

NICAEA’S LEGACY: ECUMENICAL WITNESS IN THE FACE OF EXISTENTIAL THREATS TO OUR SHARED FLOURISHING

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What can the historic Council of Nicaea (325 CE) and the Creed it produced say about our current context and the existential threats we are facing today? What are the legacies of this historic event, and what can we learn from it as we respond to the challenges of our times?

The Council of Nicaea is a historic milestone of the Christian faith. The event and the Creed it produced are historically significant for the life and witness of the church. They can provide helpful insights on how we may respond to our current challenges. These insights, however, do not come automatically. We can arrive at these insights only by seriously examining the Council, its historical circumstances, and the Creed that came out of it in conversation with our present challenges.

A Brief Postcolonial Critique of the Council of Nicaea

While traditionally framed as a theological gathering aimed at unifying Christian doctrine, I suggest that we also examine the Council through the lens of power dynamics, colonization, and imperial presence.² The event reflected the imposition of Roman imperial authority over religious and cultural practices, particularly those from regions that had been colonized or brought under the dominion of the Roman Empire.

Emperor Constantine’s active involvement in convening the Council highlights a central feature of postcolonial critique: the intersection of religion and empire. The Council was not merely a religious event; it was a political event aimed at consolidating the emperor’s control over a fragmented empire. At this point, it must be noted that the Roman Empire had extended its reach across various cultures and ethnic groups, from what is considered the Near East to North Africa and beyond. These regions, which had their rich spiritual traditions, were subsumed under the banner of Roman Christianity, and the Council of Nicaea became a vehicle and an

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² Joerg Rieger, “Christian Theology and Empires,” in *Empire: The Christian Tradition: New Readings of Classical Theologians*, eds. Kwok Pui-lan, et al. (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2007), 1–14.

opportunity through which Constantine could impose religious conformity and unity across his territories.³

Furthermore, the decisions made at Nicaea, especially regarding the divinity of Jesus and the formulation of the Nicene Creed, were not just theological but also culturally significant. These decisions marginalized local Christian traditions, particularly those from Eastern and African Christian communities, many of which had differing christologies. Postcolonial lens sees this as an act of cultural and theological homogenization, an imposition of a singular orthodoxy through the Nicene Creed, and a suppression of diversity in favor of Roman ideological control.

Postcolonial critique also interrogates the aftermath of the Council, particularly how subsequent imperial decrees enforced the decisions made at Nicaea. Heresies, such as Arianism, which had been popular in certain regions, were declared illegal, and those who did not conform were persecuted. This can be seen as a form of religious colonization, where theological dissent was criminalized, and the religious authority of Rome was imposed upon the diverse Christian traditions. Thus, the Council of Nicaea represents not only a religious milestone but also a moment where imperial power and colonization shaped the trajectory of Christian orthodoxy.

The Council of Nicaea: A Prototype Event of Our Ecumenical Beginnings

A helpful way of taking account of the Council of Nicaea is to see it as a “prototype” of ecumenism or a “breakthrough event,” not an “archetype,” which is understood as a culmination. This is the lens I use to make sense of the mixed legacy of the historic Council if it is to offer helpful insights for us today.⁴

Being the first ecumenical (universal) council in Christian history, the Council of Nicaea offers profound insights into the concept of ecumenism. Bishops gathered from across the Christian world to address issues of doctrine and practice. The Council’s significance for ecumenism lies in its attempt to unify diverse Christian communities under a shared theological framework, demonstrating both the challenges and aspirations of achieving Christian unity.

The early Christian church was far from being monolithic. It was composed of various communities spread across the Roman Empire and beyond, each with its theological traditions, liturgical practices, and interpretations of the Scriptures. Not surprisingly, this diversity led to significant doctrinal disagreements, the most pressing of which at the time of the Council of Nicaea was the Arian controversy, which questioned the nature of Jesus’ divinity.

The Council of Nicaea exemplifies theological ecumenism—the effort to articulate a shared and orthodox belief that could transcend regional and theological differences. The Nicene

³ See David E. Henderson and Frank Kirkpatrick, *Constantine and the Council of Nicaea: Defining Orthodoxy and Heresy in Christianity, 325 C.E.* (Chapel Hill, North Carolina: The University of North Carolina Press, 2016).

⁴ See, Eleazar S. Fernandez, *Burning Center, Porous Borders: The Church in a Globalized World* (Eugene, Oregon: Wipf and Stock, 2011).

Creed became a central element of Christian orthodoxy and a touchstone for future ecumenical efforts. The Council hoped to bring unity to the fragmented Christian world by providing a common doctrinal foundation.

The primary theological issue at the Council of Nicaea was the Arian controversy, which revolved around the nature of Christ and his relationship with God the Father. At Nicaea, the bishops affirmed the divinity of Jesus (*homoousios* or of the same substance as the Father) through the Creed, a statement of faith that became foundational for Christian orthodoxy. This was a pivotal moment in the development of Christian theology, as it defined the doctrine of the Trinity in a way that would become central to Christian belief.⁵

This trinitarian formulation has a crucial bearing on salvation. By affirming Jesus' divinity, the Council upheld the belief that salvation was made possible through the direct action of God in Christ, who became incarnate to redeem the world.

In addition to theological ecumenism, the Council of Nicaea contributed to institutional ecumenism. It established a model for how the Christian church could resolve disputes and maintain unity through ecumenical councils. Emphasized here is the importance of dialogue, debate, and consensus-building among Christian leaders to ensure and maintain the unity of the church despite theological and cultural differences.

While the Council of Nicaea is often celebrated as a milestone of Christian unity, it also reveals the inherent challenges of ecumenism. Not everyone accepted the decisions made at the Council, particularly the rejection of Arianism. Even after the Council, some bishops, especially from regions (Eastern and Western parts of the Empire) where Arianism had strong support, continued to promote Arian beliefs.⁶ This led to further conflicts and divisions within the church, which tells us that achieving unity is not a simple or straightforward process. Even though the Council aimed to create theological harmony, the enforcement of its decisions sometimes led to new tensions and fractures.

While rooted in the desire for unity, the Council of Nicaea teaches us that ecumenism must grapple with the reality of our global diversity and differences. Bringing different groups together in agreement on fundamental theological issues is a complex and difficult task. The Council demonstrated that unity often comes through compromise, which should not be seen as necessarily negative, as well as dialogue, and, in some instances, conflict. This tension between unity and diversity continues to be a theme in contemporary ecumenical efforts as churches seek common ground amid theological, ideological, and cultural differences.

The Council of Nicaea's legacy for modern ecumenism is profound. The Nicene Creed remains a central statement of faith for most Christian denominations, including Roman Catholicism, Eastern Orthodoxy, Anglicanism, and many Protestant traditions. It is a symbol of the unity that Christians share despite their differences. In many ecumenical dialogues today, the

⁵ *The Trinitarian Controversy*, Translated and Edited by William G. Rusch (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1980).

⁶ <https://www.britannica.com/topic/Arianism>. Accessed: October 2, 2024.

Nicene Creed often acts as a starting point for conversations about what Christians share in common.

Global Challenges, Existential Threats

The Council of Nicaea was convened because of challenges and pressing threats to the life of the church. Similarly, we also need to identify and name our present challenges or threats if we are to respond creatively to the challenges that our churches and the wider society are facing in our times. Maybe they are not simple challenges but existential threats to the church and our shared flourishing.

As a church and as a global community, we are confronted with a range of interconnected and complex threats that span political, social, environmental, technological, and economic dimensions. I articulated some of these existential threats in the context of our globalized world in a previous work.⁷ In a cursory way, let me name these major threats, their impact, and their urgency.

(1) *Inequality and Social Injustice*. Growing economic inequality, social injustice, and discrimination (based on race, gender, ethnicity, or religion) are deepening divisions within and between nations. The wealth gap between the richest and the poorest continues to widen, with a small elite controlling a disproportionate share of global resources. This inequality fuels social unrest, political polarization, and violent extremism.⁸ It undermines social cohesion as well as hampers efforts to achieve sustainable development. Marginalized communities are often excluded from decision-making processes and are more vulnerable to economic shocks and climate disasters.

(2) *Global Economic Fragility*. The global economy is facing multiple risks, including rising inflation, financial instability, and growing debt burdens among countries of the Global South. Supply chain disruptions, trade wars, and reliance on fragile global supply systems also create vulnerabilities. Economic instability exacerbates inequality, unemployment, and poverty. It also compromises the ability of countries to invest in critical areas like healthcare, education, and infrastructure.

(3) *Geopolitical Conflicts and Instability*. Ongoing geopolitical tensions, wars, and regional conflicts (e.g., the war in Ukraine, tensions in the Middle East, and disputes in the South China Sea) pose a significant threat to global peace and stability. These conflicts often have far-reaching consequences, including economic sanctions, refugee crises, and disruption of global trade. Political instability and violence result in loss of life, displacement, human rights violations, and long-term economic and social damage.

4. *Global Displacement and Migration*. War, political instability, environmental disasters, and economic hardship are causing record levels of global displacement. According to the UN, millions of people are forcibly displaced from their homes every year, either as refugees,

⁷ Fernandez, *Burning Center, Porous Borders: The Church in a Globalized World*.

⁸ Eleazar S. Fernandez, ed., *Teaching in a World of Violent Extremism* (Eugene Oregon: Pickwick, 2021).

internally displaced persons (IDPs), or migrants. Mass migration creates humanitarian crises, strains social services, generates political tensions in receiving countries, and brings ecological stress. Migrants and refugees often face discrimination, exploitation, and a lack of legal protections.⁹

(5) *Resource Scarcity and Food Insecurity*. Growing populations, climate change, and environmental degradation are putting increasing pressure on natural resources, including water, arable land, and energy. Resource scarcity exacerbates food insecurity, especially in regions vulnerable to climate change. When left unaddressed, food insecurity and resource scarcity can lead to conflicts, mass migration, and humanitarian crises. It also disproportionately affects poorer nations and populations, leading to malnutrition, health issues, and socio-economic instability.

6. *Climate Change and Environmental Degradation*. Climate change is one of the most pressing existential threats facing the planet, driven by rising global temperatures, deforestation, pollution, and unsustainable resource consumption. It leads to extreme weather events, sea-level rise, loss of biodiversity, and disruptions to ecosystems. This crisis disproportionately affects vulnerable populations, particularly in the Global South. It also exacerbates food and water insecurity, displacement, and conflicts over natural resources.

7. *Pandemics and Global Health Crises*. The COVID-19 pandemic highlighted the vulnerability of global health systems. Future pandemics, driven by zoonotic diseases, antibiotic resistance, or bioterrorism, pose a continuing threat. Inadequate healthcare infrastructure in many parts of the world exacerbates this risk. Pandemics disrupt economies, overwhelm healthcare systems, and exacerbate poverty and inequality.¹⁰ As usual, we may be facing the same storm, but we are not in the same boat. The poor majority are in their rickety old boats.

8. *Cybersecurity Threats and Information Warfare*. As our world becomes increasingly digitalized, cyberattacks and information warfare pose growing threats. Cyberattacks can disrupt critical infrastructure (such as energy grids, healthcare systems, and financial institutions), cause economic losses, and undermine trust in governments and institutions. Disinformation and fake news can manipulate public opinion, fuel social unrest, and destabilize democracies.

9. *Technological Disruption and Automation*. Advances in automation, artificial intelligence (AI), and robotics are transforming industries but also threaten to displace millions of workers. This rapid technological change could lead to widespread unemployment and social unrest. Technological disruptions are widening the digital divide, with those lacking digital skills or access to technology left behind. Moreover, the ethical use of AI in areas like surveillance, healthcare, and criminal justice raises concerns about privacy, bias, and human rights.

These threats are interconnected and require coordinated global responses. Climate change exacerbates resource scarcity and displacement, while inequality fuels social unrest and

⁹ Gemma Tulud Cruz, *Toward a Theology of Migration: Social Justice and Religious Experience* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014). Also, see Fernandez, *Burning Center; Porous Borders: The Church in a Globalized World*.

¹⁰ Eleazar S. Fernandez, ed., *Threshold Dwellers in the Age of Global Pandemic* (Eugene, Oregon: Pickwick, 2022).

populism. Technological advancements offer opportunities but also pose new risks like cyberattacks and job displacement. Addressing these challenges demands international cooperation, political will, and innovative solutions across all stakeholders of society.

Technical and Adaptive Challenges

While our challenges are complex, pervasive, and global in scale, the worldview, mindset, theoretical framework, understanding of the nature of the challenges, understanding of how the whole socio-ecosystem works and changes, the notion of power, and assessment of the kind of skills and level of stakeholder's participation as well as the energy/spirit that we bring are not proportionate to the challenges. If not proportionate to the kind and level of the challenges, we cannot expect to win, isn't it? If we cannot win, can we at least provide holding actions to slow down our unraveling?

The challenges we are facing can be classified in two ways: "technical" and "adaptive." These challenges do not always come neatly packed as either technical or adaptive. In *The Practice of Adaptive Leadership*, Ronald Heifetz and company make a distinction between the two.¹¹

Technical problems may be complex, but they have known solutions that are available within the current know-how. In technical challenges, the statement of the problem, solution, and locus of work are clear. The solution to a technical problem lies in the hands of an expert.

Adaptive challenges, however, can only be addressed through a change in people's worldview, self-understanding, beliefs, values and priorities, habits, and loyalties. The solution does not lie simply in the authority and work of experts but in the active participation of the stakeholders. Adaptive challenges require adaptive institutions: institutions that behave like an open living system that thrives on change and is constantly learning. Adaptive challenges demand adaptive leadership and adaptive governance structure.

We must develop a new set of eyes to see our world differently. Mark Twain is attributed to have said, "You can't rely on your eyes when your imagination is out of focus." We need our imagination rightly focused so our eyes can see not only what has been declared present but also the presence of a new tomorrow that is struggling to come out of the cocoon of an old world.

We need a new set of eyes so we can frame our reality differently if we are to get out of the ruts of our old habits. Jeffrey Pfeffer contends: "*The framework within which issues will be viewed and decided is often tantamount to determining the result.*"¹²

¹¹ See Ronald Heifetz, et al., *The Practice of Adaptive Leadership: Tools and Tactics for Changing Your Organization and the World* (Boston: Harvard Business Press, 2009).

¹² Jeffrey Pfeffer, *Managing with Power: Politics and Influence in Organizations* (Boston: Harvard Business School Press (1992).

Standing at the edge of a climate precipice, before this socio-political and ecological unraveling becomes a nightmare, a radical turnaround or *metanoia* must happen, which involves a new way of *seeing*, *dwelling*, and *acting* if we are to move in the direction of socio-political and ecological healing. To put it differently, this involves having the much-needed three competencies: *knowing*, *being*, and *acting* or attitude, knowledge, and skills. These competencies address the matter of *who we are*, *what we know*, and *what we do*.

Paradigmatic Turns in Ecumenism

The challenges we are facing are adaptive, which calls for adaptive responses, including adaptive thinking, dwelling, and acting. They call for adaptive leadership, institutions, and actions. Concerning ecumenism, a paradigm shift must happen in our theological thinking on how we view and practice ecumenism. The new framework must be appropriate and at par with the challenges we are facing as a faith community and as a global society.

Turn to the World

Beset with conflicts and divisions within the Christian fold, I can see why, for many years, ecumenism's priority has been Christian unity. Whether doctrinal, denominational, or personal, the divisions in Christianity undermine the core message of Christ's love and reconciliation. Jesus prayed for unity among his followers: "That they all may be one, as You, Father, are in Me, and I in You; that they also may be one in Us, that the world may believe that You sent Me" (John 17:21). This passage forms the foundation for much of the ecumenical movement, which seeks to bring reconciliation and unity among different denominations and traditions.

Given our global challenges, this "church-centered ecumenism," which is also clergy-centered, must give way to "world-centered ecumenism." The church does not just exist for itself or each other but for the sake of the world. Its mission is to incarnate God's love in Christ for the sake of the world's transformation. Hence, our ecumenical efforts, guided by our mission, must be world-centered ecumenism.

Turn to the Most Vulnerable Beings

However, this "turn to the world" (world-centeredness), if it is to truly take account of our historical specificity and away from homogenizing generalization, must "turn toward the most vulnerable of the world." This "world-centeredness ecumenism" still lacks prophetic edge unless it addresses the "intersectional" positions of people concerning class, gender, ethnicity, sexuality, education, and more, which elevates the socio-political positions of some while relegating others, usually the majority, to the position of "compounded intersectional

marginalization.”¹³ I pursued in detail these ideas in my account of the “interlocking structures of systemic evils.”¹⁴

We must put the most vulnerable at the center of this “turn to the world” not because they are morally better than the wealthy but because they are dying before their time. It is not only what is done to the world or people in general, but what is done to the most vulnerable among us, in particular, must be the barometer of the success (or failure) of our ecumenical endeavors because it is through the pain of the least that we see in a better light the heartache of God, which serves as the beginnings of our vocation and theological reflection. The least or the most vulnerable should not only refer to human beings but also other creatures, to what George Tinker calls “the four-leggeds, the wingeds, and the living-moving-things”¹⁵ As pointed out by C. S. Song, theology begins in the meeting of the “anguish of creation” and the “heartache of God” because God cares.¹⁶

Turn to Global and Contextual Ecumenism

A turn must happen from Eurocentrism to global and contextual ecumenism. Ecumenical movements have traditionally been centered in the Global North and dominated by Western Christianity. The paradigm must shift to incorporate voices and leadership from the Global South and non-Western Christian traditions. Ecumenism should embrace a truly global perspective, learning from and integrating the theological, cultural, and social insights of churches in Africa, Asia, Latin America, and other non-Western contexts. This shift recognizes the rich diversity of Christianity and allows the movement to better respond to global issues like migration, economic inequality, and ecological crises, which are often more pronounced in the Global South.¹⁷

Turn to the Cosmos

Moreover, knowing that our challenges are not limited to the plight of the people but to the wider web of life, another shift needs to happen. Not only must our ecumenical movement take a world-centered turn, but it must also take a bio-centric or “cosmo-centric turn”—a turn that is crucially needed to unsettle or subvert anthropocentrism. We are not only citizens of a particular nation but also the planet Earth: we are “Earthlings.” Knowing ourselves as

¹³ Grace Ji-Sun Kim and Susan M. Shaw, *Intersectional Theology: An Introductory Guide* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2018).

¹⁴ Eleazar S. Fernandez, *Reimagining the Human: Theological Anthropology in Response to Systemic Evil* (St. Louis, Missouri: Chalice Press, 2004).

¹⁵ George Tinker, “An American Indian Theological Response to Ecojustice,” in *Defending Mother Earth: Native American Perspective on Environmental Justice*, ed. Jace Weaver (Maryknoll, New York), 158.

¹⁶ Choan-Seng Song, *Third Eye Theology: Theology in Formation in Asian Setting* (Eugene, Oregon: Wipf and Stock, 2002), 83.

¹⁷ Philip Jenkins, *The Next Christendom: The Coming of Global Christianity*, third edition (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011); Thomas F. O’Meara, “From Ecclesiology in Europe to Contextual Theology for the World,” in *Christian Mission, Contextual Theology, Prophetic Dialogue*, eds. Dale T. Irvin and Peter C. Phan (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 2018), 119–128.

“Earthlings,” we need to expand our notion of justice, which is not predicated on sameness, and our notion of “democracy” to that of “biocracy,” which is concerned with the “right relations” of all creatures.¹⁸

We need to change the way we see and relate to the world around us. Our self does not begin and end with our bodies. We are a part of a larger body that includes the whole socio-ecosystem and beyond. As we expand our notion of body self, so also must we expand our sense of time: “Our self begins neither with our birth nor ends with our death: Our true self is past, present, and future in interdependence.”¹⁹

It is in line with this idea that we must think of our relationship with the forest, rivers, ocean, and the rest of nature around us. “Nature is not a place to visit, it’s our home,” says Gary Snider. We are a part of nature. The well-being of the whole ecosystem is our well-being. What befalls nature befalls us and other living creatures.

When Thich Nhat Hanh was asked what we need to do to save our world, he answered, “What we most need to do is to hear within us the sounds of the Earth crying.” When we think of ourselves as one with the earth, making the earth feel and cry through us is but natural. Moreover, “just as we may feel the *Earth crying with us*, perhaps we can experience the *Earth dreaming with us*.”²⁰

Turn to Interfaith

Considering the enormity of the challenges we are facing, ecumenism, if we want it to be transformative, must move beyond in-house ecumenism, which has sapped our focus and energies throughout the years, to an “interfaith-dialogical-centered ecumenism.”

Our society is awash in superficial responses to the matter of religious diversity. The modernist-secularist privatizing of religious faith has made us ignorant of the role of religion and, sadly, at our peril. While religious diversity is easily acknowledged, our secular and privatized world has made it possible for people to avoid engaging with people of different religions, partly because it is relatively easy for people to live with each other without reference to their religious identities. There is also the toleration of a non-engaging niceness that borders on indifference. At the other extreme is religious bigotry, which is fed by superficial and harmful stereotypes.

We need to move past superficial and harmful religious stereotypes. The reality of our highly globalized and religiously diverse global village calls for a serious, respectful, thoughtful,

¹⁸ Sallie McFague, *The Body of God: An Ecological Theology* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1993).

¹⁹ Darrell Fasching, et al., *Comparative Religious Ethics: A Narrative Approach to Global Ethics*, Second Edition (Malden, Massachusetts: Wiley-Blackwell, 2011), 315.

²⁰ Cited in Joanna Macy and Chris Johnstone, *Active Hope: How to Face the Mess We’re in with Unexpected Resilience and Creative Power*, revised edition (Novato, California: New World Library, 2022), 72. Also, Joanna Macy and Molly Brown, *Coming Back to Life* (Gabriola Island, BC: New Society Publishers, 2014), 105-06.

and creative response to the issue of religious diversity. If there is to be peace in the world, there must be peace among religions. Beyond the practical reality of learning to live together in a religiously diverse world, people of faith in general and Christians in particular, need to respond to the challenge of religious diversity following our faith convictions.²¹

This requires nothing but an in-depth examination of our deeply held theological views, a genuine desire to encounter believers of other faiths with respect, and a humble posture of bearing witness to the faith that is in us in the manner of the One who was humbled and resurrected. Serious engagement with people of other faiths does not require that we abandon our deeply cherished convictions, far from it. It does not require that everyone at the “table” must agree, but it does require a “commitment to being at the table—with one’s commitments.”²²

Why do Christians need to engage in dialogue with people of other faiths? What is the theological basis of our engagement? In a cursory manner, here are my basic theological motivations.

First, from a historical and hermeneutical point of view, as historical creatures we do not see reality from the point of view of eternity (*sub specie aeternitatis*), but only through our limited socio-historical and geographical location. Historical beings that we are, what we see is a part and not the totality of reality. If our perception is limited by our historicity and circumscribed by our relationship with the world around us, then we should not close ourselves to other dimensions of the total reality or other expressions of truth that our neighbors may see and experience.

Second, from the theological-mystical point of view, not only is our knowledge of God limited and historically conditioned, but God is also the Ultimate Mystery. Moreover, the Ultimate Mystery is not only ineluctably ineffable, but at the heart of the Ultimate Mystery is plurality.²³ We can discern the Ultimate Mystery’s ontological plurality in the manifold particularities. To confine the Ultimate Mystery to one expression is to misunderstand what is at the heart of the Ultimate Mystery: the mystery of plurality—a plurality that at the same time does not deny the mystery of unity. This is not simply “manyness” or oneness understood as mono, but plurality understood in a non-dualistic way—the *unity* and the *inextricable connection of the many*. There is always a hidden connection between all things (*semper occulta quaedam est concatenatio*).²⁴

²¹ See, Eleazar S. Fernandez, ed., *Teaching for a Multifaith World* (Eugene, Oregon: Pickwick, 2017).

²² See The Pluralism Project at Harvard University.

²³ Raimundo Panikkar, “The Jordan, the Tiber, and the Ganges,” in *The Myth of Christian Uniqueness: Toward a Pluralistic Theology of Religions*, eds., Paul Knitter and John Hick (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 2004), 109.

²⁴ Cited in Raimon Panikkar, *The Intra-Religious Dialogue*, revised edition (Mahwah, New Jersey: Paulist Press, 1999), xvi.

Third, from an ethical and practical point of view, Christianity does more than affirm that our knowledge is limited, and that plurality is at the heart of the Ultimate Reality. It also affirms that the building of a just, humane, and sustainable world demands openness to the claims of other religious believers and to what their religious praxis can contribute to our common life, particularly to our shared well-being. Openness to the truth-claims of others and testing them considering their contribution to greater well-being is reminiscent of Aristotle's notion of *phronesis* (practical wisdom).

Practical wisdom knows that something is “true” because of its “good” effects. If the “true” is the “good,” then the true is discernible in the “good” that a person does or what a “good person” does.²⁵ In short, a particular religious expression that claims monopoly of the absolute truth violates that truth claim when it undermines mutual respect and when it harms the other. Monopolistic claims and imposition of truth claims are contrary to the nature of truth. Such actions devour people in the name of the sacred truth.

Transformative Ecumenism: Shifting Focus to Address Challenges

From Inward Unity to Ecumenism for Outward Mission

Historically, ecumenism emphasized unity among Christian denominations, focused on theological dialogue and resolving doctrinal differences. Today, the paradigm must shift from internal reconciliation to an outward-facing mission that engages with broader societal issues. A world-centered ecumenism shifts the focus from inward unity to ecumenism for outward mission. Ecumenism should become a unifying force for addressing common global challenges—such as poverty, inequality, environmental degradation, and injustice—rather than just a theological or ecclesiastical endeavor. It should work towards practical collaboration among faith groups, governments, and civil society to address political, social, and ecological crises.

From Theological Reflection to Social and Political Engagement

Theologians and church leaders have often emphasized ecumenism as a dialogue on doctrinal issues. In today's world, ecumenism must engage more deeply with political, economic, and technological realities. Ecumenism should reconceptualize itself as an ethical and moral force in political and social governance. This involves not only speaking to internal church matters but also offering ethical frameworks for addressing corruption, injustice, war, ecological destruction, and technological challenges like artificial intelligence and surveillance. Churches and religious organizations must see themselves as stakeholders in shaping policies that affect the common good.

²⁵ Paul Knitter, *One Earth, Many Religions: Multi-Faith Dialogue and Global Responsibility* (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 1995), 82.

From Hierarchical Leadership to Grassroots Empowerment

Traditional ecumenical dialogue has often been led by church elites or institutional leaders. However, many of today's most pressing issues—social justice, climate change, inequality—are being addressed from the ground up by grassroots movements. Ecumenism should shift toward empowering local communities and grassroots movements that embody ecumenical values in action. Churches should facilitate bottom-up initiatives where ordinary people, not just clergy or theologians, are involved in efforts for peace, justice, and sustainability. I will articulate this further at the end of this paper.

From Doctrine to Praxis: Focusing on Ecumenical Action

Ecumenism has been rooted in doctrinal convergence, but the pressing challenges of today require a shift towards collaborative action across denominations. In this face of our existential crisis, ecumenism must prioritize praxis—working together on real-world issues like poverty, inequality, health, climate change, and technological ethics—over doctrinal agreement. It should foster ecumenical alliances based on shared ethical commitments rather than wait for complete theological unity.

From Ecological Stewardship to Eco-Justice

While ecumenical movements have acknowledged ecological concerns, the paradigm must shift from basic stewardship to a deeper commitment to eco-justice, which links ecological sustainability with social justice. Ecumenism should incorporate the idea of eco-justice, recognizing that environmental degradation disproportionately affects the poor and marginalized. Churches should advocate for policies that address both ecological restoration and social equity, focusing on sustainability, climate justice, and care for creation as a moral and spiritual imperative.

From Technological Hesitancy to Ethical Leadership in Innovation

Historically, religious institutions have often been slow to engage with technological advancements. However, in an age where technology influences every aspect of life—including ethics, privacy, work, and human dignity—ecumenism must develop a proactive role. Ecumenical movements should become leaders in ethical discourse on technology, offering moral perspectives on emerging technologies such as artificial intelligence, biotechnology, and digital surveillance. This includes advocating for technologies that enhance human dignity and protect the vulnerable while critiquing those that exacerbate inequality or violate human rights.

Ecumenism from Below: Lay People as the Main Agents of Ecumenical Movement

Theologically, ecumenism from below is rooted in the lived experiences of everyday Christians. It emerges not from formal doctrinal agreements but from the collective, Spirit-led actions of believers seeking to live out the radical unity that Christ prayed for in John 17:21: “That they may all be one.” This theology sees unity as a relational and practical call, grounded in solidarity with the marginalized, and shaped by the shared mission to serve, heal, and reconcile the world. In this view, the unity of the church transcends denominational boundaries

and institutional hierarchies, blossoming through acts of love, justice, and mercy that bind people together across differences.²⁶

Ecumenism from below begins with the belief that the church is a people on a mission together in the world. In a religiously plural world, an ecclesiological model that fits our current context and challenges without necessarily canceling out the best elements of other models is one proposed by D. Preman Niles: “The people of God in the midst of people of God.”²⁷ Consistent with this view of ecclesiology is mission understood as *missio Dei* (the mission of God), where God’s purpose is to reconcile and renew all of creation. It emphasizes that Christian unity is realized in shared service, especially among the poor, the oppressed, and the marginalized (Matthew 25:40). This “people-first” perspective means that unity comes as a gift of shared discipleship, not primarily through the alignment of theological doctrines.

From the point of view of ecumenism from below, the marginalized are not viewed as objects of mission but as a site of divine encounter. Just as Jesus stood in solidarity with the marginalized, Christians, regardless of denomination, are called to find common ground in their service to those in need. This unity is forged through acts of mercy, service, and advocacy, reflecting the model of Christ who came “not to be served, but to serve” (Mark 10:45).

The divine encounter is primarily the work of the Holy Spirit. Ecumenism from below relies on the Spirit’s work among ordinary believers—activists, church members, and communities—calling them into shared mission and cooperation for the common good. The Spirit transcends doctrinal differences, weaving a unity that is felt in practice rather than just professed in words.

In ecumenism from below, the everyday activities of life are seen as sacramental, holding potential for spiritual unity. Whether it is shared meals, community gardening, joint worship services, or working together on social justice projects, the ordinary becomes sacred when Christians gather to live out the Gospel.

A key element of ecumenism from below is the mutual humility and openness to learn from one another. The diversity of Christian traditions is seen not as a barrier but as a gift that enriches the broader body of Christ. When Christians from different denominations come together in service, they bring unique perspectives, practices, and theological insights that can deepen their collective understanding of God.

An Open Ending

Ecumenism from below offers a vision of unity that is not imposed from above but grows organically from the ground up. It is a unity forged in action, solidarity, and the shared mission to bring about God’s reign of peace, justice, and love in the world. It calls Christians to see each

²⁶ See, for example, ecumenical feminism, as a form of ecumenism from below. <https://journals.uj.ac.za/index.php/ajgr/article/view/1495/870>. Accessed: October 3, 2024. Also, see the article by Shane Clifton for a Pentecostal perspective on ecumenism from the bottom up. https://www.researchgate.net/publication/282355589_Ecumenism_from_the_bottom_up_A_Pentecostal_perspective Accessed: October 3, 2024.

²⁷ D. Priman Niles, *From East and West: Rethinking Christian Mission* (St. Louis: Chalice, 2004).

other as partners in the Gospel, where unity is not the end goal but a natural outgrowth of living out the love of Christ in the world.

If we are to help address our global threats and be transformative, ecumenism must become an “ecumenism from below.” It must become an ecumenical movement from below. From top-down institutional agreements and dominated by clergies, it must become a movement of the common laypeople. The grassroots or the common laypeople must play an active role if their interests are to be addressed, and their energies tapped for the work of social transformation.
