup> William G. Blaikie, "Introductory Narrative". *Report of Proceedings of the First General Presbyterian Council Convened at Edinburgh, July 1877*– With Relative Documents Bearing on the Affairs of the Council, and the State of the Presbyterian Churches Throughout the World. Edinburgh, Thomas and Archibald Constable, 1877, p.1-13.

Reformed unity, and mission in Reformed unity, let us not forget it, were among the main factors leading to the creation of the first Protestant Christian world communion.

In two rather long sentences, the Preamble of the first constitution of the new Alliance sets first of all the case for its existence. Churches “holding the Reformed faith, and organised on Presbyterian principles”<sup>2</sup> are found under different names in different parts of the world. Though they have wished for a long time “to maintain close relations”, these churches are at present united “by no visible bond”. In God’s providence, the time seems to have come when they may more fully “manifest their essential oneness, have closer communion with each other, and promote great causes by joint action”.<sup>3</sup> The Presbyterian Alliance is formed “to meet in general council from time to time” in order “to confer upon matters of common interest”, and “to further the ends for which the Church has been constituted by her Divine Lord and King”.<sup>4</sup>

The second long sentence of the Preamble states that the formation of the Presbyterian Alliance is not to be seen in opposition to other forms of inter-church cooperation. It should not affect “fraternal relations” with other Christian churches. On the contrary, the members of the new Alliance are ready to join with other churches “in Christian fellowship,

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<sup>2</sup> *Report of Proceedings of the First General Presbyterian Council Convened at Edinburgh, July 1877 - With Relative Documents Bearing on the Affairs of the Council, and the State of the Presbyterian Churches Throughout the World.* Edinburgh, Thomas and Archibald Constable, 1877, p.9. *Infra: Edinburgh 1877.*

<sup>3</sup> *Edinburgh 1877*, Preamble.

<sup>4</sup> *Edinburgh 1877*, Preamble.

and in advancing the cause of the Redeemer”.<sup>5</sup> They are ready to do so on the basis of “the general principle maintained and taught in the Reformed Confessions”, namely that the Church of God on earth, “though composed of many members, is one body in the communion of the Holy Ghost, of which body Christ is the supreme Head, and the Scriptures alone are the infallible law”.<sup>6</sup>

The four articles of the first constitution deal successively with the official name of the Alliance, eligibility for membership, the general council, and the requirements to change the constitution. Let us turn to the second and third articles. Unlike the World Evangelical Alliance, founded in 1846 on an individual membership basis, the new Presbyterian Alliance is a fellowship of churches, what we call today a Christian world communion. Which denominations are then entitled to apply for membership? According to the second article, “any Church organised on Presbyterian principles which holds the supreme authority of the Scriptures of the Old and the New Testaments in matters of faith and morals, and whose creed is in harmony with the consensus of the Reformed Confessions”.<sup>7</sup>

In order to manifest their “essential oneness”, have “closer communion with each other”, and “promote great causes by joint action”, the Alliance’s member churches will “meet in general council from time to time”. The general council, which will meet once every three years, shall consist as far as practi-

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<sup>5</sup> *Edinburgh 1877*, Preamble.

<sup>6</sup> *Edinburgh 1877*, Preamble.

<sup>7</sup> *Edinburgh 1877*, Article II.

cable of “an equal number of ministers and elders” according to regulations that will take into account the number of congregations in the member churches. The general council will have power “to decide upon” membership applications and “to entertain and consider topics” of interest to the constituency.<sup>8</sup> However, it shall not “interfere with the existing creed or constitution of any Church in the Alliance, or with its internal order or external relations”.<sup>9</sup>

The aims of the general council include considering questions of general interest to the Presbyterian community, seeking the welfare of the Churches, especially such as are weak or persecuted, gathering and disseminating “information concerning the Kingdom of Christ throughout the world”, commending the Presbyterian system “as Scriptural, and as combining simplicity, efficiency, and adaptation to all times and conditions” and entertaining all subjects “directly connected with the work of Evangelisation”, including “the best methods of opposing infidelity and Romanism”.<sup>10</sup>

## II. Confessional identity in the 1875 Constitution

What is specific or distinctive about the newly created organisation called Alliance of Presbyterian churches? The answer to this question, which is the question about the profile of the Alliance as an institution, is provided by what the denominations which have founded the Alliance hold specifically in common, in short, by what entitles certain Chris-

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<sup>8</sup> *Edinburgh 1877*, Article III.3.

<sup>9</sup> *Edinburgh 1877*, Article III.3.

<sup>10</sup> *Edinburgh 1877*, Article III.4.

tian churches rather than others to apply for membership. According to article II this is a question of harmony on matters of Faith and Order: the Scriptures, first of all, and the Reformed confessions, on the one hand, and the Presbyterian system or the Presbyterian principles on the other hand.

It is important to note, however, that what seems to be crystal clear as a principle, namely that the Presbyterian system and the Reformed confessions are to identify the churches eligible for membership and therefore to make the Alliance institutionally distinctive as a Christian world communion, proves to be a more complex issue in the actual practice of the Alliance's member churches.

**The Presbyterian system** – This can be seen first of all in connection with the Presbyterian system.<sup>11</sup> It is well known that in matters of eldership Calvin was not a Presbyterian. In the absence of indisputable biblical evidence and significant historical precedent, the understanding and practice of this constitutive element of the Reformed polity and tradition gave rise, between the Reformation and the late 19th century, to growing differences among continental Reformed churches and those influenced by the Scottish *Second Book of Discipline* of 1578 or, later on, by the 1831 Samuel Miller's *An Essay, on the Warrant, Nature and Duties of the Office of Ruling Elder, in the Presbyterian Church* to give but one example.

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<sup>11</sup> For an overview of what follows see: T. F. Torrance, *The Eldership in the Reformed Church*, Edinburgh, The Handsel Press, 1984, 16 pp; L. Vischer, "The Office of the Elders", in L. Vischer (ed.), *The Ministry of the Elders in the Reformed Church*, Bern, Evangelische Arbeitsstelle Oekumene Schweiz, 1992, pp.9-95; L. Vischer (ed.), *Elders in the Reformed Churches Today*, Geneva, WARC, 1991.



The first general council – Edinburgh 1877 – dedicated no less than three full sessions (nine papers altogether!) to Presbyterian principles in general and to eldership in particular.<sup>12</sup> The second general council – Philadelphia 1880 – continued the discussion<sup>13</sup> which resulted in the appointment of a committee that reported to the third one, held in Belfast in 1884.<sup>14</sup> Following a survey on the understanding and practice of the eldership among the Alliance’s member churches, the committee concluded that “touching the office and functions of the Eldership, at least three distinct theories are entertained”. According to the first, “while the New Testament recognises but one order of Presbyters, in it there are two degrees or classes, known as *Teaching Elders* and *Ruling Elders*”. For the second theory, “there is no warrant in Scripture for the office of the eldership as it exists in the Presbyterian Church”. The third one contends that “the modern elder is intended to be, and should be, recognized as a copy of the Scriptural ‘Presbyter’”. The practice “generally followed” by Presbyterian churches of the present time “is in accordance with the first-named theory”.<sup>15</sup>

It is, therefore, clear that when the founders of the Alliance refer to “Presbyterian principles” or to “the Presbyterian

<sup>12</sup> *Edinburgh 1877*, pp.52-86, 98-123. Papers by John Cairns, A. A. Hodge, S. Robinson, Samuel Prime, Eells, Lord Moncreiff, Lee, W. Moore, and Harper.

<sup>13</sup> *Report of Proceedings of the Second General Council of the Presbyterian Alliance, Convened at Philadelphia, September, 1880*, Philadelphia (USA), Presbyterian Journal Company and J. C. McCurdy & Co., 1880, p.148-157, 165-176, 213-223, 257.

<sup>14</sup> Alliance of the Reformed Churches holding the Presbyterian System, *Minutes and Proceedings of the Third General Council, Belfast, 1884*, Belfast, Assembly’s Offices, 1884, Appendix, p.131-136.

<sup>15</sup> *Belfast 1884*, Appendix, pp.131-132.

system” as a condition of eligibility for admission and therefore as a constitutive element of the Alliance’s institutional identity, they are speaking of a polity concept, of a broad polity concept, rather than of a polity model, of a specific normative polity model.

**The Consensus of the Reformed Confessions** – The second evidence of the complexity of the confessional/institutional identity issue comes from the reference to the Reformed Confessions as a condition of eligibility for admission into the Alliance.

It was expected, when the 1875 constitution was written and adopted, that it would be possible for the founding member churches to reach an agreement on the consensus of the Reformed confessions soon. It is obviously desirable, says William Blaikie as he addresses the 1877 council on its aims and spirit, “that at the very commencement it should be made plain what that consensus is. This is the object of the first meeting, to be held to-morrow forenoon”.<sup>16</sup> Philip Schaff, the well-known author of *Creeds of Christendom*, adds the following day that this subject “will have to be settled sooner or later”.<sup>17</sup> The consensus would then be the standard, the doctrinal basis, whereby the Alliance would determine whether the creed of an applicant church made it eligible for admission.

The first general council dedicates just one session to the future doctrinal basis of the Alliance. Schaff himself delivers

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<sup>16</sup> *Edinburgh 1877*, p.21.

<sup>17</sup> *Edinburgh 1877*, p.36.

the keynote speech. He recalls Archbishop Cranmer's proposal, made in 1552, of a Reformed Consensus "while the Council of Trent was framing its decrees against the doctrines of the Reformation"; he reviews the symbols of the 16th and 17th century by dividing them into ante-Calvinistic or Zwinglian, Calvinistic, and post-Calvinistic. He then argues for the harmony of the Reformed confessions. They present "the same system of Christian doctrine", they are "variations of one theme". There is fully "as much harmony between them as between the six symbolical books of the Lutheran Church, or between the Tridentine and Vatican decrees of Rome".<sup>18</sup> The difference between them "is confined to minor details, and to the extent to which the Augustinian and Calvinistic principles are carried out". They are "protestant in bibliology, oecumenical or old Catholic in theology and Christology, Augustinian in anthropology and the doctrine of predestination, evangelical in soteriology, Calvinistic in ecclesiology and sacramentology, and anti-papal in eschatology".<sup>19</sup>

According to Schaff a consensus can be formulated in three ways. By a "mere list of doctrines, or an index of the chief heads of doctrine on which agreement is desired", something similar to the doctrinal basis of the 1846-founded Evangelical Alliance; by a historical statement, a "brief summary of the common doctrines of the old confessions, without additions or changes", or by "a new oecumenical Reformed Confession". Schaff advocates the third way, a consensus "freely reproduced

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<sup>18</sup> P. Schaff, "The Consensus of the Reformed Confessions", *Edinburgh 1877*, p.26-27.

<sup>19</sup> P. Schaff, *Edinburgh 1877*, p.27.

and adapted to the present state of the Church”, in the sense that it would be “the creed of the Reformation translated into the theology of the nineteenth century, with a protest against modern infidelity and rationalism”. This would be “a work for our age, such as Cranmer invited the Reformers to prepare for their age”, and “a testimony of the living faith of the Church”. It would afford “an excellent opportunity to simplify and popularise the Reformed system of doctrine, to utter a protest against the peculiar errors and dangers of our age, and to exhibit the fraternal attitude of this Alliance to the other evangelical Churches. It ought to be truly evangelical-catholic in spirit”.<sup>20</sup>

The agenda of the first general council seems, however, to favour a consensus which results from the summary of the common doctrines. A paper by William Kraft, who at that time teaches church history in Bonn, Germany, contends that such a consensus is possible first of all because the Reformed confessions “unanimously adopted the traditional doctrine of the ancient Church”, secondly because “they all wholly rejected the corrupt doctrines which arose under the legal yoke of the Middle Ages”, and thirdly because “they presented their peculiar doctrinal views independently, deriving them from the Holy Scriptures”. After a brief description of the three main groups of Reformed confessions, Kraft goes on to present his own attempt at a consensus: a confession in 31 articles, each of them followed by the passages from the classical confessions used as “documentary proofs”.<sup>21</sup> To Kraft’s argument,

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<sup>20</sup> P. Schaff, *Edinburgh 1877*, p.27.

<sup>21</sup> W. Kraft, “The Consensus of the Reformed Confessions”, *Edinburgh 1877*, pp.41-48.

Alexander Mitchell, from Saint Andrews, Scotland, adds the evidence of “The Harmony between the Bibliology of the Westminster Confession and that of the earlier Reformed Confessions” by proposing a table exhibiting “in detail the coincidences in thought and expression” between them.<sup>22</sup>

I will bring the debate that follows to its most elementary expression. Principal Brown welcomes these expressions of the harmony of the Reformed confessions because they put to shame “the calumny of the Church of Rome” who says that “the Reformed Churches are divided into as many distinct and conflicting religions as there are sects among them”. For Brown the oneness in substance of the Reformed churches is “infinitely more valuable than the enforced oneness of a Church that is a despotism, and which bears down all individual, free investigation into the Word of God”. These expressions of the harmony of the confessions should, however, serve the practical purpose of projecting these great principles “into society and the world, considering that they were the salt of the earth as a Christian Church”. Professor Candlish underlines the fact that in the early history of the Reformation the churches had “consciousness and feeling (...) of the agreement of their Confessions and of their being one”. This consciousness needs now to be revived. It might be a work worthy of the council, he thinks, “to have a return, through a Committee, of the Confessions used by different Churches, and might be the means, perhaps, of restoring in some degree that feeling and consciousness of the harmony of the Reformed Confessions that

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<sup>22</sup> A. Mitchell, “The Harmony between the Bibliology of the Westminster Confession and that of the Earlier Reformed Confessions”, *Edinburgh 1877*, pp.48, 371-377.

once existed". The harmony "should be seen and felt as a living power and a living sympathy, building together all the Churches upon the common ground of the great doctrines of the Reformation". Marshall Lang reacts against Schaff's suggestion that, in Lang's words, "every age must produce its own theology", that "every age has its peculiar form of expressing the one eternal truth" because this seems to be a rejection of the decisions of the 16th century "as absolutely binding upon all times in the precise form in which they were given".

Elder Taylor Innes has a strong feeling that "the Council and Alliance should be very cautious in the whole matter of dealing with this complicate and very delicate and difficult question of creeds". He wonders whether it is desirable to give "any opinion upon the general question of a creed..." and proposes a motion to appoint a committee in charge of a survey on the existing creeds or confessions as well as on formulas of subscription adopted by the member churches, and the extent to which individual adherence is required from ministers, elders or other office-bearers.<sup>23</sup> The motion by Taylor Innes has the support of those, like Principal Tulloch, who think that one cannot "draw up a new creed or even formulate the consensus of old creeds" without full information about the confessions adopted by the member churches, and of those, like Dr. Begg, who entirely disagree with Schaff's idea that "every age has its own theology". No consensus on the consensus is achieved in 1877.

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<sup>23</sup> *Edinburgh 1877*, p.51.

Chaired by the same Philip Schaff, the Committee on Creeds and Confessions, appointed in 1877, submits to the following general council, held in Philadelphia, USA, in 1880 a comprehensive report including detailed information about churches in 13 countries from the British Islands, North America, continental Europe, Australia and New Zealand.<sup>24</sup> The report recommends, in the words of Schaff, that a committee be appointed “to prepare a summary of the creeds and confessions upon which the Council is professedly based. By such information we may be able to know what the complexity of the body itself is...”<sup>25</sup>

A new committee, “of divines from the various branches of the Reformed or Presbyterian Churches embraced with this Alliance” is then appointed in order to consider, more modestly this time, just “the desirableness of defining the consensus of the Reformed Confession as required by our Constitution...”<sup>26</sup> It works in three sections: American, British, and Continental European. The members of the sections are required to answer the following question: “Do you think it desirable that the ‘Consensus of the Reformed Confessions’ as mentioned in the Constitution of the Alliance, be defined, and in what sense and to what extent?” The American section, whose members include A. A. Hodge and Philip Schaff, is “in favour of formulating the Consensus of the Reformed Confessions, in the received historic sense of those Confes-

<sup>24</sup> *Report of Proceedings of the Second General Council of the Presbyterian Alliance, convened at Philadelphia, September 1880*. Philadelphia, Presbyterian Journal and J. C. McCurdy & Co., 1880, pp.259-262, 379-395, 497-499, 965-1123.

<sup>25</sup> *Philadelphia 1880*, p.262.

<sup>26</sup> *Philadelphia 1880*, p.497.

sions, and to the extent of including all the doctrines common to the symbolical books of the Reformed Churches”.<sup>27</sup> For the British, including W. Blaikie, “it is scarcely possible to formulate such a Consensus as will determine all cases which may arise, or prove helpful to the Alliance in regard to the admission of Churches”.<sup>28</sup>

Among the Continental Europeans “the reasons for and against a Consensus nearly balance each other”, in the words of Jean Monod. The Germans go as far as submitting, on behalf of the Rhenish Synod, the draft of a confession taken from the Luther and the Heidelberg catechisms. For some pastors from Neuchâtel, a confession of faith is “needful to the Presbyterian Alliance” as a witness to Christian truth and as a way of making known to churches seeking membership “the terms of their admission” whereas for others it might disguise theological differences or lead to separation: “Thus, in seeking to consolidate our work we have put it in peril”. The Waldensians affirm the desirableness of a consensus “which should not involve the abandonment of particular Confessions”. The French, non-officially, approve and encourage “all the labours which have tended to throw light on the characteristics of Presbyterianism, both as regards Church doctrine and organisation...”, provided that the aim is not “to impose on the Churches a new symbol”. According to Van Osterzee, from Utrecht, now that the Alliance exists without the consensus, founded “on the purely formal principle of Presbyterianism”,

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<sup>27</sup> *Alliance of the Reformed Churches holding the Presbyterian System. Minutes and Proceedings of the Third General Council, Belfast, 1884.* Belfast, Assembly's Offices, 1884, p.32.

<sup>28</sup> *Belfast 1884*, p.32.



“there is reason to fear that the efforts to formulate a Consensus, and the debates which such a procedure would entail, might lead to a dissension fatal to the Alliance itself.” Placing himself “in the point of view of our French Protestant Churches”, Théodore Monod, the author of the Continental European report, “would not vote at this time for the framing of a doctrinal basis to the Presbyterian Alliance.”<sup>29</sup>

These rather different views, added to the optimism of the Americans and the scepticism of the British, lead the second consensus committee, reporting at Belfast in 1884, to conclude that “it is not indispensable to the Alliance, as an organization, that the Consensus should at present be further defined”. While “there are advantages which the defining of the Consensus would secure, as working out the ends for which the organization exists”, it is recognised that “the advantages which might arise from a satisfactory definition of the Consensus seem to the Committee, for the present, outweighed by its risks and difficulties”.<sup>30</sup>

Absent from the agenda of the general councils held in London 1889, Toronto 1902, Glasgow 1896, Washington 1899, Liverpool 1904, New York 1909, Aberdeen 1913, and Pittsburgh 1921, the consensus issue makes a somewhat predictable comeback when the Alliance celebrates its jubilee in Cardiff, Wales, 1925. Against the advice of Karl Barth, who contributes a substantial paper read *in absentia*, the Cardiff general council requests the North American and the European branches of

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<sup>29</sup> *Belfast 1884*, p.33-34.

<sup>30</sup> *Belfast 1884*, p.35-36, 36-43.

the Alliance to once again appoint committees “to draw up a common Statement of Faith to be presented to the Council for consideration”.<sup>31</sup>

Once again, as in 1884, the Eastern and the Western areas of the Alliance hold different views. The Europeans generally prefer “a declaration, within a paragraph” which looks like “the first of the well-known Articles Declaratory of the Constitution of the Church of Scotland in Matters Spiritual”,<sup>32</sup> a statement “brief and simple, religious and practical, affirmative rather than expository, loyal to the principles of the Reformation and to the fundamental revelation of which Scripture is the record”.<sup>33</sup> A short declaration of faith is then drafted to this effect. The North Americans, however, object that “the form submitted is in no distinctive sense a Reformed instrument” and that no express affirmation is made of “the virgin birth, the substitutionary, sacrificial atonement, and the bodily resurrection of our Lord”.<sup>34</sup> The two committees recommend that the 1929 Boston general council “take no further step in the matter”,<sup>35</sup> but the general council asks the Eastern and Western sections of the Alliance “to appoint Committees to continue the consideration of the Cardiff plan, with

<sup>31</sup> *Proceedings of the Twelfth General Council of the Alliance of Reformed Churches holding the Presbyterian System held at Cardiff 1925*. Edinburgh, Office of the Alliance, 1926, p.145.

<sup>32</sup> *Presbyterian Alliance, Eastern Section. Committee on Proposed Doctrinal Statement. 20th Jan., 1926*. Geneva, Archives of the World Alliance of Reformed Churches, HA 1.

<sup>33</sup> *Report of Eastern Sub-Committee to meeting of the Eastern Section*. Geneva, Archives of the World Alliance of Reformed Churches, HA 1.

<sup>34</sup> *Letter from Dr. McNaugher in reply to the communication from the committee of the Eastern Section, 20th May 1927*, Geneva, Archives of the World Alliance of Reformed Churches, HA 1.

<sup>35</sup> *Proceedings of the Thirteenth General Council of the Alliance of Reformed Churches holding the Presbyterian System held at Boston, Massachusetts 1929*. Edinburgh, Office of the Alliance, 1929, p.388.

a view to drawing up a declaration of the evangelical truths now held in common by the constituent Churches of this Alliance”.<sup>36</sup> At the request of the North American section, however, the activities around the common statement of faith were suspended in Belfast, 1933, “in view of union negotiations then pending between various Churches in America”.<sup>37</sup>

None of the two specific conditions meant to identify the churches eligible for membership in the Alliance – the Presbyterian system and the harmony with the consensus of the Reformed confessions – is thus specific enough to provide the Alliance at the outset with a clear institutional profile, with a clear institutional identity as a future Christian world communion. The term “Presbyterian system” here also means “Reformed system”... or perhaps systems. It includes churches attached to teaching and ruling eldership as well as churches alien to the idea that those ordained to the ministry of word and sacrament hold the same office as that held by the “lay” members of a local session, council or presbytery, themselves also ordained for life. It includes also Reformed churches with an episcopal-like structure. It therefore refers broadly to corporate decision-making and corporate responsibility. The consensus of the Reformed confessions not being agreed upon, or even formulated, churches holding particular or conflicting views on traditionally essential tenets of the Reformed tradition such as predestination remain entitled to member-

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<sup>36</sup> *Boston 1929*, p.85-87.

<sup>37</sup> *Proceedings of the Fourteenth General Council of the Alliance of Reformed Churches holding the Presbyterian System held at Belfast, Northern Ireland 1933*. Edinburgh, Office of the Alliance, 1933, pp.187-188, 435.

ship provided that they state that their confession is nonetheless in harmony with the consensus.

## II. The Ecumenical Dimension of the 1875 Constitution

Is it possible to discern in the 1875 Constitution impulses or elements which would be considered “pro-ecumenical” in our days? I wish to contend that they do exist and that they outweigh what a plain reading of that document might suggest.

The first element has to do with the ecclesial and theological culture shared by the founding fathers of the Alliance and authors of its first constitution. Three men above all others, writes J. R. Fleming in 1925, on the occasion of the Alliance’s jubilee, “were pioneers in this adventure”:<sup>38</sup> James McCosh, William Garden Blaikie, and Philip Schaff.<sup>39</sup> McCosh is the president of Princeton Theological Seminary. One of the leaders of the Free Church evangelical movement in Scotland, he is also a philosopher concerned with the impact of materialists, empiricists and Kantians on religious beliefs. At the US Presbyterian union assembly of 1870, he preaches a sermon that gives a remarkable impulse to the idea of a world alliance of Presbyterian churches. Blaikie, who teaches apologetics and pastoral theology at New College, Edinburgh (Scotland), is the one through whom the vision will come true. He will be secretary and later on President of the Alliance.

<sup>38</sup> J. R. Fleming, *The Founding and Achievements of the Alliance. Proceedings of the Twelfth General Council of the Alliance of Reformed Churches holding the Presbyterian System held at Cardiff 1925*. Edinburgh, Office of the Alliance, 1926, p.41.

<sup>39</sup> We should add to Fleming’s list the names of John Hall and Duff.

Although he is certainly the most widely known among them, Philip Schaff, whom I have often quoted above, deserves a reference albeit very brief at this point. Born in Chur, Switzerland, in 1819, he studies theology in Tübingen, Halle, and Berlin, Germany. Under the influence of Hegelian theologians such as Ferdinand Christian Bauer and David Strauss, and particularly of August Neander, Schleiermacher's "congenial pupil", Schaff embraces church history.

Instead of pursuing a promising academic career in Berlin though, Schaff accepts the call from the German Reformed Church in America to take up teaching at its small theological seminary in Mercersburg, Pennsylvania, in 1844. His encounter with John Nevin who, also under the influence of Neander, breaks with Charles Hodge's Presbyterian Princeton and later leaves Pittsburgh Seminary, marks the blossoming of the so-called Mercersburg theology, a solitary church-based theological experiment of evangelical catholicity within a US ecclesial and theological landscape marked by Puritanism and revivalism.

From 1870 to his death in 1893 he teaches church history, theological encyclopedia, Christian symbolism, Hebrew, and sacred literature at Union Theological Seminary – a liberal split from conservative Presbyterian Princeton – in New York. A prolific author, he is also the founder of the American Society of Church History and contributes to the foundation of the Society of Biblical Literature and the World's Parliament of Religions (1893).

Schaff was celebrated by the American Society of Church History in 1988 not only as a "Christian scholar" but also as an

“ecumenical prophet”.<sup>40</sup> In his Hegelian inspired *Weltanschauung*, today’s many move dialectically towards the future One. He distinguishes but does not separate church and history. History is in progress. History is developing. The church is an organic unity. The members of the body, by their union with Christ – a Calvinian leitmotiv – join in an organic whole, an organic unity. The history of the church is the history of the principle of life, introduced by Christ into human nature. History and therefore church history move to the future organisation of the world as the Kingdom of Christ in the *pleroma*. The blurring of the clear-cut borders between Catholicism and Protestantism that follows like a corollary inevitably challenges a confessionalism in search of self-perpetuation. The present ministry of the future Kingdom requires the building of bridges: between North America, Britain and Europe,<sup>41</sup> between separated evangelical Christians,<sup>42</sup> between Christianity and other religions.

Schaff, McCosh and Blaikie are all familiar with Reformed church life on both sides of the Atlantic as well as with the experience of recent church divisions and attempts at church reunion. Some of these attempts are successful, like the 1870 reconciliation within the Northern Presbyterian Church (USA), others not, like the effort to unite the Free Presbyterian Church and the United Presbyterian Church in Scotland. The hearts of good men, writes Fleming, “were sick of barren

<sup>40</sup> I am referring to George Shriver’s *Philip Schaff – Christian Scholar and Ecumenical Prophet*, Macon (Georgia, USA), 1987.

<sup>41</sup> Schaff published his *Amerika* in German (Berlin, 1854) and coordinated the English translation of Herzog’s *Realencyclopädie*.

<sup>42</sup> Schaff supports the work of the Evangelical Alliance formed in 1846.

and bitter controversy, and were turning towards some possible basis of closer fellowship.”<sup>43</sup> They began to feel that the tendency to division “was in danger to be carried to extremes, that distinctive testimony – to part of the truth – was not everything, that catholic testimony – to the whole of the truth – was a worthier ideal.”<sup>44</sup>

Schaff and Blaikie, Fleming goes on to say in a reference to the Alliance and its first constitution, “conceived and put into practice a scheme of unity that would include the Reformed Churches of the Continent”. We are surprised today, he concludes, “at the wisdom of those who, instead of propounding a new doctrinal formula or attempting to define rigidly a common system of polity, were content to rear their structure on the supreme authority of the Holy Scripture in matters of faith, on adherence to the consensus of the Reformed confessions, and on a general acknowledgement of Presbyterian principles.”<sup>45</sup>

The second ecumenical dimension I wish to underline has to do with the conciliar idea of a fellowship of churches. The founders of the Alliance are aware of initiatives meant to bring together individual believers from different denominations on the basis of a set of commonly held doctrinal affirmations, such as the 1846-founded Evangelical Alliance, or in order to respond to social and humanitarian challenges such as the Red Cross or the Young Men’s Christian Association and the Young Women’s Christian Association. However, the encoun-

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<sup>43</sup> J. R. Fleming, *op. cit.*, p.40-41.

<sup>44</sup> J. R. Fleming, *op. cit.*, p.43.

<sup>45</sup> J. R. Fleming, *op. cit.*, p.41-42.

ter between Christianity and other religions in the mission fields of Asia and Africa, the pastoral or ministerial challenges raised by the social consequences of the industrial revolution as well as the cultural expressions of the dissolution of the *corpus christianum* seem to encourage them to realise not only the importance of the renewal of the visible institutional expressions of the koinonia based on God's covenant but also the importance for life and mission of their lived fellowship made possible by their oneness in Christ and by their common confessional memory.

This pioneering, modern expression of confessional conciliarity is conceived as a supra-national prolongation of different national Presbyterian structures, as an international Presbyterian and Reformed synod or world general assembly whose aims, according to the longest article of the first constitution, include the promotion of common reflection on faith, inter-church solidarity and information, the Presbyterian system, and church mission, particularly "the best methods of opposing infidelity and Romanism". By denying it any jurisdictional authority, though, the founders of the Alliance intend to be consistent with the urgent need to respond to Reformed divisiveness and isolation while, on the one hand, recognising the autonomy of member churches in matters of faith, order, and relations, and, on the other hand, remaining critical of what they call the enforced, mechanical, external unity of the Roman Catholic Church.<sup>46</sup>

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<sup>46</sup> Oswald Dykes, "Individual Freedom and Catholic Unity". *Alliance of the Reformed Churches holding the Presbyterian System - Minutes and Proceedings of the Fourth General Council - London 1888*. London, Presbyterian Alliance Office, 1889, p.9.



My last note on the ecumenicity of the 1875 constitution has to do with its pan-Protestantism. The founders of the Alliance, Schaff included as I have noted above, are convinced that by bringing together Reformed and Presbyterian churches from different parts of the world they are responding at the end of the 19th century to Archbishop Cranmer's call to unity among Reformation churches, a call for which Calvin had declared himself ready to cross ten seas in order to put it into practice. Schaff's project for the Alliance is an *Aufhebung* of past Reformed divisions consubstantial to a critical engagement with present modern rationalism that is a sign and seal of the future in which all will be one in the One.

The idea of an Alliance, Council, or Confederation of Reformed churches, writes Blaikie in the first line of his 1877 *Introductory Narrative*, "had a prominent place in the minds of the Reformers, and has seldom been overlooked by those whose minds have been impressed with the unity of the Church". Seven years later, addressing the Belfast general council on "the extent and diffusion of the Presbyterian Church, and the leading features of its training and work" Blaikie affirms that for his part he has never desired that the Alliance "should end, as it were, with itself". On the contrary, he concludes as an ecumenical visionary, "it should be a step towards an Alliance that one day would have a vastly large constituency, and that would form a more important contribution than we can make toward the swift fulfilment of our Saviour's prayer – "That they all may be one"<sup>47</sup>

<sup>47</sup> W. Blaikie, "A Survey of the Whole Family of Presbyterian Churches: Their Training and their Work". *Alliance of the Reformed Churches holding the Presbyterian System. Minutes and Proceedings of the Third General Council, Belfast, 1884*. Belfast, Assembly's Offices, 1884, p.100.

This understanding sheds some light on the two parts of the preamble of the first constitution. Reformed and Presbyterians are coming together to “more fully manifest their essential oneness”. But this should not “change their fraternal relations with other Churches”. Even more meaningful, it is in order to ground the affirmation that the Alliance intends to join with the other Reformation churches “in Christian fellowship, and in advancing the cause of the Redeemer” that the preamble of the constitution refers to the Paulinian image of the one body with many members as a “general principle maintained and taught in the Reformed Confessions”.

### **Conclusion**

Why not a Reformed Alliance formed exclusively by churches which adopt the Westminster standards – which are, according to Philip Schaff “the most important of the Reformed symbols, and have shown the greatest vitality” – and order themselves according to the functional distinction between ruling and teaching elders? Would it not provide the expression of this fellowship with a clear confessional and institutional profile? Would it not give rise to a Christian world communion committed to perpetuate Presbyterianism?

This is not the path chosen by the founders of the Alliance nor is it the self-understanding embodied in its first constitution. Facing Reformed and Reformation diversity in its faith and order complexities, the first constitution chooses to state its confessional and institutional specificity in a way that not only enlarges the Reformed tent but also shows its thin, transparent fabric. Although the name of the fellowship refers to



I. TOWARDS AN ALLIANCE OF REFORMATION CHURCHES?

the Presbyterian “system” and its general council aims include both to commend Presbyterian polity as “Scriptural, and as combining simplicity, efficiency, and adaptation to all times and conditions” and to oppose “Romanism”, eligibility for membership is formulated in more inclusive terms of agreement with Presbyterian “principles” and “harmony with the consensus of the Reformed Confessions” which, at the same time, encourage the search for more visible fellowship with those living under other tents nearby.





BEYOND CONFESSIONALISM: ESSAYS ON REFORMED ECUMENICITY





## II

### **Opposing confessionalism: the World Alliance of Reformed Churches and the ecumenical movement 1948 – 1957**

*By pioneering the creation of the Conference of Secretaries of Christian World Communions in 1957 the World Alliance of Reformed Churches was trying to make sure that the work of the international confessional bodies would neither prevent the emergence of united churches in the global south nor weaken the World Council of Churches.*

*“We cannot prevent other churches from taking our witness to be the confession of a particular denomination, the expression of our own religious understanding. But woe to us, if we ourselves take such a view of it!”*

**Wilhelm Niesel**

How does the Alliance define itself as a world confessional family in the years since the foundation of the World Council of Churches? How does it envisage its relations with sister confessional organizations in the light of its own ecumenical self-understanding?

Exactly fifty years after adopting the statement “The Reformed Churches and the Ecumenical Movement”,<sup>1</sup> WARC gathers in Accra, Ghana, in August 2004 to review its ecumenical engagement at the international level, in the light of its permanent constitutional purposes, in service to the ecumenical experiences and needs of its member churches and in response to an ecumenical landscape in which time and unity, particularly through conciliarity, no longer seem to converge.

Soon after Accra, the Alliance, other Christian world communions (CWCs), the World Council of Churches (WCC) and other ecumenical actors will embark on an urgent discussion on the institutional coherence of organized ecumenism at a time of declining resources and major sociohistorical transformations affecting Christianity in general and mainline or historical Protestant churches in particular.

Because these two events engage the Alliance’s ecumenical self-understanding, as well as its views on the ecumenical movement and the role Christian world communions might play within it, I thought it appropriate to resist both ecumeni-

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<sup>1</sup> “The Reformed Churches and the Ecumenical Movement”, *Proceedings of the Seventeenth General Council of the Alliance of the Reformed Churches Holding the Presbyterian Order Held at Princeton, NJ, USA, 1954* (Geneva: Office of the Alliance, 1954), pp. 73-79. (No attempt has been made to update the language of this and other historical texts.)

cal amnesia and the temptation of believing that the world of the living is governed by the dead to an extent our vain philosophy is not prepared to admit and in this article briefly revisit eight or nine years in which the Alliance laid some foundations for its future ecumenical engagement.

### **I. Geneva and Amsterdam 1948**

The World Presbyterian Alliance holds its general council in Geneva from August 11 to 17, 1948, a couple of days before the World Council of Churches meets for its first assembly in Amsterdam. WARC issues a statement in which it welcomes the formation of the World Council of Churches “as a manifestation of the spirit and will of Jesus Christ, the sole king and head of the church” and recommends to Reformed churches in general “that they give serious and prayerful consideration to applying for membership in the World Council...”<sup>2</sup> More than that, the general council agenda includes two addresses on “the present ecumenical situation”. One is by JH Cockburn, from the staff of the WCC then still “in process of formation”.

The other is by a certain John Mackay. The name imposes a reverent note. If you intend to pursue the reading of this text you had better learn something about him. John Mackay (1889-1983), the Scottish missionary who had worked in Latin America for twenty years (1916-1936), is now professor of ecumenics and president of Princeton Theological Seminary (USA). He will be elected president of the World Alliance in

<sup>2</sup> *Proceedings of the Sixteenth General Council of the Alliance of Reformed Churches Holding the Presbyterian System Held in Geneva, Switzerland 1948* (Edinburgh, Office of the Alliance, 1949), pp. 201-210.

1954. What is even more important for the purpose of this essay is that Mackay is also the chairman of the International Missionary Council (IMC), the major institutional expression of the mission wing of the ecumenical movement, which will join the WCC in 1961.

According to Mackay, the church has become, for the first time in history, “*ecumenical* in a geographical sense”.<sup>3</sup> Within non-Roman Christianity, this “Ecumenical” movement is marked by two different trends. One, centripetal, is “a trend towards greater understanding, unity and co-operation among non-Roman Catholic churches”. The other is described in the following terms: “certain Protestant denominations constitute what might be termed ecumenical denominations or confessional blocks. There is thus emerging world Lutheranism, world Anglicanism, world Methodism, etc.” What should be the Reformed attitude “on an issue of this kind”?<sup>4</sup>

Mackay goes on to spell out “the actual relations of the Reformed churches to the ecumenical movement”. While some of them take no part in the general ecumenical movement, Reformed churches in general “have ordinarily been very cooperative in their relations with other churches”. They have played “a leading part in determining the thought and in shaping the policy of the contemporary ecumenical movement”.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> John Mackay, “The Reformed Churches and the Ecumenical Situation”, *Proceedings of the Sixteenth General Council*, p. 110.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 110.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 110-111.



He then concludes his address by listing elements in the Reformed tradition “which have a bearing on the attitude which the Reformed Churches should adopt towards the ecumenical movement”. John Calvin in his thoughts and attitudes was “the most ecumenical figure of his time”. His ecclesiology as well as the Reformed doctrine of the communion of saints “produce naturally a spirit of friendly relationship towards all Christian churches...” When true to itself, Presbyterianism “’s naturally ecumenical”” Reformed churches need to work out a Reformed doctrine of the church. In any country, they should do all in their power “to achieve unity, and if possible, organic union, between all the members of the Reformed family within that country, giving to the consummation of organic union between Reformed churches priority ... over union with churches belonging to a different ecclesiastical tradition”.<sup>6</sup>

Why is the chairman of the International Missionary Council so concerned with the rise of what he calls “ecumenical denominations” or “confessional blocks” – these same Christian world communions often engaged in 2004 in a wide range of bilateral dialogues, some of them producing significant results?<sup>7</sup> Because in the late 1940s the newly founded Lutheran World Federation (LWF) is sponsoring “confessional” mis-

<sup>6</sup> Ibid., p.111-112.

<sup>7</sup> Some essays which deal with the origins of the conference of leaders of Christian World Communions seem to overlook this point. See for instance Harold E. Fey, “Confessional Families and the Ecumenical Movement”, in Harold E. Fey, ed. *The Ecumenical Advance: A History of the Ecumenical Movement Volume 2, 1948-1968* (Geneva, WCC, 1993), p.121; Edmond Perret, “The Conference of Secretaries of World Confessional Families: 1957-1977”, in Y. Ishida et al., *The History and Theological Concerns of World Confessional Families*, Stuttgart, Kreuz Verlag-LWF, 1979, pp.43-72; Lukas Vischer, “World Communions, the WCC and the Ecumenical Movement”. *The Ecumenical Review*, 54/1 (January-April 2002), pp.142-161.

sion work in the south and, by so doing, it may ultimately – at least in Mackay’s view – be undermining the ecumenical movement.

Let’s go back to the documents.

The WARC executive committee meets in Cambridge in 1949. The agenda includes two items on the “problems of the missionary movement and of the younger churches as related to the Alliance”. Chairman Mackay, just back from the joint meeting between the WCC and the IMC, introduces the issue. He stresses the importance for the Alliance “to keep in close touch with the missionary movement”. He is “strongly of the opinion” that the Alliance “should not imitate the Lutherans and promote missions as an Alliance”. If this really happens, “it will give a new character to international denominationalism”. Presbyterianism should pursue “an ecumenical policy, true to the spirit of Calvin” and encourage younger churches “to take the lead in the formation of united churches”. If a certain trend in the confessional missionary movement develops, he concludes, “it will break the ecumenical movement”; it will tend “to crystallize for the future the ecclesiastical traditions of the past. That would be a tragedy.”<sup>8</sup>

The 1949 executive committee re-states the attitude of the Alliance to the ecumenical movement by affirming that “while we want to be true to our Reformed and Presbyterian convictions, we are glad to be in the larger body of the World Coun-

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<sup>8</sup> Alliance of Reformed Churches Throughout the World Holding the Presbyterian System, *Minutes of the Executive Committee held at Westminster College, Cambridge, England, July 4-6 1949*, pp.10-11.

cil of Churches. We want to take our full share in the building of the *una sancta*.”<sup>9</sup> It also agrees on three points concerning “the Alliance and the other confessional groups”: we are not ready “to follow other confessional groups in what we believe to be narrow and dangerous confessionalism”; in foreign mission fields, “we work for union with other Protestant forces”; we are ready “to exchange information with other confessional groups and work together whenever possible”.<sup>10</sup>

If Mackay and the World Alliance saw no significant difference between the emergence of the “confessional blocks” (what we call today Christian world communions, CWCs) and the ecumenical movement, their analysis would have been a non-analysis and Mackay’s question on the Reformed attitude “on an issue of this kind” would have been a non-question.

But they do see significant differences between the confessional and the ecumenical movements. They seem to transfer to all “confessional blocks” the potential risk for the ecumenical movement they discern in one of them: the Lutheran World Federation. In the diagnosis of this potential risk, issues apparently related to the so-called “orphaned missions” – amplified by the decision of the Lutheran churches in India to remain outside the formation of the Church of South India and by the decision of Lutheran churches in Germany to create their own structure alongside the Evangelical Church (EKD) – were given more importance than several resolutions adopted by the 1947 first LWF Assembly, indicating that “all

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<sup>9</sup> Ibid., p.10.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid., p.9.

Lutheran churches were being urged to cooperate in mission efforts, not only among themselves but also with the International Missionary Council” and that “a serious attitude towards the latter agency was seen as an integral part of a common Lutheran ecumenical obligation”.<sup>11</sup>

Mackay’s question in the Geneva general council about the Reformed attitude to the emergence of the “confessional blocks”, his critical remarks about the LWF in 1949, and the Alliance’s own rejection of a “narrow and dangerous confessionalism” all suggest that in this regard the World Alliance is not or should not see itself as one such “block”. The unity required by mission in the south encourages Presbyterians and Reformed to conceive of a fellowship of churches whose specificity is not exclusive and whose destiny is to be made redundant by what is experienced as a growing convergence between time and unity.

This divergence (if you prefer, this lack of full common understanding) between two Protestant world communions already housed in the Geneva headquarters of the WCC plays an important part in two major ecumenical statements made by the Alliance in the early 1950s. I will review them briefly, one right now and the other in the next section of this text.

The agenda of the 1951 executive committee meeting in Basel, Switzerland, includes a discussion on “the future activity of the Alliance”. It takes place on Monday evening, August 13. And the chairman is ... John Mackay. According to the

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<sup>11</sup> Jens Holger Schjorring et al., eds, *From Federation to Communion: The History of the Lutheran World Federation* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1997), p.18.

minutes, the chairman pointed out that “we were living in an era of neoconfessionalism and that it was essential for us to define our attitude”. After a “good exchange of views”, it was felt desirable “to leave the problem of the future activity of the Alliance until after the adoption of the statement on the role of the Alliance in the present ecumenical situation”.<sup>12</sup> This statement, adopted in the same meeting, is submitted to member churches for study and comment. Here is its argument.

The life of Protestant Churches in the present time is marked by “three main trends of ecclesial character”. The first is “a potent movement towards ecumenical understanding and unity”. The second, in opposition to the WCC, is a movement towards “the world unity of sectarian groups”. The third trend, “ecumenical denominationalism”, represents “the desire on the part of each major Protestant communion to re-discover and purify its own religious heritage and to unite the Churches which belong to it in a denominational world fellowship”. In view of this church situation, it is important that the Alliance should “define its significance and objectives”.<sup>13</sup>

On the basis of the ecclesiological statements made by the Preamble of the 1875 Constitution on fellowship with other Protestant Churches, the executive committee affirms that the Reformed tradition in post-Reformation Christianity is

<sup>12</sup> *Meeting of the Executive Committee of the Alliance of Reformed Churches Throughout the World Holding the Presbyterian System – Missionhaus, Basel (Switzerland), August 13-15 1951*, p.5.

<sup>13</sup> “The World Presbyterian Alliance in the Present Ecumenical Situation”, *Meeting of the Executive Committee of the Alliance of Reformed Churches Throughout the World Holding the Presbyterian System – Missionhaus, Basel (Switzerland), August 13-15 1951*, p.25.

“by nature ecumenical”: it is committed “to the pursuit of Christian unity upon the basis of loyal commitment to the essential verities of the Christian faith”.

The church is an instrument of God’s glory. In the same way, it is the true nature of Presbyterianism “never to be merely an end in itself, but to serve the church universal of Jesus Christ, the church which is his body”. The highest glory of the Reformed tradition is “to maintain the vision and viewpoint of the church universal, seeking continually its welfare and unity...”<sup>14</sup>

These considerations lead the executive committee to affirm the need “to increase solidarity among the members of the Reformed family” and to advocate “a strengthening of the Alliance of Reformed Churches...”. The promotion of solidarity among Reformed Churches “would help to emphasize aspects of the Reformation heritage which are of permanent significance for the Christian church and the secular order at the present time”. Secondly, Presbyterian solidarity on a world scale would meet “the contemporary needs of many persons and churches belonging to the Reformed tradition”.

The younger Presbyterian churches would then be led “to understand that it is the true glory of this tradition to seek and promote Christian solidarity and also church union where the local or national situation demands it”. Finally, membership in the Alliance is important for those Reformed churches which are not part of the “ecumenical movement for Christian unity”. It strengthens them “against schismatic elements

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<sup>14</sup> Ibid., p.26.

in their own ranks” and prevents them “from giving their adhesion to any organization designed to disrupt ecumenical unity and to thwart Presbyterian solidarity”.<sup>15</sup>

The executive committee of the Alliance, concludes the statement, “is acutely aware” of the perils of “ecumenical denominationalism”. The Alliance “would never desire to be a party to preventing the incorporation of one of its member churches into wider ecclesiastical relationships...” Presbyterianism, on the other hand, is called to see to it “that the resurgence of denominationalism, which is manifest around the globe, shall not become sectarian, but shall remain ecumenical in character”. According to the Alliance’s executive committee, “if the great world denominations, the Reformed churches among them, pursue denominational preeminence and make their great world bodies ends in themselves, they will betray Jesus Christ”. Conversely, if they desire “to make denominational emphasis an enrichment of that common evangelical heritage, they will, by so doing fulfil the designs of the one head of the church and be true organs of the Holy Spirit”.<sup>16</sup>

Which are the language regularities transversal to these papers and statements? Here is my attempt to summarize them.

1. Protestant Churches today are marked by three different ecumenical trends, namely, ecumenical unity, ecumenical sectarianism and ecumenical confessionalism.

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<sup>15</sup> Ibid., p.26-27.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid., op.cit., p.27.

2. The Reformed tradition being by nature related to ecumenical unity, the purpose of the Alliance is not to promote world Presbyterianism as an end in itself.

3. The Alliance needs to be strengthened in order to promote solidarity among Reformed churches by emphasizing the ecumenical aspects of the Reformed tradition, particularly among the younger churches, and by resisting ecumenical sectarianism.

4. To pursue denominational pre-eminence and to make great world bodies ends in themselves is to betray Jesus Christ.

## **II. Princeton and Evanston, 1954**

In 1954, the World Alliance holds its 17<sup>th</sup> general council in Princeton, USA, just a couple of weeks before the World Council of Churches meets for its second Assembly in Evanston, USA. This promising practice of meeting as “Catholic Reformed” in the framework of a visible sign of the church universal has ever since disappeared.

The 17<sup>th</sup> general council is very ecumenically oriented. My recent survey, *The World Alliance of Reformed Churches and the Modern Ecumenical Movement*,<sup>17</sup> includes seven documents from Princeton 1954. No other general council matches this score.

Joseph Hromádka, John Baillie, Henri D’Espine and chairman Mackay are invited to speak on the Reformed churches

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<sup>17</sup> OP Mateus, *The World Alliance of Reformed Churches and the Modern Ecumenical Movement – A Selected, Annotated, Chronological Bibliography (1875-2004)*, forthcoming.



and the ecumenical movement. WA Visser't Hooft and HP Van Dusen address the general council on the World Council of Churches and the relationship of the Princeton and Evanston main themes. Space does not allow me to deal with all these contributions. I will review the general council opening address before moving to the Alliance's 1954 statement on its role within the ecumenical movement.

In his opening address on the main theme of the Princeton general council, John Mackay, *l'incontournable*, reflects first of all on the witness of the "Reformed heritage" then on the witness of the "confessional alliance".<sup>18</sup> By the contemporary witness of the Reformed heritage he means the significance for the ecumenical movement of some central aspects of the Reformed ethos.

Presbyterians, he writes, share with all evangelical Christians the "four great foundations" of Christian religion, namely "the supreme authority of the Bible, Jesus Christ as God and saviour, the reality of the new man in Christ, and the Christian church as the community of Christ". At the same time they hold certain "specific emphases" that constitute their "particular contribution" to the church catholic. Mackay, like the Alliance itself in the future, does not speak here of the Reformed identity in terms of church polity, a *corpus* of Reformed confessions or essential tenets of the Reformed tradition. He prefers the more modest, flexible, hermeneutical language of "specific emphases" that points not so much to

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<sup>18</sup> John Mackay, "The Witness of the Reformed Churches in the World today", *Proceedings of the Seventeenth General Council (Princeton 1954)*, p.109-120.

doctrinal content and consequently to confessional borders as to a characteristic theological style.

Which are these “emphases” held by Presbyterians by way of identity? The first emphasis is “the sovereign rule of God in the affairs of men”.<sup>19</sup> Presbyterian truth “is organized around the concept of the divine sovereignty, God’s eternal purpose in Christ which is history’s central and controlling reality”.<sup>20</sup> This emphasis implies “that men and nations owe their health and stability, and also their security, to the attitude which they take up towards God’s eternal righteousness as set forth in Holy Scripture and in Jesus”.<sup>21</sup> The second emphasis is “the instrumental role of the Christian and the Christian church”. God was supremely manifest within history “in the form of a servant”. The Christian and the church belong to God, are the servants of God. They can never be an end in themselves. The church is most truly the church “when it is God’s servant, the medium whereby he expresses his redemptive love to mankind...”

The phrase, “an end in themselves”, that reminds us of the ecclesiology of Basel 1951, indicates that Mackay is just about to draw ecumenical implications from this brief description of the Reformed ethos or style. This Reformed emphasis, he goes on to say, “needs to be blazoned forth in the present ecumenical situation.” No church “can ever be regarded as an end in itself or the master of its members”.<sup>22</sup> As in Geneva in

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<sup>19</sup> Ibid., p.111.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid., p.111-112.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid., p.112.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid., p.114.

1948, Mackay discerns two basic trends in the ecumenical movement of his day. One is “towards worldwide unity among the Churches” and the other is “towards confessional unity”.<sup>23</sup> There is no greater need than to think through “the problem of the new confessionalism in its relation to the ecumenical movement of our time”.<sup>24</sup>

Against this background Mackay deals with the witness of the “confessional Alliance” by proposing five statements. The first is that “we are not, and we should never become, an ecclesiastical block”.<sup>25</sup> The second, that “we are loyally committed to Christ’s church universal”.<sup>26</sup> While Christians are one in Christ and are called “to give the maximum visible expression to unity”, structure “is not of the essence of the church”. There are two things we Presbyterians must repudiate “with all our might”: one is what has been called “ecclesiastical tribalism” and the other is “the idea of a super church”.<sup>27</sup> This means that “we do not regard the Roman ideal as the ideal for the church of Jesus Christ”.<sup>28</sup> We do not consider that “the ultimate historical form of Christian unity involves a ‘single, unified church structure, dominated by a centralized administrative authority’”.<sup>29</sup>

The third statement Mackay proposes is that “we emphasize the place of the local in the sphere of the ecumenical”.<sup>30</sup> The Presbyterian churches in the Hispanic world “an be

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<sup>23</sup> Ibid., p.114.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid., p.115.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid., p.115.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid., p.116.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid., p.116.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid., p.117.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid., p.117.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid., p.117.

brought into the fellowship of the wider ecumenical community only through a sense of belonging to a confessional family”<sup>31</sup> The fourth is “to stress the importance of theology” and the fifth is to proclaim that “a church is validated as a church of God not by its organized structure, but by its missionary action”.<sup>32</sup> Structure is not an end in itself, “nor can it be made the supreme criterion of a true church”. The church becomes the church “not when it extols its virtues, but when it accepts its God-given mission”<sup>33</sup>

Let’s move now to the second major statement on the ecumenical movement made by the Alliance in the 1950s.

The Reformed family gathered in Princeton begins by recognizing that Reformed churches throughout the world “have taken an active part” in the ecumenical movement. The 1954 general council feels therefore the need to affirm “in ways that are relevant to the actual ecumenical situation” the task and contribution of Reformed churches in the search for Christian unity.

The ecumenical movement, says Princeton 1954, is “a singularly significant fact about the Christian church in our time”. This “deep stirring” towards the unity of the Churches “is of God, not men, a sign of the work of the Holy Spirit”<sup>34</sup> in accordance “with the mind and will of Jesus Christ”.<sup>35</sup> On what grounds does Princeton 1954 state such a recognition?

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<sup>31</sup> Ibid., p.118.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid., p.119.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid., p.119.

<sup>34</sup> “The Reformed Churches and the Ecumenical Movement”, *Proceedings of the Seventeenth General Council (Princeton 1954)*, p.73.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid., p.73.

Jesus Christ transforms us and makes us fully human in and through our fellowship with one another. He breaks down all barriers of separation. He reconciles and unites. Wherever and whenever his gathered believers preach and practise his gospel of reconciliation and communion and administer the sacraments according to his institution, there he is; and *ubi Christus, ibi ecclesia*. Unity is therefore “a gift to the church in Jesus Christ her Lord”. Whenever the community of believers is divided by “the various forms of faith and life of the church”, Christ himself “calls these churches to unity and wills to accomplish it in them through his word and Spirit”. Unity is also a task: Christians are, therefore, “under a particular and pressing responsibility to give visible expression to the unity which the Lord of the church wills and works among them”.<sup>36</sup>

Because they so believed, the Reformers “never intended to create a new church”. They rather intended “to clarify and restore the faith and life of the church in obedience to the word of God”.<sup>37</sup> Calvin’s ecclesiology “enables the Reformed churches to stand at the centre of the ecumenical movement”. He severely condemned those “who encourage schism from motives other than those which proceed from absolute obedience to the word of God”.<sup>38</sup> It is therefore “urgently necessary” to resist “any increase of division in the body of Christ and to labour to compose all differences of faith and order which are not justified by obedience to the word of God...”.<sup>39</sup>

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<sup>36</sup> Ibid., p.74.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid., p.74.

<sup>38</sup> Ibid., p.75.

<sup>39</sup> Ibid., p.76.

Some kind of structure, says Princeton 1954, is necessary to the church. However, “the visible structure of the church is not identical with the unity of the church”. The living adaptation of structures to Christ’s mission in the world and in the church is an expression of “the living relation between Christ, the head of the church and the members of the body”.<sup>40</sup> Our adherence to the Presbyterian order “is inspired by the fact that it expresses certain fundamental aspects of the nature and life of the church”. But we do not consider it to be “the one indispensable government structure of the church”. Likewise we cannot regard any particular existing form of episcopacy as a “fundamental condition of the restoration of the unity of the church”.<sup>41</sup>

Princeton goes on to state that as Reformed and Presbyterian churches we thus “recognize the ministry, sacraments and membership of all churches, which, according to the Bible, confess Jesus Christ as Lord and saviour”. Their members are all invited and gladly welcome “to the table of our common Lord”. The table is the Lord’s, says the statement, not ours. “We believe that we dare not refuse the sacrament to any baptized person who loves and confesses Jesus Christ as Lord and saviour”. We cannot proclaim the gospel of reconciliation “without demonstrating at the table of the Lord that we are reconciled to one another”. Therefore, “we would welcome face to face talks with our fellow Christians in other churches, looking towards the time when all sincere Christians will be welcome around a common table”.<sup>42</sup>

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<sup>40</sup> Ibid., p.74.

<sup>41</sup> Ibid., p.76.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid., p.75.

Finally, the statement notes that obedience to Christ involves not only unity but also mission. The oneness of believers in Christ, it says, quoting a well-known 1951 WCC statement on the meaning of ecumenical, “is inseparable from dynamic and effective outreach of the church into every part of the world and into every phase of the world’s life”.<sup>43</sup>

What is then “the role of the Alliance in the present ecumenical situation”? A confessional alliance such ours “can and must provide the opportunity and the means for furthering the ecumenical reality of the church”,<sup>44</sup> it can “give strength and living reality to every effort to express the mission and unity of the universal church”.<sup>45</sup> The Alliance “is only an instrument in the service of more ultimate purposes”, since it is the nature of Presbyterianism “never to be an end in itself”. It desires therefore “to collaborate closely with the World Council of Churches and the International Missionary Council as the main organizational expressions of that movement”.<sup>46</sup> Thanks to the WCC basis, the way is open to all Alliance member churches to join the council. Churches that are the fruit of the missionary work “should be free to enter into local or regional union with other Christian bodies if, in this way, they can bear a better witness to Christ”.<sup>47</sup>

However, at least three reasons call “for a strong and active Presbyterian and Reformed confessional agency”. The first is the need for “bearing witness to the basic doctrinal position

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<sup>43</sup> Ibid., p.77.

<sup>44</sup> Ibid., p.73.

<sup>45</sup> Ibid., p.74.

<sup>46</sup> Ibid., p.77.

<sup>47</sup> Ibid., p.77.

of the Reformed churches”. In the framework of ecumenical conversations, “the task of the Alliance is steadily to exhort the Reformed Churches to have recourse to the Holy Scriptures as the only rule of faith and practice.”<sup>48</sup> There are aspects in which the aid of a confessional organization to the exercise by the churches of their ecumenical doctrinal responsibility “may play an important role in the contemporary ecumenical situation”.<sup>49</sup>

The second reason is the need for emphasizing “the fundamentals of our Presbyterian polity”. The Alliance can serve as an instrument “by promoting our joint study of polity, by bringing us to greater unity in our convictions regarding it, and by gaining for these convictions a hearing in ecumenical circles which no single church could command”.<sup>50</sup> The third reason is the need for “rendering certain practical services to members of the Presbyterian and Reformed family”, including “the initiation of studies of union or reunions... of the constituent churches of the Alliance with each other or with other churches”.<sup>51</sup>

In the years following the foundation of the WCC, the Alliance – then a fellowship of churches with the ecclesial profile of a “Christian world communion” – formulates its ecumenical self-understanding in terms of a bridge which, through ecumenical Reformed theology, intends to link isolated Reformed denominations to their own family as well as to other Christian churches preferably through organic union;

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<sup>48</sup> Ibid., p.77.

<sup>49</sup> Ibid., p.78.

<sup>50</sup> Ibid., p.78-79.

<sup>51</sup> Ibid., p.79.



it understands itself as existing provisionally, in between times: between Reformed isolation today and the visible unity of the church universal tomorrow. This unusual instrumental-provisional self-understanding governs the merger between the World Presbyterian Alliance and the International Congregational Council in 1970. Before that, it inspires the creation of a conference of leaders of Christian world communions.

### **III. Towards a conference of Christian world communions**

After the 1954 general council, Chairman Mackay, now WARC president, seems more convinced than in previous years that the new configuration of the ecumenical movement he has been tirelessly describing and tirelessly combating at least since Geneva 1948 is not likely to undergo major changes in the near future. The Alliance has already clearly stated its views on the so-called new global confessionalism and the ecumenical movement. It is time now for the Alliance to move into action and respond through new initiatives to the new ecumenical scene. Action takes two courses.

The first one has to do with WARC itself. Addressing the 1955 executive committee, meeting near Geneva, Mackay draws attention to the “dynamic growth of the Lutheran World Federation”. This is due, he continues, “to a vital sense of confessional position”. The time has come for the Alliance “to enter into the confessional discourse now going on within the ecumenical movement”.<sup>52</sup>

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<sup>52</sup> *World Alliance of Reformed Churches – Executive Committee Meeting, July 18-21 1955*, p.4.

Which roles should it play? First of all, “to help and to relate together all the members of our confessional family, especially the struggling members of our family, and those churches not within the ecumenical movement”; then “to offset any tendency within the WCC for it to become a vast monolithic structure” and, finally, “to strengthen the ecumenical movement by keeping before our sister churches in the WCC certain basic principles entrusted to our tradition”, namely the kingship of Christ, the priesthood of all believers and our conception of the church as “a servant of the redemptive plan of Jesus Christ and not as an end within itself”. While the Anglican-Catholic tradition is contributing the emphasis on liturgy, and the Lutheran World Federation is contributing “the concept of church service”, our confessional family should perhaps contribute “a substantial body of Protestant theology for this century”.<sup>53</sup>

What does this mean in terms of programme? In a 1956 paper, to which I will return, Mackay makes five proposals.<sup>54</sup> I will mention four and hold the fifth until the next page. The first is “the complete restoration of the Calvin Auditorium in Geneva”. Does this sound strange to you? For Mackay, the Auditorium “will be the symbol of a Christian heritage of thought and life which when true to itself seeks the glory above every other interest or concern”. The second is to hold the next general council in Brazil, to give expression “to the reality of our missionary interest and our far-flung confessional

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<sup>53</sup> Ibid., p.4.

<sup>54</sup> J. Mackay, “The Confessional Resurgence and the Ecumenical Movement with Special Reference to the Role and Development of the World Alliance of Reformed Churches”, *Minutes of the Executive Committee, Prague, Czechoslovakia, August 7-11 1956*, Appendix IX, p.35-40.

family”. The third is “to make provision for intensive theological research in our Reformed heritage of faith” and the fourth to ensure “that all sister Churches belonging to the Reformed family of Churches who may have suffered in recent times receive adequate support”.<sup>55</sup>

The second course of action has to do with interconfessional initiatives to resist “confessionalism” on behalf of the ecumenical movement as it expresses itself in the World Council of Churches. Since the 1954 Assembly in Evanston, the WCC commission on faith and order has been facilitating informal conversations between the Alliance and the Lutheran World Federation. The Alliance wants to take a step forward and to launch the proposal of a new ecumenical space to overcome what it sees as a potential conflict between the confessional and the ecumenical. Let us listen to Mackay, for the last time in this text.

In the previous thirty years, he writes in 1956 in a paper I’ve just quoted, “three significant developments have taken place in non-Roman Christianity”: a reborn sense of the church, the emergence of the ecumenical movement and the resurgence of confessionalism. What does he mean by “confessionalism” or neoconfessionalism in 1956?

The reborn sense of the church and the new aspiration towards church unity have awakened in the several confessional groups which make up the Protestant family “a fresh interest in their religious heritage”.<sup>56</sup> It is being realized that a Christian “cannot belong to the church in general”. A Christian

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<sup>55</sup> Ibid., p.39.

<sup>56</sup> Ibid., p.36.

becomes introduced into the fullness of Christ “through a specific church tradition”. She or he treats this tradition, however, “not as an idolatrous expression of the one and holy church, but as a providential instrument through which he was introduced to the Christian faith and nourished in the Christian life.

The new confessionalism is different from the old: there is no disposition on the part of the Anglicans, Congregationalists, Baptists, Lutherans, Methodists or Presbyterians “to absolutize their several confessional structures or loyalties”. Each believes it enshrines in its heritage “something that is authentically Christian” and this something makes “its specific contribution to the ecumenical treasure house of Christian faith and life”.<sup>57</sup>

The ecumenical movement and the confessional movement, however, “are developing side by side”. The future relationship of these two movements is for Mackay “one of the most crucial questions confronting Protestant Christianity in our time”. For the plain truth is that “the confessional movement could develop in such a way as to wreck the ecumenical movement” or at least “reduce the World Council of Churches to a venerated ecclesiastical façade”. It could “prevent unions taking place between the ‘younger churches’ and for that matter between ‘older churches’ in new situations”. On the other hand “the confessional movement, if wisely directed, can and should enrich the ecumenical movement”. But if this is going to happen “the confessional movement must be taken seriously by the World Council of Churches”.<sup>58</sup>

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<sup>57</sup> Ibid., p.37.

<sup>58</sup> Ibid., p.37.

What is the role of the Alliance in this dual context of the ecumenical and the confessional? The Alliance was “the first confessional body to become organized on a world scale” as well as the first “to interpret its position and outlook in the present ecumenical situation”. It does not regard itself “as existing to promote world Presbyterianism but rather to strengthen the holy catholic church through the Presbyterian witness”. “Open communion” is regarded by the Alliance “as the threshold and not as the consummation of Christian unity”. The church universal in our time “needs the witness of our Reformed heritage of faith”. In this connection, he writes, “it is important that we call upon ourselves, and upon our brethren of the other confessional groups, to engage in an act of self-examination, reappraisal and rededication” so that “the confessions bring their pure gold into the ecumenical treasure house of faith”.<sup>59</sup>

And here I come, finally, to the fifth proposal of action made by Mackay: “let us make arrangements for an informal meeting to take place between leaders of the several confessional organizations”.<sup>60</sup> At the present moment “there is no way of knowing what are the aims, objectives and trends of the confessional movement as a whole”. This can only be done “if confessional leaders come together for the exchange of information and the discussion of policies in an atmosphere of Christian confidence”.<sup>61</sup>

WARC adopts this proposal in the same year. A first informal meeting takes place in New Haven, USA, 1956, in the

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<sup>59</sup> Ibid., p.38.

<sup>60</sup> Ibid., p.39.

<sup>61</sup> Ibid., p.39.

framework of a WCC Central Committee. The following year, WARC proposes the following points as the agenda for the first official meeting: the place of confessionalism in the ecumenical movement; the ecumenical contribution of resurgent confessionalism; confessionalism as a threat to oneness in Christ; ecumenical commitment and confessional mission.<sup>62</sup> Since 1957, writes Harold Fey a few years later, “the officers (Fey means presidents and secretaries) of fourteen world confessional families have met in Geneva, generally annually, for conversations among themselves and with members of the staff of the World Council of Churches”.<sup>63</sup>

### Conclusion

A spectre is haunting the ecumenical movement, the spectre of confessionalism. Whatever views we may hold about it today, the perception of this potential ecumenical risk in 1948 plays an important role as the Alliance formulates its ecumenical self-understanding in the following years and at the same time takes the initiative leading to the creation of a conference of leaders of Christian world communions.

The Alliance does not pay lip service to the ecumenical self-understanding that emerges from the past pages of its history. According to its 1954 constitution, “United churches which have retained in their faith, life and government a sufficient and substantial part of the Reformed heritage... may likewise be eligible for admission”; one of the permanent pur-

<sup>62</sup> *Minutes of the Executive Committee, Stony Point, New York, USA, August 8-13 1957*, p.20.

<sup>63</sup> Harold E Fey, “Confessional Families and the Ecumenical Movement”, in Harold E Fey, ed, *The Ecumenical Advance*, p.121.

poses of the Alliance is now to study “what unions or reunions of the constituent Churches of the Alliance, with each other or with other churches, appear to be according to the will of God”.<sup>64</sup>

After the already mentioned 1970 merger between the Alliance and the International Congregational Council – the only case to date of organic union among Christian world communions (but hopefully not the last one) – the new constitution not only drops the 1954 reference to promoting Presbyterian polity as one of the constitutional aims, but it also formulates the purposes of the new fellowship clearly in the language of a “Reformed, Evangelical, Catholic Theology”.<sup>65</sup> One of these purposes is to facilitate “the contribution to the ecumenical movement of the experiences and insights which churches within the Alliance have been giving in their history, and to share with churches of other traditions within that movement, and particularly in the World Council of Churches, in the discovery of forms of church life and practice which will enable the people of God more fully to understand and express together God’s will for his people”.<sup>66</sup>

It is because the Alliance understands itself, in the light of a “Reformed, Evangelical, Catholic theology”, as a provisional instrument placed between the isolation of Reformed churches today and the visible unity of the church universal

<sup>64</sup> Constitution of the Alliance as adopted by the 17<sup>th</sup> General Council, 1954, article III.8, *Proceedings of the Seventeenth General Council (Princeton 1954)*, p.56.

<sup>65</sup> Cf. Alan PF Sell, *A Reformed, Evangelical, Catholic Theology – The contribution of the World Alliance of Reformed Churches, 1875-1982* (Eugene OR: Wipf & Stock, 1998), 304 pp.

<sup>66</sup> Constitution, article III.9, [www.warc.ch/who/const.html](http://www.warc.ch/who/const.html)

tomorrow that it seeks on the one hand to resist confessional mission in the south in the late 1940s and on the other hand to build a bridge in the late 1950s between its sister Christian world communions and the ecumenical movement as represented by the World Council of Churches.

We cannot prevent other churches from taking our witness to be the confession of a particular denomination, future WARC president Wilhelm Niesel writes in 1954, “but woe to us, if we ourselves take such a view of it”.<sup>67</sup>



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<sup>67</sup> W Niesel, “The Reformed Witness and the Word of God”, *Proceedings of the Seventeenth General Council (Princeton 1954)*, p.127.



# III

## The World Council of Churches and the early history of the Catholic-Reformed dialogue

### I. On Cardinal Sadoleto, Calvin, and Reformed ecumenicity today

In March 1539, now that the Frenchmen Calvin and Farel have been banned from Geneva for claiming the right to excommunicate unworthy Genevans, James Cardinal Sadoleto, who has been bishop of Carpentras, France, for more than twenty years, addresses a letter “to his dearly beloved brethren, the magistrates, senate, and citizens of Geneva”. Cardinal Sadoleto builds on the fear of the hereafter a soteriological appeal to *unitatis redintegratio*.

Here is an elementary form of the Cardinal’s argumentation<sup>1</sup>: Those who put their faith and hope in Christ, he writes, do it in order to obtain “salvation for themselves and their souls” (page 6). We must use every effort to retain this possession (p.9). We obtain the eternal salvation of our souls “by faith alone in God and in Jesus Christ” (10). However, this saving faith is not just “a mere credulity and confidence in

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<sup>1</sup> For an English translation of Sadoleto’s letter see H. Beveridge (transl.), *John Calvin – Tracts Relating to the Reformation*, Edinburgh, Calvin Translation Society, 1844, volume I, 3-22. The figures in brackets refer to the pages in the Beveridge edition.

God” (9), which eliminates “charity and the other duties of a Christian mind” (9). In true faith “love is essentially comprehended as the chief and primary cause of our salvation” (10).

Sadoletto goes on to hold that it is the Church which has “regenerated us to God in Christ” and also taught us “by what way we must tend towards heaven” (10-11). We do not claim for ourselves “anything beyond the opinion and authority of the Church” (11). We should guard ourselves from “the loss and perdition of our souls” (12), induced by the “dreadful sin of preposterous and false religion” (13). The more appropriate to our salvation and more pleasing to God is to believe and follow “what the Catholic Church throughout the whole world, now for more than fifteen hundred years (...) approves with general consent” (14). The way to obtain the favour of the Almighty God is to agree “with the whole Church, and faithfully observe her decrees, and laws, and sacraments” (15) because the Church “errs not” (18) since the Holy Spirit “constantly guides her public and universal decrees and Councils”(18).

The Roman Cardinal contends *ad hominem*. He suggests that the Reformers are moved by ambition for personal power and prestige. He refers to them as “enemies of Christian unity” (4) who cast “the wicked seeds of discord” (5). They are “inventors of novelty” who seek dissension (15-16). As a result of their action, many sects have torn the Church. These sects do not agree with them and disagree with each other, which is “a manifest indication of falsehood”, for “truth is always one, while falsehood is varied and multiform” (19). The tearing of the spouse of Christ in pieces is “the proper work of Satan”

(20). Love was given to us that “we might all confess the Lord with one head and mouth” (20). I beg and exhort you, concludes Sadoleto, “that you would be pleased to return to concord with us” (21).

It is to none other than Calvin, the banned, that the Geneva authorities appeal for a response to Sadoleto’s letter. The “Reply by Calvin to Cardinal Sadolet’s Letter”<sup>2</sup> is an *abrégé* of the fundamental 16<sup>th</sup> century Reformation insights. Its two main sections deal respectively with faith (41-49) and order (49-56) or, in Calvin’s language, with “a purer teaching of the gospel” and “a better form of Church” (33).

Following an initial set of paragraphs in which he argues for the integrity of the Reformers’ ministry and against Sadoleto’s definition of the Church – which refers to the Holy Spirit in the Church without referring to the Word of God –, Calvin contends that the present teaching and practice of the Gospel in the Latin Church is neither sanctioned by Scriptures nor in agreement with the Church of the Greek and Latin Fathers. The issues here are justification, good works, the Lord’s Supper, confession, the intercession of the saints, and purgatory. In attacking your kingdom, he writes, “we are armed not only with the energy of the Divine Word, but with the aid of the Holy Fathers also” (48). He then goes on from faith to order. The issue here is the perversion of the ministerial and pastoral office, a perversion well illustrated by the Roman Pontiff and the “pseudo-bishops”. We admit that ecclesiasti-

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<sup>2</sup> For what follows see H. Beveridge (transl.), *John Calvin – Tracts Relating to the Reformation*. Op. cit. , p. 25-68. Figures in brackets refer to the page in the Beveridge edition.

cal pastors are to be heard like Christ, he writes, “but they must be pastors who execute the office entrusted to them”.

Calvin’s case for the gospel preached in its purity and the sacrament administered according to the gospel within a community ordered under the World of God is inseparable from his loyalty to the Church of fathers and from his rather inclusive concern for the visible unity of the Church Universal. My conscience told me, one of his characters says to God in the letter, “how strong the zeal was with which I burned for this unity of thy Church, provided thy truth were made the bond of concord” (60).

Towards the end of his reply, Calvin writes that the most serious charge of all made by Sadoleto is “that we have attempted to dismember the Spouse of Christ”. He admits that “on the revival of the gospel, great disputes arose, where all was quietness before” (67). But this is not to be imputed to the Reformers. Our Reformers offered “to render an account of their doctrine”, he writes with a thought for the Augsburg Confession. If overcome in argument, he goes on to argue, “They decline not to submit”. And he asks: “to whom, then, is it owing that the Church enjoys not perfect peace, and the light of truth?” (68) Calvin concludes by praying that Sadoleto perceive that “the only true bond of Ecclesiastical unity would exist if Christ the Lord who hath reconciled us with God the Father, were to gather us out of our present dispersion into the fellowship of his body” (68).

This brings us to the contemporary practice of Reformed ecumenicity. The Scottish theologian William Blaikie, one of the founders of the World Presbyterian Alliance in 1875, opens

the first historical narrative about the future WARC by outlining the history of the ideal of a World Reformed Alliance<sup>3</sup>. This idea, he writes in the first line of his text, “had a prominent place in the minds of the Reformers”. Blaikie mentions Théodore de Bèze’s Conference at the 1561 Colloquy of Poissy, then quotes the famous 1552 letter of Calvin to the Anglican Archbishop Cranmer on crossing ten seas to achieve Christian unity, and ends up in a 19<sup>th</sup> century Scottish Church law reference to a “General Council of Protestants”.

The new Presbyterian Alliance pursued for at least fifty years the idea of a confession broad enough to receive previous Reformed confessions or the idea of a harmony of confessions as a way of encouraging its member churches to move from the abnormal age of Euro-American confessionalism and denominationalism back to the more catholic ecumenical agenda of the Reformation, which later on the so called “younger churches” from the global South would claim without naming. Making the case for “The Consensus of the Reformed Confessions” at the first General Council of the Presbyterian Alliance, in 1877, the world citizen and “Catholic Reformed” Philip Schaff, another of the Alliance’s pioneers, states that “a confession which would intensify Presbyterianism an loosen the ties which unite us to the other branches of Christ’s kingdom I would regard as a calamity (...) We want a declaration of union, not a platform of disunion”. Now a question:

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<sup>3</sup> W. Blaikie, “Introductory Narrative”, *Report of Proceedings of the First General Presbyterian Council Convened at Edinburgh, July 1877*. Edinburgh, Thomas and Archibald Constable, 1877, p. 1.

Would it be possible to draw a theological-ecumenical line threading the Calvinian inclusive concern for the unity of the Church (which leaves little or no room to confessionalism or denominationalism), the pan-protestant vision of the Reformed Alliance pioneers, and the post-denominational way in which the World Alliance of Reformed Churches (WARC) understood itself and its role in the ecumenical movement following the establishment of the World Council of Churches in 1948? This article undertakes a case study on institutional ecumenical decision-making in order to test the ground for a substantiated answer. It deals with the WARC deliberations leading to the decision of engaging or not in bilateral ecumenical dialogue with the Roman Catholic Church in the years following the II Vatican Council.

## **II. WARC observes Vatican II (1961-1965)**

The theological dialogue between the Roman Catholic Church and the World Alliance of Reformed Churches (WARC) traces its origins to the Third Assembly of the World Council of Churches, held in New Delhi, India, 19 November to 5 December 1961. During that meeting, the Roman Catholic observers and the WARC General Secretary raised for the first time the possibility that the Vatican Secretariat for Promoting Christian Unity invite WARC to send three delegated observers to the Second Vatican Council, due to open in Rome in October 1962.<sup>4</sup> The issue was discussed once again in Geneva, in April 1962, at a meeting of representatives of world

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<sup>4</sup> Pradervand, M. (1962) Report of the General Secretary. World Alliance of Reformed Churches, *Minutes of the Executive Committee – Ibadan, Nigeria, West Africa – August 26-30, 1962*, Appendix 1, p.20.

confessional families.<sup>5</sup> In that meeting, most of the confessional families marked by the Reformation expressed their desire to be invited to send observers to Vatican II.<sup>6</sup>

Still in 1962 the WARC Executive Committee meeting, held in Ibadan, Nigeria, confirmed the decision, previously taken by its officers, to appoint three observers to Vatican II – one from continental Europe, one from Britain and one from North America.<sup>7</sup> It also clarified, especially for a constituency which included very different, if not contradictory, views on the Church of Rome, the nature of this decision. The primary purpose of sending observers would be “to have direct information about the work of the Second Vatican Council”. The WARC observers “will not have authority to speak officially for the Alliance or its member churches or to engage in any negotiations on behalf of the Alliance”. They may informally “give explanations of Reformed doctrine and practice as it may bear upon the questions being discussed in the Council”. During the Roman Catholic Council the WARC observers “will

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<sup>5</sup> What we call today “Christian world communions” or CWCs.

<sup>6</sup> Pradervand, M. (1962) Report of the General Secretary. World Alliance of Reformed Churches, *Minutes of the Executive Committee – Ibadan, Nigeria, West Africa – August 26-30, 1962*, Appendix 1, pp.19-21.

<sup>7</sup> They were: Pastor Hébert Roux of the Reformed Church of France; Rev. Douglas W.D. Shaw of the Church of Scotland and Rev. Prof. James H. Nichols of the United Presbyterian Church U.S. World Alliance of Reformed Churches (1962) *Minutes of the Executive Committee – Ibadan, Nigeria, West Africa – August 26-30, 1962*, pp.6-7. Observers at the 1963 session were: Rev. Prof. Robert McAfee Brown, Rev. Angus Morrison, Pastor Hébert Roux and Rev. Prof. Vittorio Subilia (alternate). Observers to the 1964 session: Rev. Prof. Vittorio Subilia, Rev. Allan MacArthur and Rev. Prof. J.N. Thomas. Cf. *Frankfurt 1964 – Proceedings of the Nineteenth General Council of the Alliance of the Reformed Churches Throughout the World Holding the Presbyterian Order*, Offices of the Alliance, Geneva, p.251. Observers at the last sessions were: Rev. Prof. V. Subilia, Rev. Dr. R.H.N. Davidson and Prof. J.K.S. Reid. World Alliance of Reformed Churches (1965) *Minutes of the Executive Committee, Baguio City, Philippines, June 24-29, 1965*, p.5.

report to the Churches exclusively through the officers and Executive Committee of the Alliance.”<sup>8</sup>

The reports on the first session of Vatican II produced by the observers underlined the positive value of having WARC observers attending the Roman Catholic Council. For Hébert Roux, the observers were not treated as passive spectators, but as true witnesses. It was essential that throughout Vatican II the Alliance should continue “to maintain with the maximum of continuity the delegation of three Observers accorded to it”. Their role would be facilitated and enriched by the nomination of theological experts who could, at their request, stay in Rome for brief periods.<sup>9</sup> Another observer, D.W.D. Shaw, notes that the observer had an informative role to play, “not only among his own people, but among Roman Catholics as well.”<sup>10</sup> The three WARC observers were also unanimous in the recognition of the prominent ecumenical role played by Pope John XXIII and his newly appointed Secretariat for Promoting Christian Unity during the first session of the Council. According to James H. Nichols, Roman Catholic ecumenism in any developed sense was, before Vatican II, “a small minority concern”. The “enormous and sudden” increase of the influence of ecumenical ideas throughout the Roman Catholic Church resulted from “the direct intervention of the

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<sup>8</sup> World Alliance of Reformed Churches (1962) *Minutes of the Executive Committee – Ibadan, Nigeria, West Africa – August 26-30, 1962*, p.6.

<sup>9</sup> World Alliance of Reformed Churches (1963) *The Second Vatican Council – Report of Pastor Hébert Roux. Minutes of the Executive Committee, Princeton, USA, July 29-August 3, 1963*, p.38.

<sup>10</sup> World Alliance of Reformed Churches (1963) *The Second Vatican Council – Report of Rev. D.W.D. Shaw. Minutes of the Executive Committee, Princeton, USA, July 29-August 3, 1963*, p.42.



Pope which gave the ecumenists their direct influence in the machinery of the Council.”<sup>11</sup>

The unprecedented ecumenical situation created both by the remarkable achievements of the WCC 1961 Assembly and by the 1962 and 1963 sessions of Vatican II compelled the Reformed Alliance, gathering in Frankfurt, Germany, for its 1964 General Council, to reflect extensively on WARC’s role in the ecumenical movement in general and on Reformed-Roman Catholic relations in particular.

As a result, the WARC general council adopted several documents with direct bearing on its ecumenical engagement in general and on its relations with the Roman Catholic Church in particular. One of them, the Resolution on Observers to the Second Vatican Council, opens on an optimistic note by making reference to the Ibadan 1962 decision of responding positively to the Vatican invitation to send observers to the Council. Now that there have been two sessions of the Vatican Council, it says, “it is sometimes difficult to recall the hesitations in the summer of 1962 that accompanied those actions”. In that meeting the WARC Executive Committee “did not and could not know the depth and breadth of the new ecumenical atmosphere that would be produced by the Vatican Council”. After two sessions of the Council, “it is now possible (...) to report (...) that its 1962 decisions are proved to have been right and useful”. In taking them the WARC leadership acted

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<sup>11</sup> World Alliance of Reformed Churches (1963) The Second Vatican Council – Report of Professor James Hastings Nichols. *Minutes of the Executive Committee, Princeton, USA, July 29-August 3, 1963*, p.39.

“as a servant of its member Churches and as a service to the Roman Catholic Church.”<sup>12</sup>

### **III. To be or not to be in dialogue with the Roman Catholic Church (1965-1968)**

Early in 1968, two years after the last session of Vatican II, the Roman Catholic Church had already started bilateral theological dialogues with different confessional families marked by the Reformation which had sent observers to Vatican II. The Anglican-Roman Catholic Joint Preparatory Commission had just held its third meeting and, depending on the recommendation of the 1968 Lambeth Conference, a Permanent Joint Commission might soon be set up. The Catholic-Methodist joint commission had had an exploratory meeting and would meet again late in August to discuss the eucharist and authority in the church. After the 1965 and 1966 meetings of the Joint Roman Catholic/Lutheran Working Group, a Study Commission on “The Gospel and the Church” met in 1967 and would meet again in September 1968. The Joint Working Group between the Roman Catholic Church and the World Council of Churches had been meeting since 1965 and had already issued two reports, including a study on Catholicity and Apostolicity. What about the Reformed-Catholic international dialogue?

WARC’s very positive appraisal of Catholic-Reformed relations did not mean, though, that it was willing to start a bilat-

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<sup>12</sup> *Frankfurt 1964 – Proceedings of the Nineteenth General Council of the Alliance of the Reformed Churches Throughout the World Holding the Presbyterian Order (1964) Offices of the Alliance, Geneva, pp.250-251.*

eral dialogue with the Church of Rome. Reporting to the WARC Executive Committee meeting in Baguio, Philippines, in 1965, the general secretary Marcel Pradervand wrote that “we do not believe it to be the task of the Alliance at this time to enter into conversation at the world level with our Roman Catholic brethren.”<sup>13</sup> This view was confirmed by the WARC Executive Committee, which stated in the same meeting that “it is the consensus of the Executive Committee that the World Alliance of Reformed Churches initiate no separate theological dialogue or theological discussions with the Vatican at this time...”<sup>14</sup> The 1966 Strasbourg meeting of the WARC Executive Committee reaffirmed this decision and appointed an ad-hoc committee to confer with the WCC secretariat “on how the Alliance may best cooperate with the WCC in dialogue with Rome”, and to consult with the Lutheran World Federation “concerning joint participation, and with other families of churches that may become involved in the Roman Catholic dialogue...”<sup>15</sup>

The wind soon began to change. To the 1965 and 1966 WARC decisions rejecting a bilateral dialogue in favour of the new WCC-Vatican dialogue, the outgoing WCC general secretary, Visser 't Hooft, responded that the WCC would not be able “to deal with any specific questions which have arisen

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<sup>13</sup> Pradervand, M. (1965) General Secretary's Report. World Alliance of Reformed Churches, *Minutes of the Executive Committee – Baguio City, Philippines, June 24-29, 1965*, Appendix II, p.20. This position was reaffirmed by the 1966 Executive Committee meeting, and by the general secretary in his report to the 1967 Executive Committee meeting.

<sup>14</sup> World Alliance of Reformed Churches (1965) *Minutes of the Executive Committee – Baguio City, Philippines, June 24-29, 1965*, p.7.

<sup>15</sup> World Alliance of Reformed Churches (1966) *Minutes of the Executive Committee – Strasbourg, France, July 28-August 2, 1966*, p.9.

between the Roman Catholic Church and the Reformed churches”, and that national dialogue between the Reformed and the Catholics was underway “in Holland, USA, Switzerland, etc.”. In the course of an informal encounter with the WARC general secretary, Visser ’t Hooft reiterated his view and added that “the WCC does not wish to convey the impression that member churches of the WCC embarking on direct dialogue with the RC Church have become ‘bad’ members of the WCC.”<sup>16</sup> A consultation between WARC and WCC representatives late in 1966<sup>17</sup> affirmed once again the WARC policy on no separate dialogue with Rome, adding that the Alliance “should reaffirm its willingness to enter into dialogue with the Roman Catholic Church in the future, should particular, crucial, and urgent theological questions arise vis-à-vis the Roman Catholic Church.” It was also recommended that WARC and the Lutheran World Federation should explore “what possible co-operation in the common task of the ecumenical movement could be undertaken by the two bodies.”<sup>18</sup>

During 1967, the new WCC general secretary, the American Presbyterian theologian Eugene Carson Blake, and the equally Reformed director of the WCC Commission on Faith

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<sup>16</sup> Richmond Smith. Memo to Dr Marcel Pradervand, August 15, 1966, WARC Archives, T/52.

<sup>17</sup> It should be noted that the participants from both sides were all Reformed: Wilhelm Niesel, WARC President; James I. McCord, Moderator of the WARC Department of Theology; Marcel Pradervand, WARC General Secretary; Willem Visser ’t Hooft, WCC General Secretary; Lukas Vischer, WCC/Faith and Order Director; Richmond Smith, WARC Theological Secretary.

<sup>18</sup> *WARC/Roman Catholic Relations – Consultation between WARC and WCC representatives*, November 25, 1966, p.2. WARC Archives, T/52.

and Order, the Swiss Lukas Vischer, come to the conclusion that WARC's policy of no separate dialogue with Rome ought to be reviewed.<sup>19</sup>

Referring to a conversation with Lukas Vischer in January 1968, WARC's theological secretary Richmond Smith noted that "the reality of the present ecumenical context is such that the original Alliance motive not to proliferate bilateral dialogue in order to strengthen the WCC position may now paradoxically be best served by entering the field in such a way that the WCC, along with the Confessional Families of Churches, may be able to co-ordinate effectively the total work of dialogue with the RC Church on the international level". The moderator of WARC's Department of Theology, James McCord, wrote to Richmond Smith that "both Dr. Blake and Dr. Vischer feel that the time has come for a fresh appraisal of our decision". And he went on: "Let me add that I agree with them."<sup>20</sup> McCord agreed with the German Calvin scholar Wilhelm Niesel, WARC's president,<sup>21</sup> that "this is not a matter to be approached hurriedly" and that a full discussion should take place during the next WARC Executive Committee in Cluj, Romania, at the end of June 1968. For McCord, "if we do begin conversations, it is imperative that we engage the cooperation of our best Reformed theologians. (...) I should hope that the topic or theme would be something relevant to the

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<sup>19</sup> Richmond Smith. Letter to Wilhelm Niesel, January 30, 1968. WARC Archives, T/52. "On the subject of Alliance/Roman Catholic dialogue I think that you are aware that some questioning and re-thinking of Alliance policy has been going on in WCC circles."

<sup>20</sup> James I. McCord. Letter to Richmond Smith, February 16, 1968. WARC Archives, T/52.

<sup>21</sup> Wilhelm Niesel. Letter to Richmond Smith, February 2, 1968. WARC Archives, T/52.

present relations and that the results would have more than antiquarian interest in the life of our Churches.”<sup>22</sup>

The WARC Executive Committee meeting held in Cluj, Romania, in 1968, instructed the WARC theological leadership “to explore with the General Secretary of the WCC and the Director of Faith and Order and with representatives of the Roman Catholic Church the elements in the new situation that may make the initiation of Reformed/Roman Catholic dialogue wise at this time”. Should such a review point to the beginning of the dialogue, the same group “is empowered to meet with representatives of the Vatican to discuss possible agenda items, schedule, format, etc.”<sup>23</sup>

In order to draw the implications of the Cluj decision, Roman Catholic and WARC/WCC representatives met during the 4th WCC Assembly in Uppsala, Sweden, on July 15, 1968.<sup>24</sup> It is worth noting that the WARC delegation was formed by its president, Wilhelm Niesel, the chairman of WARC’s department of theology, James I. McCord, and by two high level WCC executives: Eugene Carson Blake, general secretary, and Lukas Vischer, director of the WCC Commission on Faith and Order.

It was agreed that “formal, ongoing conversations should begin only if there were real, serious theological/pastoral is-

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<sup>22</sup> James I. McCord. Letter to Richmond Smith, February 16, 1968. WARC Archives, T/52.

<sup>23</sup> World Alliance of Reformed Churches (1968) *Minutes of the Executive Committee – Cluj, Romania, June 25-29, 1968*, p.14.

<sup>24</sup> Roman Catholic representatives were: Jan Willebrands, Killian McDonnell, Thomas Stransky and Jérôme Hamer. On the Reformed side: Wilhelm Niesel, Eugene Carson Blake and Lukas Vischer.

sues that demanded specifically bilateral treatment” and that “a small group of representatives of both sides should hold an ad hoc meeting to discuss if such issues in fact exist, and if they do, what forms of collaboration would best meet the need.”<sup>25</sup>

Following this decision, WARC undertook consultations with the confessional families already in dialogue with Rome – Methodists, Lutherans, Congregationalists, and the WCC Faith and Order Commission – in order to avoid duplication of theological agendas. Two preparatory meetings between Roman Catholic and Reformed representatives, to be held in November 1968 and in April 1969, finally led to the conclusion that the specific issues demanding bilateral treatment “in fact exist”, and opened the way to the launching of the Catholic-Reformed international dialogue.

#### **IV. The WARC internal theological debate on dialogue with Rome (1968)**

While the WARC officers were taking the steps leading to the decision of moving to dialogue with the Roman Catholic Church, WARC theological advisors exhibited different views on the desirability, convenience and role of a Catholic-Reformed international dialogue. Here is a brief review of this internal discussion.

According to the Dutch theologian Hendrikus Berkhof, professor at the University of Leyden, WARC’s 1965 decision

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<sup>25</sup> Thomas Stransky. *Pro Memoria – World Alliance of Reformed Churches – Roman Catholic Church Relations*. WARC Archives, T/52.

of holding no separate dialogue with Rome remains basically correct. Conversations with the Roman Catholic Church on a world level “must necessarily have a somewhat abstract if not ghostly character”. They were in danger of “reinforcing denominational characteristics which are no longer the live issues in the actual Churches.” Moreover, “according to the philosophy of *De Ecclesia* and *Ecclesiam suam* the Vatican loves to surround itself with denominational bodies with which it maintains ‘conversations’. But the real things happen in the national situations on the one hand and between Rome and Geneva<sup>26</sup> on the other hand”. WARC and Rome should start a theological dialogue “only if we were convinced that the WCC would not undertake adequate work.”<sup>27</sup>

For the Scottish theologian Thomas F. Torrance, professor of Christian Dogmatics at the University of Edinburgh, there did not seem to be much point in setting up talks between the Reformed Churches and the Catholic Church “if these are merely to repeat what is going on elsewhere between Protestants and Romans on the usual themes, Scripture, Tradition, Justification, Sacraments, Papacy, Mariology, etc.” There could be some real point “in discussions that were designed to penetrate beneath and behind these areas of disagreement into the basic inner connections with a view to clarifying the deeper divergences and to reaching, if possible, deeper agreement.”

Torrance proposed discussions be “scientifically set up and carried through”, in which “all participants combine to work

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<sup>26</sup> “Geneva” means here the World Council of Churches (author’s note).

<sup>27</sup> Letter to Richmond Smith, March 31, 1968. WARC Archives, T/52.



out rigorously the connections and implications of the common stock of catholic and ecumenical theology of Christendom – e.g. as expressed in the Nicene Creed, and the Ecumenical Councils of the Ancient Catholic Church”. These conversations should therefore focus on topics such as Church and Israel, the assumption of Adamic humanity, the vicarious humanity of Christ, and the problem of Latin culture. In relation to the assumption of Adamic humanity, Torrance asked: “Why is it that the Church of Rome alone accepts the immaculate conception that puts Mary outside the continuity of fallen Adamic humanity? What are the arguments of the Orthodox against this? Why is it that even the vast majority of protestants reject the idea that the Son of God took fallen flesh, ‘the flesh of sin’, although He sanctified it in the very event of its assumption? Is Roman ‘infallibility’ and is Protestant ‘perfectionism’ bound up with this ‘error’?”

According to Torrance, the Catholic-Reformed dialogue would then take “a seminar form” in which a group of theologians “work together on an agreed set of texts, preferably from the Greek Fathers outside the immediate traditions of Roman and Reformed Churches”. In this way the results would stand “in contrast to the rather passing significance of so many Conference reports of modern times”. In this way the Reformed churches could make “a signal contribution to the whole ecumenical discussion”, and one that was not “fraught with the artificiality of discussing unity with Rome where this is clearly ecclesiastically and theologically impossible, until great changes have taken place in our common foundations.”<sup>28</sup>

<sup>28</sup> Letter to M. Pradervand, January 22, 1968. WARC Archives, T/52.

For Rudolf Ehrlich – a German theologian and Scottish ecumenist, author of *Rome, Opponent or Partner?*<sup>29</sup> and professor at Edinburgh, Scotland – the Roman Catholic Church saw its conversations with the world – including the newly launched bilateral dialogues with Anglicans, Lutherans and Methodists – as “concentric circles”: “they rotate around the one and the same centre: Rome”. As they enter into separate bilateral dialogue with Rome, the Anglican, Lutheran, and Methodist Churches or confessional federations “are doing their best to become separate circles which have only one thing in common: they are concentric, i.e., they have the same centre which is Rome.”

Ehrlich went on to argue that given that separate conversations were taking place, the question was: “Has the Reformed Church (as distinct from the Anglicans, the Lutherans and the Methodists) nothing to contribute to a dialogue with Rome (...)?” Faithful to the *solus Christus* of the Reformation, “the Reformed theologian must insist on Christ alone being the centre of the dialogue. Today the dialogue is in danger of becoming Rome-centred.” The different understandings of the church may be basically due to “Christological misunderstandings” and their implications for ecclesiology. “Christology – the humanity of Christ, his substitutionary and vicarious activity both as God and man – and ecclesiology – the Church always as *ancilla domini*, never and never to be *regina coeli* – are surely areas where Reformed and Roman Catholic theologians have something to say to each other.”<sup>30</sup>

<sup>29</sup> Ehrlich, R. (1965) *Rome, Opponent or Partner?* Lutterworth Press, London.

<sup>30</sup> Memorandum Concerning Proposed Talks with the Church of Rome. WARC Archives, T/52. Cf. also Ecclesiology – The Dialogue with Rome. *Bulletin of Theology*, 7(4), 1967, pp.7-10.

Late in 1968, the Congregationalist theologian George B. Caird, a New Testament scholar at the University of Oxford, reported to WARC on a November consultation of secretaries and theological consultants of the world confessional families, called “to discuss the future of dialogue with Rome”. According to the participants, “at the world level the main dialogue should still be conducted under the auspices of the World Council of Churches”. It was essential “that Geneva and not Rome should be the centre of all ecumenical discussion”. Only the WCC “is large enough to meet the Roman Catholic Church on equal terms”. If there were many separate dialogues, “Rome will at once become the hub of a wheel with many radiating spokes”. This is a picture of the ecumenical movement “which Rome has held in the past but it is not now anxious to perpetuate”.

For George Caird, if the Alliance decided to enter on bilateral dialogue with Rome at world level, such dialogue “should be undertaken only if it is clear that the subject is one which these bodies could better discuss without the presence of representatives of other world confessions”. Caird mentions two issues “on which our position is so distinctive that the real division between us and Rome is not likely to be brought to the surface when Orthodox, Anglicans, or even Methodists are present”. These two issues were authority in the church, and the relation between continuity and identity. Caird also thought – “rather tentatively” – that in the post-Vatican II era, Rome faced what “has been described as a crisis of authority, but which is really a crisis of faith”. Having “largely abandoned the old safeguards”, the Roman Catholic Church “cannot now

see what is to prevent the faith being modernized away altogether”. Thus it could benefit from a dialogue with the Congregationalists, “who have lived for centuries without safeguards and have still remained substantially orthodox.”<sup>31</sup>

### **V. The Preparatory Meetings for WARC-Roman Catholic Dialogue (1968-1969)**

At the end of the first preparatory meeting, held in Geneva, 27-29 November 1968,<sup>32</sup> the Catholic and the Reformed representatives agreed unanimously that “conversations on a world level are now desirable and feasible...” While in several countries there were Catholic-Reformed conversations, which “bear directly on the life of the Church in the local situation”, these local conversations “cannot influence the whole Church and in some cases they are unable to conclude anything because of the universal nature of the questions under discussion”. Moreover, they often duplicated each other and did not sufficiently influence “the centre of their respective authorities”; in countries where local dialogue presented major difficulties, churches were deprived “of the influence of the dialogue which is already taking place”. An international dialogue “could achieve a wider influence on the results already obtained on national levels” and would benefit those areas where dialogue was not possible.

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<sup>31</sup> George B. Caird. *World Confessional Families, 1968 – Report on Discussions about Dialogue with Rome*. WARC Archives, T/52.

<sup>32</sup> For what followed on the first preparatory meeting see: Consultation of Representatives of the World Alliance of Reformed Churches and Secretariat for Promoting Christian Unity of the Roman Catholic Church, WARC Archives, T/52. Reformed participants were James I. McCord, Rudolf J. Ehrlich and Richmond Smith; Catholic participants were Jan Willebrands, Alexandre Ganoczy and August Hasler.

The Catholic-Reformed dialogue should not duplicate other ongoing dialogues such as the Catholic-Lutheran and the Catholic-Anglican dialogues. It must reflect not only “the peculiar tensions between the two Churches” but also “their common concern to make manifest the relevance of Christ in the word today”. It was agreed that the “most suitable” topic for the next exploratory meeting was “The Presence of Christ in Church and World” because “it has a bearing not only on the ultimate salvation of man but also on his life and happiness here and now”. This theme, and especially the meaning of Christ’s saving humanity, would also bring to light “the differences between the two communions”.

The second preparatory meeting took place in Tiltenberg/Vogelenzang, the Netherlands, April 15-19, 1969.<sup>33</sup> It started by focusing on the national dialogues. A Roman Catholic, I.C. Groot, reported on “The Reformed/Roman Catholic Dialogue in the Netherlands”. A Presbyterian, James H. Nichols, reported on “The Reformed-Presbyterian/Roman Catholic Dialogue in the USA”.

It was in the wider context of discussions on the local dialogues that two position papers on the theme selected for the preparatory meeting, “The Presence of Christ in Church and World”, were presented respectively by Jacques de Senarclens, professor of theology at the University of Geneva and by Joseph Hoffmann, professor at the Faculty

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<sup>33</sup> For what followed on the second preparatory meeting see: (1970) Preparation for dialogue between the Roman Catholic Church and the World Alliance of Reformed Churches. *Nairobi 1970, Proceedings of the Uniting General Council of the World Alliance of Reformed Churches*, WARC, Geneva, pp.204-210.

of Catholic Theology at the University of Strasbourg, France, and a proxy for the Catholic theologian and Calvin scholar Alexandre Ganoczy. The discussion that ensued on the two position papers gave rise to “a remarkable convergence” on Christology, Ecclesiology and the attitude of the Christian in the world. It evidenced, on the other hand, “basic divergences” related to “the central problem of understanding the Lordship of Christ today”. The Church was confronted with these traditional problems “in quite a new form, because of a new historical situation and more especially of the developments in the secular world”. For the first session of the Catholic-Reformed Dialogue, to be held in 1970, the proposed theme was “Christ’s Relationship to the Church”, because “it is both christological and ecclesiological”.

## **VI. On “denominational pre-eminence” as a betrayal of Jesus Christ**

Contemporary readers somewhat familiar with the ways in which bilateral dialogues take place today may be puzzled by the fact that the ecumenical decision-making process described above is marked not only by some years of hesitation on going bilaterally in ecumenical dialogue but also by a constant reference – better: a constant subordination – of WARC’s ecumenical decisions to the World Council of Churches and its Faith and Order Commission.

The rationale for what looks today like an intriguing type of ecumenical discernment and decision-making is to be found not so much in the diversity of views on this matter

exhibited by the WARC constituency as in a strict application of the way in which WARC understood itself as a confessional body within the ecumenical movement especially after the establishment of the World Council of Churches in 1948.

This understanding began to take shape in 1949, in response to the Lutheran World Federation decision to sponsor confessional work in mission lands, and was first formulated in 1951 in the statement “The World Presbyterian Alliance in the Present Ecumenical Situation”.<sup>34</sup> According to that statement, the life of the Protestant churches was marked by three main trends: a movement towards ecumenical understanding and unity; a movement towards the world unity of sectarian groups; and finally a movement towards world denominationalism. The Reformed tradition is “by nature ecumenical”. It is committed to “the pursuit of Christian unity upon the basis of loyal commitment to the essential verities of the Christian faith”. It is in the essence of Presbyterianism “never to be merely an end in itself, but to serve the Church Universal of Jesus Christ”. Through WARC, younger churches should be led to understand that “it is the true glory of this tradition to seek and promote Christian solidarity and also church union where the local or national situation demands it.” Aware of the perils represented by world denominationalism, the WARC leaders concluded their statement: “If the great

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<sup>34</sup> See Mateus, O.P. (2005) *The World Alliance of Reformed Churches and the Modern Ecumenical Movement*, WARC, Geneva, pp.132-136.

world denominations, the Reformed churches among them, pursue denominational pre-eminence and make their great world bodies end in themselves, they will betray Jesus Christ.”<sup>35</sup>

This ecumenical policy was consistently reaffirmed and implemented in the following years and especially in the discernment process leading to the Catholic-Reformed dialogue. Thus the WARC 1964 General Council adopted three ecumenical documents with direct bearing on WARC relations with the Roman Catholic Church. A brief review of those documents sheds light respectively on the Reformed understanding of ecumenicity, on the WARC ecumenical policy and on its implications for its relations with Rome.

The first 1964 document was a General Council Section Report on “Come Creator Spirit, for the Calling of the Churches Together”. It affirmed the value of the Reformation principle and reflected on the Church universal (catholicity), on the Church in each place (locality) and on the role of a confessional body in promoting unity. At the Reformation, “the Church was renewed by a new understanding of the Word of God”. But this was a renewal “within the ongoing life of the Church, a life continuing from the days of the Apostles”. The truth recognized by the Reformers “that there is only one Church extended throughout the world” remains valid today, and the present disunited state of the Church “is sinful in that it obscures this truth and our reconciliation with one another in Christ”. To tolerate this disunity “is to be sharer in the sin”.

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<sup>35</sup> *Idem.*





### III. THE WORLD COUNCIL OF CHURCHES AND THE EARLY HISTORY..

The Church is catholic because the grace of God in Christ being the good news for all the world, it is “called to show by its life that it has a complete Gospel for all sorts and conditions of men”. The Reformed churches recognize catholicity “in those churches also which are divided from us, in that they too bear witness to the one Lord and to the one faith”. The toleration of disunity “denies the meaning of our baptism”. The unity of the Church must be expressed “in each place in which Christians live and work”. The separate existence of divided denominations “hinders mission” and “impairs our own understanding of the Gospel”. A confessional body “is by its very nature a provisional body”. Its purpose includes “helping the churches of each place to become one in truth and love of God in Christ”.

The Reformed Alliance not only helps to bring all constituent churches “into a worldwide fellowship, thus preparing them for other ecumenical contacts”, but it also encourages them “to enter upon co-operative enterprises with other Churches” and “to seek or continue union negotiations with a sense of urgency”. It is here that the Alliance “must safeguard the most precious insight of the Reformation, namely this, that the Church must be free in the Spirit to obey the Word of God in the changing situations of history”. WARC endorses “the support given to the World Council of Churches and the resolve to avoid unnecessary duplication of work that can best be done by the World Council of Churches.”<sup>36</sup>

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<sup>36</sup> *Frankfurt 1964 – Proceedings of the Nineteenth General Council of the Alliance of the Reformed Churches Throughout the World Holding the Presbyterian Order*. Offices of the Alliance, Geneva, 1964, pp.220-225.

The second 1964 document was the Report of the Standing Committee on Ecumenical Policy. It recognized that “the Holy Spirit has been awakening us through many ecumenical events within the Church in recent years”. These included “the great expansion of the fellowship of churches within the World Council of Churches”, “the new climate within Roman Catholicism”, the increasing number of WARC member churches “which are now United Churches or are engaged in discussions directed towards Union”, and “the insistence by many of the ‘Younger Churches’ and by such bodies as the East Asia Christian Conference, that the role of the world confessional bodies be re-examined”.

Thus the Alliance resolved to continue “to work in the closest possible collaboration with the World Council of Churches, doing nothing separately which can be done together”. WARC urged its member churches to participate actively in the work of the WCC, to be alert to opportunities to explore with other churches “the possibility of closer fellowship, joint action, or union”, and to keep before all their people “the truth that the wholeness of the Church must be made manifest in every local community”. Our Reformed heritage, concluded the document, enables us in these ecumenical relationships, “to bear witness to truths of the Gospel which are important for the whole Church and for the world”, such as that “Jesus Christ is Lord over the Church and the world, and cannot be bound by any churchly institution or rite.”<sup>37</sup>

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<sup>37</sup> *Frankfurt 1964 – Proceedings of the Nineteenth General Council of the Alliance of the Reformed Churches Throughout the World Holding the Presbyterian Order*. Offices of the Alliance, Geneva, 1964, pp.235-237.



### III. THE WORLD COUNCIL OF CHURCHES AND THE EARLY HISTORY..

In the third 1964 document, the General Council's Standing Committee on Roman Catholicism opened its report by rejoicing "with our Roman Catholic brethren" in the "signs of renewal within that Church". This had resulted in "new relationships of goodwill"; in the opening of areas of cooperation; in the opportunity for dialogue concerning such subjects as "the nature of the Gospel, the nature of the Church, its worship and mission, the relation of Scripture and Tradition, the meaning of ecumenism, the meaning of a committed Christian life in a secularized world"; and in the possibility, as understanding and confidence in one another grew, of addressing long-standing areas of disagreement such as "mixed marriages, proselytism, and rebaptism and the freedom of Churches to exercise their mission by proclaiming the Gospel in all parts of the world". It welcomed "the advance already made in greater understanding in such matters as the authority of the Scriptures, the nature of the Church, the place of liturgy, and the role of laity". The Reformed-Catholic dialogue can be truly a work of the Holy Spirit, "working for the advancement of the whole Church".

In the new emerging dialogue with Rome, the Alliance could assist its member churches "by making available more information concerning developments within the Roman Catholic Church", by stating clearly "the issues and questions raised by the Roman Catholic-Protestant dialogue" and by ensuring that as far as possible, "different parts of the world are represented in the choice of official Observers at the Vatican Council".

The Alliance recognized the place that the World Council of Churches had taken “in giving leadership in this area”. WARC was indebted to the WCC “for placing the Roman Catholic-Protestant dialogue in the largest context of new understanding between the several branches of the Christian Church”. Finally, the Alliance recognized – particularly in relation to its member churches in regions such as Latin America – that the Roman Catholic-Reformed encounter included “a real element of risk” given that some WARC member churches “still suffer because of limitations which have been imposed upon them in the past and which continue to be imposed on them in the present”. Those churches cannot easily forget “the sufferings and injustices which they have known and which some of them continue to know”.<sup>38</sup>

Unlike other world confessional bodies such as the Lutheran World Federation, which since its 1936 statement on “Lutherans and Ecumenical Movements” had sought to hold together the search for ad-extra Christian communion and ad-intra Lutheran communion,<sup>39</sup> the Reformed Alliance, throughout the 1950s and the 1960s, consistently identified the search for the visible unity of the church with the overcoming of institutionalized forms of confessional identities.

As a result, the Reformed churches were encouraged to enter into church union negotiations in each place. The Alli-

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<sup>38</sup> *Frankfurt 1964 – Proceedings of the Nineteenth General Council of the Alliance of the Reformed Churches Throughout the World Holding the Presbyterian Order*, Geneva, Offices of the Alliance, 1964, 242-246.

<sup>39</sup> See for instance: Root, M. (1994) The Ecumenical Identity of the Lutheran World Federation. *The Ecumenical Review*, 46(4), October, pp.420-427.



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ance understands itself as a provisional denominational instrument called to point to the vision of a future post-denominational and truly united Church; it intends therefore to do alone only what it cannot do through the unique ecumenical instrumentality of the World Council of Churches. And the years following Vatican II were precisely the years in which the WCC and the Roman Catholic Church in Rome launched a promising dialogue through the establishment of a Joint Working Group.





BEYOND CONFESSIONALISM: ESSAYS ON REFORMED ECUMENICITY





## IV

### Beyond “Confessionalism”: The specificity and Challenge of Reformed Ecumenicity

*If we get our hearts large enough to embrace all our Presbyterian brethren, the proofs of enlargement will go on, and we shall begin to long earnestly for wider fellowship. I, for my part, never desired that this Alliance should end, as it were, with itself: but rather that it should be a step towards an Alliance that one day would have a vastly larger constituency, and that would form a more important contribution than we can make toward the swifter fulfilment of our Saviour’s prayer – “That they all may be one.” (William G. Blaikie, first President of the World Alliance of Reformed Churches, in the 1884 General Council)*

*This paper deals with the ecumenical engagement of a global confessional body: the World Alliance of Reformed Churches (WARC). The expression “Beyond ‘confessionalism’” in its title points at the same time, as the subtitle suggests, first of all to the particularity of the WARC’s ecumenical engagement and also to the challenges of its supra-confessional self-understanding and institutional situation in an ecumenical landscape which seems to increasingly call for confessionally profiled actors. I will briefly retrace the history of the emergence of this “beyond confessionalism” self-understanding, then describe its institutional inscription in WARC’s foundational texts, then point to its challenges.*

My concern with the dialectics of the confessional and the ecumenical has a lot to do, on the one hand, with my ecumenical ministry at the World Alliance of Reformed Churches and, on the other hand, with the present and future of organised ecumenism in general and the World Council of Churches (WCC) and its future assemblies in particular. As negotiations begin between the WCC and the Christian world communions on the possibility of future concurrent world assemblies, for instance, it is important to reflect on what they might mean for our common commitment to grow in conciliar fellowship.

### **I. The confessional Movemen in the Ecumenical Age**

Let me start by the background. We often think of the last quarter of the 19th century and the first half of the 20th century as the modern ecumenical age, as the age in which separated Christian churches, particularly those marked by the 16th century Reformation, progressively realise in fact “that there is such a thing as *the Church*” and that even in their existing divisions they “must seek to *be* the Church in all possible fullness”<sup>1</sup>. The ecumenical movement, writes the Presbyterian ecumenist Lewis Mudge in the early 1960s, “does not submerge churches in the bigness of a world enterprise which claims to do everything better and more authoritatively than it can be done by them. On the contrary, correctly understood, it lifts churches up, and show them what they are”<sup>2</sup>.

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<sup>1</sup> Lewis S. Mudge, *One Church: Catholic and Reformed*, London, Lutterworth, 1963, p. 16, 18.

<sup>2</sup> *Op. cit.*, p. 19.



The national councils of churches, the World Council of Churches, and the regional councils or conferences of churches are, in a certain chronological order, expressions of churches’ search to be the Church.

However, if it is true that we often think of that age as the time in which walls of separation began to be broken down, it is also true – and somewhat paradoxical – that during that very same ecumenical age the same churches experienced the need to come together as confessional families, to revisit their traditional confessional identity and go as far as to provide it with international institutional expression<sup>3</sup>. The first Lambeth Conference of Anglican bishops from provinces in communion with the Archbishop of Canterbury met in London in 1867. The Presbyterian Alliance<sup>4</sup>, gathering the Reformed and the Presbyterians mainly from Anglo-Saxon countries, was organised in 1875, also in London. The Ecumenical Methodist Conference met for the first time in 1881. The Old Catholic Union of Utrecht was created in 1889. The International Congregational Council was founded in London in 1891. The Baptist World Alliance was organised in 1905. The first Lutheran World Convention was held in Eisenach, Germany, in 1923. The Disciples of Christ from different countries met for the first time as a Convention in 1930. We nowadays call these confessional bodies and other worldwide church bodies “Christian world communions”.

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<sup>3</sup> On this topic see, for instance, R. Rouse and S. C. Neil (eds.), *A History of the Ecumenical Movement 1517-1948*, Geneva, World Council of Churches, 1986(3rd), p. 613-620; H. E. Fey (ed.), *The Ecumenical Advance – A History of the Ecumenical Movement – Volume 2 – 1948-1968*, Geneva, World Council of Churches, 1986 (2nd), p. 117-142.

<sup>4</sup> Its full name was then: The Alliance of The Reformed Churches Throughout the World Holding the Presbyterian System.

The encounter, the interaction between the ecumenical movement and the confessional movement, between ecumenical conciliar organisations and international expressions of different church families, and more specifically between the World Council of Churches and the Christian world communions has a long history marked by institutional tensions<sup>5</sup>, theological debate on the unity we seek<sup>6</sup> and, more recently, by the laborious search for a complementarity which remains to be spelled out in a clear and consensual way<sup>7</sup>.

Why is it so? Because in this encounter between the confessional and the ecumenical what has been at stake is no less than the *raison d'être*, the sense, the ultimate aim, the integrity of the ecumenical movement itself. If a divided witness in the mission lands of Asia and Africa is seen as the scandal to overcome, then the building of united churches, of Christian communities which no longer identify themselves along the lines of what has divided them elsewhere in the past, is a test-case of ecumenical integrity in the present and a foretaste of the real possibilities of the ecumenical movement in the future. The rise of confessional organisations appears, against this background, as a threat both to the ecumenical ideal and to its most important instruments, namely the International Missionary Council and the World Council of Churches.

<sup>5</sup> I am thinking, for instance, of the admonition addressed by the Asian Churches to the World Methodist Council, the Anglican Communion and the Lutheran World Federation in 1964 and its follow-up. Cf. H. Fey (ed.), *op. cit.*, p. 124-128.

<sup>6</sup> This time I am thinking of the 1974-1978 debate opposing two conceptions of the One Church: conciliar fellowship and reconciled diversity. See for instance H. Meyer,

<sup>7</sup> This is the case of ongoing discussions on the possibility of having Christian world communions holding their assemblies in closer cooperation with WCC assemblies. See: Stephen Brown, "Towards a common global ecumenical assembly?" *Reformed World*, 56(2), June 2006, p. 221-247.

## II. Against "confessionalism: the emergence of WARC's ecumenical self-understanding

I will now turn more narrative and adopt the present tense in order to try to demonstrate as vividly as possible that, after the foundation of the World Council of Churches in 1948, the self-understanding the Alliance of Reformed Churches as an ecumenical actor is shaped up by these two dynamics of the ecumenical age, by what was yesterday often the tension - and is often seen today as the laborious complementarity - between the ecumenical and the confessional. My red thread will be a church servant, a person who incarnated both the tensions and the laborious search for complementarity between the ecumenical and the confessional. I am speaking of John Mackay.

Born in Inverness, Scotland, in 1889, Mackay studies in Aberdeen and Princeton (USA), and is for some years a Presbyterian missionary in Peru, South America. This leads him to study Iberian culture and philosophy and to reflect and write on gospel and culture in Latin America. We find him also in Montevideo, Uruguay, and Mexico City, Mexico, when he is the religious work secretary with the South American Federation of the YMCAs from 1926 to 1932.

When we meet Mackay in 1948 he is the first professor of the newly created chair of ecumenics at Princeton Theological Seminary and also president of that traditional (in more than one sense...) North American Presbyterian institution. But not only this. Mackay has just been appointed the chairman of the International Missionary Council (IMC) and the head of the joint IMC-WCC Committee, which will prepare

the integration of the IMC into the World Council of Churches. But not only this. He is a member of the Executive Committee of the World Presbyterian Alliance – which will become the World Alliance of Reformed Churches (WARC) in 1954 – and will be the WARC’s president from 1954 to 1959.

**Geneva 1948: Confessionalism is rising, but Presbyterianism is “naturally ecumenical”**

The World Alliance holds its world assembly in Geneva, Switzerland, August 11 to 17 1948, soon before the World Council of Churches holds its first world assembly. The assembly programme includes two addresses on “the present ecumenical situation”. One of them is by John Mackay.

Mackay offers at the outset an overview of the existing ecumenical situation. For the first time in history, he says, the church has become “*ecumenical* in a geographical sense”<sup>8</sup>. Within the non-Roman Christianity, this “ecumenical” movement is marked by two different trends. One, centripetal, is “a trend towards greater understanding, unity and co-operation among non-Roman Catholic churches”. The other is described in the following terms: “certain Protestant denominations constitute what might be termed ecumenical denominations or confessional blocks. There is thus emerging world Lutheranism, world Anglicanism, world Methodism, etc.” And he asks: what should then be the Reformed attitude “on an issue of this kind”<sup>9</sup>?

<sup>8</sup> J. Mackay, “The Reformed Churches and the Ecumenical Situation”. *Proceedings of the Sixteenth General Council of the Alliance of Reformed Churches Holding the Presbyterian System Held at Geneva, Switzerland 1948*, Edinburgh, Office of the Alliance, 1949, p. 110.

<sup>9</sup> J. Mackay, *op. cit.*, p. 110.

Mackay then goes on to spell out, in the second part of his address, "the actual relations of the Reformed churches to the ecumenical movement". While some of them take no part in the general ecumenical movement, Reformed churches in general "have ordinarily been very co-operative in their relations with other churches". They have played "a leading part in determining the thought and in shaping the policy of the contemporary ecumenical movement"<sup>10</sup>.

Mackay enumerates, in the third part of his address, some elements in the Reformed tradition "which have a bearing on the attitude which the Reformed Churches should adopt towards the ecumenical movement". John Calvin was "the most ecumenical figure of his time". His doctrine of the Church and the Reformed doctrine of the communion of saints "produce naturally a spirit of friendly relationship towards all Christian churches..." When true to itself, Presbyterianism "is naturally ecumenical". Due to the developing ecumenical situation, it is imperative that Reformed churches work out a Reformed doctrine of the church as the Catholics, Orthodox, Anglicans, and Lutherans have done in recent times. Reformed churches should achieve "closer solidarity" in their relations. In a given country, they should do all in their power "to achieve unity, and if possible, organic union, between all the members of the Reformed family within that country, giving to the consummation of organic union between Reformed churches priority, other things being equal, over union with churches belonging to a different ecclesiastical tradition"<sup>11</sup>.

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<sup>10</sup> J. Mackay, *op. cit.*, p. 110-111.

<sup>11</sup> J. Mackay, *op. cit.*, p. 111-112.

The contributions which the Reformed tradition has to make to the ecumenical movement include, in his view, “a vertebrate Christo-centric theology”, the ethical insistence that “all truth is in order to goodness”, and the affirmation that Jesus Christ is the sole Head of the Church, as an antidote “to any trend to Romanize Protestantism”<sup>12</sup>.

But what is right now pushing Chairman Mackay to be so concerned with the rise of “confessionalism” in general and to insist in particular on the fact that Presbyterianism is “naturally ecumenical”? For the answer, we need to meet him in Cambridge in 1949.

### **Cambridge 1949: Against confessional mission in the South**

The Alliance’s Executive Committee meets in 1949 in Cambridge, England. The agenda includes two items on the “problems of the missionary movement and of the younger churches as related to the Alliance”. Chairman Mackay, just back from a session of the joint IMC-WCC Committee, introduces the issue. He stresses the importance for the Alliance “to keep in close touch with the Missionary movement”, that means in close touch with attempts to create united churches especially in Asia and in Africa.

Mackay is “strongly of the opinion” that the Alliance “should not imitate the Lutherans and promote Missions

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<sup>12</sup> J. Mackay, *op. cit.*, p. 112.

as an Alliance”, that means confessional mission<sup>13</sup>. If this really happens, “it will give a new character to international denominationalism”, for this will perpetuate among young churches in the South past intra-Protestant divisions inherited from their mother churches in the North.

Presbyterianism should pursue “an ecumenical policy, true to the spirit of Calvin” and encourage younger churches “to take the lead in the formation of United Churches”. If a certain trend in the confessional missionary movement develops, he concludes, “it will break the ecumenical movement”; it will tend “to crystallize for the future the ecclesiastical traditions of the past. That would be a tragedy”<sup>14</sup>.

The 1949 Executive Committee re-states the 1948 attitude of the Alliance to the ecumenical movement by affirming that “while we want to be true to our Reformed and Presbyterian convictions, we are glad to be in the larger body of the World Council of Churches. We want to take our full share in the building of the ‘Una Sancta’”<sup>15</sup>. It also agrees on three points

<sup>13</sup> This is how Mackay interprets the Lutheran Federation’s decision to take direct responsibility for what was called after World War II the German “orphaned missions”. Mackay’s interpretation of this decision as a potential ecumenical risk seems to be reinforced by the decision of the Lutheran churches in India to remain outside the formation of the Church of South India and by the decision of Lutheran churches in Germany to create their own structure alongside the Evangelical Church (EKD). Mackay does not comment on several resolutions, adopted by the 1947 first LWF Assembly, indicating that “all Lutheran churches were being urged to cooperate in mission efforts, not only among themselves but also with the International Missionary Council” and that “a serious attitude toward the latter agency was seen as an integral part of a common Lutheran ecumenical obligation”. Cf. J. H. Schjørring et al. (eds.), *From Federation to Communion – The History of the Lutheran World Federation*, Minneapolis, Fortress Press, 1997, p. 18.

<sup>14</sup> Alliance of Reformed Churches Throughout the World Holding the Presbyterian System, *Minutes of the Executive Committee held at Westminster College, Cambridge, England, July 4<sup>th</sup> to 6<sup>th</sup> 1949*, p. 10-11.

<sup>15</sup> *Minutes of the Executive Committee of the Alliance of Reformed Churches Holding the Presbyterian System held in Cambridge, Great Britain, July 4-6 1949*, p. 10.

concerning “the Alliance and the other Confessional groups”: we are not ready “to follow other confessional groups in what we believe to be narrow and dangerous confessionalism”; in foreign mission fields, “we work for union with other Protestant forces”; we are ready “to exchange information with other confessional groups and work together whenever possible”<sup>16</sup>.

It is clear now that Mackay and the Reformed Alliance discern a potential conflict not only between the growth of the “confessional blocks” and the ecumenical movement, but also between their action and the urgent need to search for visible Christian unity in the mission fields in the South. Mackay and the Alliance leaders are convinced that the Alliance needs to drink from its own well and justify itself in clear complementarity with the ecumenical movement. The specificity of this ecumenical self-understanding needs to be spelled out. This happens two years later.

### **1951: Confessionalism betrays Jesus Christ**

The agenda of the Alliance’s 1951 Executive Committee meeting, held in Basel, Switzerland, includes a discussion on “the future activity of the Alliance”. It takes place under the chairmanship of John Mackay. According to the minutes, the chairman pointed out that “we were living in an era of neo-confessionalism and that it was essential for us to define our attitude”. After a “good exchange of views”, it is felt desirable “to leave the problem of the future activity of the Alliance until after the adoption of the statement on the role Alliance in the

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<sup>16</sup> *Op. cit.*, p. 9.



present ecumenical situation”<sup>17</sup>. The statement is adopted in the same meeting and submitted to member churches for study and comment.

The first section of the Basle Statement offers an overview of the main ecumenical trends to which we are familiar. The life of Protestant Churches in the present time is marked by three main trends. The first is “a potent movement towards ecumenical understanding and unity”. The second, in opposition to the World Council of Churches, is a movement towards “the world unity of sectarian groups”. The third, neo-confessionalism or “ecumenical denominationalism”, represents “the desire on the part of each major Protestant communion to rediscover and purify its own religious heritage and to unite the Churches which belong to it in a denominational world fellowship”.

In view of this Church situation, says the Statement in its second section, it is important that the Alliance should “define its significance and objectives in the present church situation”<sup>18</sup>. The Reformed tradition in post-Reformation Christianity is “by nature ecumenical”. It is committed “to the pursuit of Christian unity upon the basis of loyal commitment to the essential verities of the Christian faith”. The Church is an instrument of God’s glory. In the same way it is the true nature of Presbyterianism “never to be merely an end in itself,

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<sup>17</sup> *Meeting of the Executive Committee of the Alliance of Reformed Churches Throughout the World Holding the Presbyterian System – Missionshaus, Basle (Switzerland), August 13-15, 1951*, p. 5.

<sup>18</sup> “The World Presbyterian Alliance in the Present Ecumenical Situation”, *Meeting of the Executive Committee of the Alliance of Reformed Churches Throughout the World Holding the Presbyterian System – Missionshaus, Basle (Switzerland), August 13-15, 1951*, p. 25.

but to serve the Church Universal of Jesus Christ...” The highest glory of the Reformed tradition is “to maintain the vision and viewpoint of the Church Universal, seeking continually its welfare and unity...”<sup>19</sup>

The statement goes on to affirm the need “to increase solidarity among the members of the Reformed family”. It offers and thus to advocate “a strengthening of the Alliance of Reformed Churches...”. The promotion of solidarity among Reformed Churches “would help to emphasize aspects of the Reformation heritage which are of permanent significance for the Christian Church and the secular order at the present time”. The younger Presbyterian Churches would then be led “to understand that it is the true glory of this tradition to seek and promote Christian solidarity and also church union where the local or national situation demands it”. Membership in the Alliance is important for those Reformed churches which are not part of the “ecumenical movement for Christian unity”. It strengthens them “against schismatic elements in their own ranks” and prevents them “from giving their adhesion to any organisation designed to disrupt ecumenical unity and to thwart Presbyterian solidarity”<sup>20</sup>.

The Executive Committee of the Alliance, concludes the statement, “is acutely aware” of the perils of represented by “ecumenical denominationalism”. The Alliance “would never desire to be a party to preventing the incorporation of one of its member churches into wider ecclesiastical relationships...”

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<sup>19</sup> “The World Presbyterian Alliance in the Present Ecumenical Situation”..., *op. cit.*, p. 26.

<sup>20</sup> “The World Presbyterian Alliance in the Present Ecumenical Situation”..., *op. cit.*, p. 26-27.

Presbyterianism, on the other hand, is called to see to it “that the resurgence of denominationalism, which is manifest around the globe, shall not become sectarian, but shall remain ecumenical in character”. If the great world denominations, the Reformed Churches among them, “pursue denominational preeminence and make their great world bodies ends in themselves, they will betray Jesus Christ”. Conversely, if they desire “to make denominational emphasis an enrichment of that common evangelical heritage, they will, by so doing fulfil the designs of the one Head of the Church and be true organs of the Holy Spirit”<sup>21</sup>.

#### **1954: Reformed, therefore ecumenical**

The World Alliance holds its 1954 general council in Princeton, USA, once again just a couple of weeks before the World Council of Churches meets for its second Assembly in Evanston, USA. The 1954 general council is very ecumenically oriented<sup>22</sup>. Well-known Reformed theologians and church leaders such as Joseph Hromadka and W. A. Visser’t Hooft address that world gathering on the Reformed churches and the ecumenical movement. In his opening address on the main theme of the Princeton general council, John Mackay, *l’incontournable*, reflects first of all on the witness of the “Reformed heritage” then on the witness of the “Confessional Alliance”<sup>23</sup>.

<sup>21</sup> “The World Presbyterian Alliance in the Present Ecumenical Situation”, *op. cit.*, p. 27.

<sup>22</sup> My survey, *The World Alliance of Reformed Churches and the Modern Ecumenical Movement*, Geneva, WARC, 2005, includes seven documents from Princeton 1954. No further WARC general council matches such score.

<sup>23</sup> John Mackay, “The Witness of the Reformed Churches in the World today”, *Proceedings of the Seventeenth General Council of the Alliance of the Reformed Churches Holding the Presbyterian Order Held at Princeton, N. J., U.S.A. 1954*, Geneva, Office of the Alliance, 1954, p. 109-120.

The Reformed, he writes, share with all evangelical Christians the “four great foundations” of Christian religion, namely “the supreme authority of the Bible, Jesus Christ as God and Saviour, the reality of the new man in Christ, and the Christian Church as the community of Christ”. At the same time they hold certain “specific emphases” that constitute their “particular contribution” to the Church Catholic. The first one is “the sovereign rule of God in the affairs of men”. The second is “the instrumental role of the Christian and the Christian Church”. God was supremely manifest within history “in the form of a Servant”. The Christian and the Church belong to God, are the servants of God. They can never be an end in themselves. The Church is most truly the Church “when it is God’s servant, the medium whereby He expresses His redemptive love to mankind...” This Reformed emphasis, he goes on to say, “needs to be blazoned forth in the present ecumenical situation”. No Church “can ever be regarded as an end in itself or the master of its members”<sup>24</sup>.

Mackay then addresses the witness of the “confessional Alliance” in the present ecumenical context. This time he discerns just two basic trends in the ecumenical movement . One is “towards world-wide unity among the Churches” and the other is “towards confessional unity” There is no greater need than to think through “the problem of the new confessionalism in its relation to the ecumenical movement of our time”.

He then goes on to propose five statements. The first one is that “we are not, and we should never become, an ecclesias-

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<sup>24</sup> John Mackay, *op. cit.*, p. 110-114.

tical block". The second, that "we are loyally committed to Christ's Church Universal". While Christians are one in Christ and are called "to give the maximum visible expression to unity", structure "is not of the essence of the Church". There are two things we Presbyterians must repudiate "with all our might": one is what has been called "ecclesiastical tribalism" and the other is "the idea of a super Church". This means that "we do not regard the Roman ideal as the ideal for the Church of Jesus Christ". We do not consider that "the ultimate historical form of Christian unity involves a 'single, unified Church structure, dominated by a centralized administrative authority'"<sup>25</sup>.

The third statement which Mackay proposes is that "we emphasize the place of the local in the sphere of the ecumenical". The fourth one is "to stress the importance of theology" and the fifth to proclaim that "a Church is validated as a Church of God not by its organized structure, but by its missionary action". Structure is not an end in itself, "nor can it be made the supreme criterion of a true Church". The Church becomes the Church, he concludes, "not when it extols its virtues, but when it accepts its God-given mission"<sup>26</sup>.

The Alliance's 1954 world assembly adopts a statement on "The Reformed Churches and the Ecumenical Movement". Here is its argument. The ecumenical movement is "a singularly significant fact about the Christian Church in our time". This "deep stirring" toward the unity of the churches "is of

<sup>25</sup> John Mackay, *op. cit.*, p. 114-117.

<sup>26</sup> John Mackay, *op. cit.*, p. 117-120.

God, not men, a sign of the work of the Holy Spirit”<sup>27</sup>. The Reformed churches throughout the world “have taken an active part” in the ecumenical movement. A confessional alliance such ours “can and must provide the opportunity and the means for furthering the ecumenical reality of the Church” It has not been always clearly understood by some Reformed churches that “the Reformers never intended to create a new Church but to restore the faith and life of the Church in obedience to the word of God”<sup>28</sup>.

The unity of the Church is a gift in Christ. Jesus Christ transforms us and makes us fully human in and through our fellowship with one another. He breaks down all barriers of separations. He reconciles and unites. Wherever and whenever his gathered believers preach and practice his gospel of reconciliation and communion and administer the sacraments according to his institution, there he is and “where Christ is, there is the Church”, one and holy, catholic and apostolic. Whenever the community of believers is divided by “the various forms of faith and life of the Church”, Christ himself “calls these churches to unity and wills to accomplish it in them through his Word and Spirit”. Unity is also a task: Christians are, therefore, “under a particular and pressing responsibility to give visible expression to the unity which the Lord of the Church will and works among them”<sup>29</sup>.

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<sup>27</sup> “The Reformed Churches and the Ecumenical Movement”. *Proceedings of the Seventeenth General Council of the Alliance of the Reformed Churches Holding the Presbyterian Order Held at Princeton, N. J., U.S.A. 1954*, Geneva, Office of the Alliance, 1954, p. 73.

<sup>28</sup> *Op. cit.*, p. 73-74.

<sup>29</sup> *Op. cit.*, p. 74.

The visible structure of the Church "is not identical with the unity of the Church", though "structure and unity cannot be separated". There is a living relation between Christ and the members of His body. This is continually and continuously expressed "in the living adaptation of the structures of the Church's faith and life to the sovereign and redemptive work of Christ in the Church and in the world"<sup>30</sup>.

As Reformed and Presbyterian Churches, we thus "recognise the ministry, sacraments and membership of all churches, which, according to the Bible, confess Jesus Christ as Lord and Saviour". Their members are all invited and gladly welcome "to the table of our common Lord". The table is the Lord's, say the statement, not ours. "We believe that we dare not refuse the sacrament to any baptized person who loves and confesses Jesus Christ as Lord and Saviour". We cannot proclaim the gospel of reconciliation "without demonstrating at the Table of the Lord that we are reconciled to one another". Therefore "we would welcome face to face talks with our fellow Christians in other churches, looking toward the time when all sincere Christians will be welcome around a common Table"<sup>31</sup>.

Calvin's doctrine of the true Church "enables the Reformed Churches to stand at the centre of the ecumenical movement". He severely condemned those "who encourage schism from motives other than those which proceed from absolute obedience to the word of God". It is therefore "urgently neces-

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<sup>30</sup> *Op. cit.*, p. 74.

<sup>31</sup> *Op. cit.*, p. 75.

sary” to resist “any increase of division in the Body of Christ and to labour to compose all differences of faith and order which are not justified by obedience to the word of God...” Especially today “there is a kind of ‘ecumenical sectarianism’ which gravely disturbs the peace and unity of the community of believers”<sup>32</sup>.

Some kin of structure “is necessary to the Church”. Our adherence to the Presbyterian Order “is inspired by the fact that it expresses certain fundamental aspects of the nature and life of the Church”. But we do not consider it to be “the one indispensable government structure of the Church”. Likewise we cannot regard any particular existing form of episcopacy as a “fundamental condition of the restoration of the unity of the Church”<sup>33</sup>.

Finally, the statement notes that obedience to Christ involves not only unity but also mission. The oneness of believers in Christ, it says quoting a well-known 1951 WCC statement on the meaning of ecumenical, “is inseparable from dynamic and effective outreach of the Church into every part of the world and into every phase of the world’s life”<sup>34</sup>.

What is then “the role of the Alliance in the present ecumenical situation”? A confessional alliance such ours “can and must provide the opportunity and the means for furthering the ecumenical reality of the Church”; it can “give strength and living reality to every effort to express the mission and

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<sup>32</sup> *Op. cit.*, p. 75-76.

<sup>33</sup> *Op. cit.*, p. 76.

<sup>34</sup> *Op. cit.*, p. 77.



unity of the universal Church". The Alliance "is only an instrument in the service of more ultimate purposes" as much as it is the nature of Presbyterianism "never to be an end in itself". It desires therefore "to collaborate closely with the World Council of Churches and the International Missionary Council as the main organisational expressions of that movement". Thanks to the WCC basis, the way is open to all Alliance member churches to join the Council. Churches which are the fruit of the missionary work "should be free to enter into local or regional union with other Christian bodies if, in this way, they can bear a better witness to Christ"<sup>35</sup>.

However, at least three reasons call "for a strong and active Presbyterian and Reformed confessional agency". The first is the need for "bearing witness to the basic doctrinal position of the Reformed Churches". In the framework of ecumenical conversations, "the task of the Alliance is steadily to exhort the Reformed Churches to have recourse to the Holy Scriptures as the only rule of faith and practice". There are aspects in which the aid of a confessional organisation to the exercise by the churches of their ecumenical doctrinal responsibility "may play an important role in the contemporary ecumenical situation". The second reason is the need for emphasising "the fundamentals of our Presbyterian polity". The Alliance can serve as an instrument "by promoting our joint study of polity, by bringing us to greater unity in our convictions regarding it, and by gaining for these convictions a hearing in ecumenical circles which no single Church could command". The third reason is the need for "rendering certain practical ser-

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<sup>35</sup> *Op. cit.*, p. 77.

vices to members of the Presbyterian and Reformed family”, including “the initiation of studies of union or reunions (...) of the constituent churches of the Alliance with each other or with other churches”<sup>36</sup>.

This six-year reflection on the Alliance and the modern ecumenical movement – which will inspire the creation of the Conference of Christian world communions in 1957<sup>37</sup> and the merger between the Alliance and the Congregational Council in 1970 - can be summarised in the following propositions:

1. The international movement towards greater fellowship Christian among churches is marked by at least two major trends: one of them is the ecumenical movement, the search for Christian unity; the other one is the confessional movement, the search for a renewed sense of belonging to a given church family. Confessionalism has the potential of causing great damage to the search for Christian unity. 2) Presbyterian and Reformed churches have been actively involved in the ecumenical movement. The Reformed tradition offers significant impulses to ecumenical engagement. 3) Presbyterianism is not an end in itself. As it adopts the point of view of the church universal it should resist to confessionalism. 4) There are reasons which speak in favour of a strong World Alliance of Reformed Churches. These reasons are complementary to the engagement of Reformed

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<sup>36</sup> *Op. cit.*, p. 77-79.

<sup>37</sup> Cf. O. P. Mateus, “The Alliance, the Christian world communions and the ecumenical movement (1948-1957)”, *Reformed World*, 54(2), June 2004, p. 91-106.

churches in the search for Reformed unity and united churches.

### **III. Towards a Supra-Confessional Fellowship of Churches**

I will now try to demonstrate how this particular ecumenical self-understanding, formulated in opposition to "confessionalism", progressively shapes up the whole self-understanding of the World Alliance of Reformed Churches and transforms it into a family of church families, into a sort of supra-confessional fellowship of Reformation churches sharing a common Reformation and theological memory.

I will demonstrate this remarkable transformation by briefly reviewing the references to the confessional and to the ecumenical in the three successive versions of the foundational document of the World Alliance: its constitution. I will raise two questions to each of those three different versions of the Alliance's constitution: Which are the churches eligible for membership in the Alliance? Which are the purposes of the Alliance? I will then try to discern in the language of the answers the dynamic interaction between the confessional and the ecumenical.

#### **The 1875 Constitution**

The first constitution of the Alliance is adopted by representatives of twenty-one churches mainly from Britain and the United States - but also from Western Europe - who gather in London, in July 1875, as a "Pan-Presbyterian

Council” to manifest their “substantial unity” and promote “harmony of action” in mission<sup>38</sup>.

Which are the churches eligible for membership in the Alliance? They are those who are “organised on Presbyterian principles”, which affirm the “supreme authority” of the Scriptures and whose creed is “in harmony with the consensus of the Reformed Confessions”<sup>39</sup>. Which are the purposes of the Alliance? The aims of its world assembly include “consider questions of general interest to the Presbyterian community”, “seek the welfare of the Churches, especially such as are weak or persecuted”, “commend the Presbyterian system as Scriptural, and as combining simplicity, efficiency, and adaptation to all times and conditions” and addressing topics “directly connected with the work of Evangelisation, such as “the best method of opposing infidelity and Romanism”<sup>40</sup>.

Are there “ecumenical” references in this first constitution? There is at least two. According to the preamble, the Presbyterian Alliance is not to be seen in opposition to other forms of inter-church cooperation. The “essential oneness” of the members of the Presbyterian Alliance is not confined to their Reformed faith and Presbyterian government or polity. The churches that are forming the Presbyterian Alliance are ready to join with the other churches “in Christian fellowship, and in advancing the cause of the Redeemer”. They are

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<sup>38</sup> William G. Blaikie, “Introductory Narrative”. *Report of Proceedings of the First General Presbyterian Council Convened at Edinburgh, July 1877 - With Relative Documents Bearing on the Affairs of the Council, and the State of the Presbyterian Churches Throughout the World*. Edinburgh, Thomas and Archibald Constable, 1877, p. 1-13.

<sup>39</sup> Edinburgh 1877, Article II.

<sup>40</sup> Edinburgh 1877, Article III.4.

ready to do so on the basis of “the general principle maintained and taught in the Reformed Confessions”, namely that “the Church of God on earth, though composed of many members, is one body in the communion of the Holy Ghost, of which body Christ is the supreme Head, and the Scriptures alone are the infallible law”<sup>41</sup>. The second one is the reference to the methods of opposing “Romanism”. It shows the limits of the first one, by implying that the true body of Christ is to be found only in the Reformation family.

The Alliance is a fellowship of churches which affirm the supreme authority of the Scriptures, hold the Reformed faith as their confession is in harmony with the consensus of Reformed confessions, and which are organised on Presbyterian principles. They seek, through the Alliance, to study together issues of common Presbyterian interest, and to promote the Presbyterian system as Scriptural. The Alliance is ecumenically pan-protestant because its member churches are ready to join and cooperate with other non-Roman churches.

### **The 1954 Constitution**

The second constitution<sup>42</sup> is adopted only in 1954, almost eighty years later. As we have seen above, this is a time in which, under the leadership of John Mackay, the Alliance, seeking to take distance from what it calls “confessionalism,”

<sup>41</sup> Edinburgh 1877, Preamble.

<sup>42</sup> *Proceedings of the Seventeenth General Council of the Alliance of Reformed Churches Holding the Presbyterian Order Held at Princeton, N. J., U.S.A 1954*. Geneva, Office of the Alliance, 1954, p. 55-58.

is formulating its self-understanding as a fellowship of Reformed churches which see their future post-confessionally, within the ecumenical movement.

Which are the churches eligible for membership in the Alliance? They are those which accept “Jesus Christ as Lord and Saviour”, hold the Scriptures to be “the supreme authority in matters of faith and life”; their doctrinal position “is in harmony with the consensus of the Reformed Confessions” and their polity “is in accord with the Presbyterian order”. United churches with a “sufficient and substantial part of the Reformed heritage” and Reformed bodies within interconfessional associations of churches are also eligible. Membership in the Alliance “does not restrict the relationship of any Church with other churches or with other inter-church bodies”<sup>43</sup>.

Which are the purposes of the Alliance? The new constitution lists them in ten items, yet some of them include more than one purpose. They can be brought together under the five following clusters: 1) to deepen fellowship, intercourse and solidarity among member churches; 2) to unite forces in common service, study of the faith, mission and evangelism and information sharing; 3) to commend the Reformed faith, the preaching of the word of God, worship rightly ordered, and the Presbyterian order; 4) to study and advise on church union or reunion negotiations; and 5) to advocate religious and civil liberty.

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<sup>43</sup> “Constitution of the Alliance - Article II - Membership”, *Proceedings of the Seventeenth General Council...*, p. 55.

The constitution adopted at the moment in which the Alliance formulates its self-understanding as a fellowship of Reformed churches which see their future post-confessionally does not innovate in its confessional references. The Alliance remains is a fellowship of churches which affirm the supreme authority of the Scriptures, hold the Reformed faith as their confession is in harmony with the consensus of Reformed confessions, and which are organised on Presbyterian principles. They seek, through the Alliance, to promote Reformed faith and life, and the Presbyterian order.

The same cannot be said of its supra-confessional or ecumenical references. They are abundant and mirror both the emerging "beyond confessionalism" self-understanding of the Alliance and the new ecumenical situation. The churches eligible for membership are those who, before their confessional identity, affirm the basis of the newly constituted World Council of Churches, namely "Jesus Christ as Lord and Saviour". United churches with substantial Reformed heritage and Reformed bodies within interconfessional associations are also eligible. Membership in the Alliance "does not restrict the relationship of any Church with other Churches or with other interchurch bodies". The member churches seek, through the Alliance, to study, advise, and support church union or church reunion negotiations not only among the Alliance's member churches, but also with other churches. They no longer seek together to design ways of opposing the Roman Catholic Church.

### The 1970 Constitution

The third constitution of the World Alliance was adopted in 1970, when the Presbyterian Alliance took a step forward in the implementation of its “beyond confessionalism” self-understanding and merged with another Christian world communion, the International Congregational Council (ICC), founded in London in 1891<sup>44</sup>. This is to date the only case – but hopefully not the last one – of a merger involving two international confessional bodies.

The historical roots of Congregationalism lie in the Protestant resistance to church establishment and church uniformity in England in the 16th and 17th centuries. Congregational Christians translate their recognition of God’s sovereignty in salvation and Christ’s lordship in the world, through the Spirit, into a way of ordering the church which, unlike Presbyterianism, affirms first of all the autonomy of the local congregation and, secondly, the mutual recognition of these congregations and cooperation among them and with other Christian communities. The purposes of the ICC include “strengthening the Congregational contribution to the World Council of Churches and the ecumenical movement generally”<sup>45</sup>. By the time of the merger with the Presbyterian Alliance, 85% of the member churches of the International Congregational Council were also members of the World Council of Churches.

<sup>44</sup> “Constitution”, *Nairobi 1970 – Proceedings of the Uniting General Council*, Geneva, Offices of the Alliance, 1970, p. 40-42. All quotations from the 2004 amended version: *Accra 2004 – Proceedings of the 24th General Council of the World Alliance of Reformed Churches*, Geneva, WARC, 2005, p. 290-296.

<sup>45</sup> R. Rouse, “Other Aspects of the Ecumenical Movement 1910-1948”, in R. Rouse and S. Neil (eds.), *A History of the Ecumenical Movement 1517-1948*, Geneva, WCC, 1986(3), p. 613-614.



Which are the churches eligible for membership in the newly created World Alliance of Reformed Churches? Eligible for membership is any church "which accepts Jesus Christ as Lord and Saviour", holds the Scriptures to be "the supreme authority in matters of faith and life", acknowledges "the need for the continuing reformation of the Church catholic", whose position in faith and evangelism is "in general agreement with that of the historic Reformed confessions", and which recognise that the Reformed tradition "is a biblical evangelical, and doctrinal ethos" rather than "any narrow and exclusive definition of faith and order". United churches which "share this understanding of the nature and calling of the Church" are also eligible for membership. Membership in the Alliance "does not restrict the relationship of any Church with other Churches or with other inter-church bodies"

Which are the purposes of the newly created World Alliance of Reformed Churches? They include to further "all endeavours to proclaim the Word of God faithfully" and to order the church's life and worship accordingly; to further the work of evangelism, mission, stewardship, and the common study of the Christian faith"; to encourage the diversity and fraternal character of ministries in the Church"; to widen and deepen understanding and fellowship among member churches and churches eligible for membership; to further intercourse between the member churches; to unite the forces of the member churches in common service; to be in solidarity with the oppressed or persecuted churches"; to promote and defend religious and civil liberties", and – the last purpose deserves to be quoted in full - "to facilitate the contribution to the ecumenical movement of the experiences and in-

sights which Churches within this Alliance have been given in their history, and to share with Churches of other traditions within that movement, and particularly in the World Council of Churches, in the discovery of forms of church life and practice which will enable the people of God more fully to understand and express together God's will for his people"<sup>46</sup>.

The constitution adopted at the moment in which the Presbyterian and Reformed Alliance merges with the Congregational Council cannot but recast once again its confessional references in order to adapt them to the self-understanding of the newly created fellowship of churches. In the 1875 constitution these references were essentially the Presbyterian system of church government, a confessional position in harmony with the consensus of the Reformed confessions, and the commitment to promote the Presbyterian system as scriptural. In 1954 these references are similar slightly less a church government in agreement with the Presbyterian order, a confessional position in harmony with the consensus of the Reformed confession, and the commitment to commend the Reformed and Presbyterian order "as a polity founded and agreeable with the New Testament". In the 1970 constitution, only the reference to the Reformed confessions is retained, although it is formulated differently: eligible for membership are those churches "whose position in faith and evangelism are in general agreement with that of the Reformed confessions".

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<sup>46</sup> *Accra 2004* – Proceedings of the 24th General Council of the World Alliance of Reformed Churches, Geneva, WARC, 2005, p. 292.

While the specific confessional references disappear, a supra-confessional Reformed language seeks to provide a new sense of identity to the old Presbyterian Alliance. The article on the name of the organisation includes as from 2004 a specific reference to two "first Reformation" movements: Waldensians and Hussites. Membership requirements retain the reference to the WCC basis in its first version (Jesus Christ as Lord and Saviour), and to the united churches. But they now include the acknowledgement of the need for "the continuing reformation of the Church catholic" and, once against confessionalism, define the Reformed tradition as "a biblical, evangelical and doctrinal ethos", rather than "any narrow and exclusive definition of faith and order".

While the constitutional purposes of the new organisation no longer make any reference to the words "Presbyterian", "Reformed", or "Congregational", their recasting is once again clearly Reformed catholic. The list of purposes, as we have just seen, starts by a reference to the proclamation of the Word of God. It then envisages in that light church life, worship, ministry and mission, and culminates in the affirmation of the member churches participation in the ecumenical movement in general and the World Council of Churches in particular.

Once a fellowship of Reformed churches holding the Presbyterian system and open to Pan-Protestantism, the Alliance is now on a supra-confessional fellowship of first and second Reformation churches which share a biblical, evangelical, doctrinal Reformed ethos and envisage their future within the wider ecumenical movement. Placed between the past

isolation of its member churches and the future world fellowship of truly united churches in each place, the World Alliance of Reformed Churches will incarnate this self-understanding in an institutional life often envisaged not only as instrumental, but also as provisional, because ultimately shaped by the so called “Lund principle”: WARC member churches would do together through WARC only what they could not yet do together with other Christian churches in and through the World Council of Churches. Although it has considerably changed its institutional configuration in recent years, the Alliance has not undertaken a major revision of its supra-confessional self-understanding as fellowship of churches sharing a certain biblical, evangelical, and doctrinal ethos called Reformed, which challenges them to be the Church.

#### **IV. The Supra-Confessional in the age of Reconciled Diversity**

By the time the Alliance becomes a supra-confessional fellowship of churches which are called to envisage their future preferably as united churches, the ecumenical movement begins to undergo major changes. While the awareness of the ecumenical indicative (that the Church is one, that its oneness is God’s gift in Christ, and that this gift mirrors the koinonia of the Holy Trinity) continues to inspire Christians and churches, the understanding and practice of the ecumenical imperative (that is, the task of making manifest the gift of unity) begins to be challenged, if not enlarged, by the emergence a new critical sense of Christian discipleship which embraces justice in opposition to discrimination and struc-

tural poverty, peace in opposition to nuclearisation and militarisation, and the integrity of creation in opposition to anthropo(andro?)centrism and environmental degradation. This critical sense of Christian discipleship, that challenges the traditional understanding and practice of the ecumenical imperative, reaches us today as we experience the need to promote inter-religious encounter and solidarity in evangelical opposition to the language of clash of civilisations that masks the ambitions of Empire.

As the understanding and implementation of the ecumenical imperative gains in complexity, we realise that ours is a time of ecumenical uncertainty. And perhaps the best evidence to this affirmation is the fact that there is limited agreement among the different attempts to explain this uncertainty. Is the ecumenical movement going through a time of transition in which the classical ecumenical paradigm built around a Christocentric universalism is being integrated "into a more comprehensive perspective that meets the challenges and contradictions which have arisen"<sup>47</sup> and that expresses itself in the different yet mutually related meanings of the word *oikoumene*?<sup>48</sup> Is the present uncertainty the symptom of a crisis engendered by the ambivalence of ecumenical achievements which requires the reaffirmation of the integrity and indivisibility of the ecumenical movement?<sup>49</sup>

<sup>47</sup> Cf. K. Raiser, *Ecumenism in Transition – A Paradigm shift in the Ecumenical Movement*, Geneva, WCC, 1991, p. 122.

<sup>48</sup> Cf. K. Raiser, "Ecumenism in search of a New Vision", in M. Kinnamon and B.E. Cope (eds.), *The Ecumenical Movement – An Anthology of Key Texts and Voices*, Geneva-Gd Rapids, WCC-Eerdmans, 1997, p. 70-77.

<sup>49</sup> Institute for Ecumenical Research, Strasbourg, *Crisis and Challenge of the Ecumenical Movement – Integrity and Indivisibility*, Geneva, WCC, 1994.

It is clear, nonetheless, that significant elements of the emerging ecumenical perspective challenge the Alliance's traditional self-understanding as a supra-confessional fellowship of Reformed churches oriented to church union as church unity. One of them, perhaps the most important, is the "rehabilitation" of denominational or confessional identities. Challenged by the Faith and Order and WCC vision of the unity we seek as a conciliar fellowship of truly united churches, the Christian world communions respond – along the lines of the 1973 Concord of Leuenberg – by formulating the notion of reconciled diversity as a concept of church unity.

The ecumenical and institutional challenges are clear. How can the Alliance make relevant sense today of its "beyond confessionalism" ecumenical profile in a time in which a plurality of concepts of unity and models of union presuppose that confessional identities are "an element of future structures of church unity"?<sup>50</sup> How can the Alliance make relevant sense of its supra-confessional institutional self-understanding in a time in which profiled denominational or confessional identities progressively become requirements for our staying together and even for our common prayer for the manifestation of the visible unity of church?



<sup>50</sup> G. Gassmann, "Unity", in N. Lossky et al. (eds), *Dictionary of the Ecumenical Movement*, Geneva, WCC, 2002(2), p. 1172; cf. also M. Root, "Reconciled Diversity' and the visible unity of the Church", in C. Podmore (ed.), *Community – Unity – Communion – Essays in Honour of Mary Tanner*, London, Church House, 1998, p. 237-251.

## Origin of the Texts

Towards an alliance of Reformation churches? The confessional and the ecumenical in the origins of the World Alliance of Reformed Churches **was originally published as “Towards an Alliance of Protestant Churches? The Confessional and the Ecumenical in the WARC Constitutions (I)” in *Reformed World*, 55(1), March 2005, 55-70.**

Opposing confessionalism: The World Alliance of Reformed Churches and the ecumenical movement 1948 – 1957 **was originally published as “The Alliance, the Christian world communions and the ecumenical movement (1948-1957) in *Reformed World*, 54(2), June 2004, 91-106.**

The World Council of Churches and the early history of the Catholic-Reformed dialogue **was originally published as “Nicht ohne den Ökumenischen Rat – ein Beitrag zur Geschichte des internationalen, bilateralen katholisch-reformierten Dialogs, in M. Weinrich and U. Möller (eds), *Calvin heute – Impulse der reformierten Theologie für die Zukunft der Kirche*, Neukirchen, Neukirchener, 2009, 131-150. A modified version was published in English as “Not without the World Council of Churches: a**

**contribution to the history of the Catholic-Reformed international bilateral dialogue” in *The Ecumenical Review*, 61(3), October 2009, 328-342.**

**A short version of Beyond confessionalism: the specificity and challenge of Reformed ecumenicity was originally published in Spanish as “Más allá del confesionalismo. Especificidad y desafío del ecumenismo reformado” in *Cuadernos de Teología*, XXVI, 2007, 39-48.**







ORIGIN OF THE TEXTS





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*fonts: Modern and Constantia  
printed in Brasil  
on the digital process*

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