

# From Christian anti-imperialism to postcolonial Christianity: M. M. Thomas and the ecumenical theology of communism in the 1940s and 1950s\*

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## Abstract

*This article uses the early thought and career of the Indian Mar Thoma Christian and Marxian theologian M. M. Thomas to investigate the connections between ecumenism's theology of communism and its engagements with anti-colonial politics and decolonization in the 1940s and 1950s. The article situates Thomas' efforts to reconcile Marxian doctrine with Christian faith within the movement's institutional practices for combating the entropic effects of modern secular civilization and Cold War polarization. Tracing Thomas' ascent from Christian Marxist youth circles in south India to leadership positions in the World Student Christian Federation and the World Council of Churches, the article highlights the central role of his theology in establishing 'revolutionary' postcolonial social transformation as the object of Christian global governance in the post-war era.*

**Keywords** Cold War, communism, decolonization, ecumenism, imperialism, religious thought

In July 1943, the Madras *Guardian*, a weekly journal of Christian opinion, announced the formation of a 'National Christian Youth Council'. Comprised of Protestant and Mar Thoma Syrian Christians living in and around the state of Travancore in south India, the Council, according to its statement of aims, would combine 'evangelism with social action', seeking to

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embody the Christian faith ‘in historical institutions, economic, social and political’. The organization exemplified the sort of inter-confessional voluntarism that scholars have seen as central to formation of the ecumenical movement – a concern to enact Christian faith through the formation of associations outside formal church structures.<sup>1</sup> But the Council’s approach to the social application of Christianity points to a trajectory of ecumenical history that has largely escaped scholars’ attention. The body had adopted ‘Marxian Scientific Socialism ... as its guide for political action’.

The Council recognizes the struggle between the class which owns and controls the means of production of goods and services ... and that which does not so own, as in large measure basic to all the other social conflicts in the world today. In this struggle, the Council shall be identified with the have-nots and shall work for the establishment of the workers’ society.<sup>2</sup>

For Madathilparampil Mammen (‘M. M.’) Thomas, secretary of the Council and a lay leader in local circles of the Student Christian Movement, applying Christian faith in politics required a ‘united national front’ of all Indians under the leadership of the Communist Party.<sup>3</sup> He was one of numerous young Asian ecumenists in the 1930s and 1940s who sought to align this political commitment with Christian faith. Using his early career and thought as a guiding thread, this article investigates how ecumenism’s wider engagements with communism shaped the movement’s approaches to anti-colonial nationalism, Cold War politics, and decolonization. It locates this engagement within ecumenists’ strategy for combating ‘secularism’ – understood as the displacement of belief in God by worldly politics – through the achievement of a worldwide fellowship of all nations, races, and classes. If communism was the most menacing form of secularism outside the church, ecumenists believed that incorporating its doctrines and practices into a reformed Christian faith was essential to spreading Christian influence in the world. Nowhere was the ecumenical appropriation of communist ideas and Marxian doctrines more important than in shaping the movement’s complex engagements with empire and decolonization.

Thomas’ trajectory provides a useful angle from which to connect two areas of ecumenical thought: the engagement with communism on the one hand, and with extra-European nationalists and anti-colonialists on the other. Three stages in his early career bring these connections into focus. Part one of the article examines how, by reconciling Marxian ideological critique and the theological pessimism of neo-orthodox theology, Thomas originated the most important of many Asian attempts to reconcile Christian faith and communist politics in the service of anti-colonial struggle. The value to the movement of his Marxian theology – what I call an ‘ecumenics of suspicion’ – was its capacity to be decoupled from the political context of its origin and applied broadly as an international practice of ecumenical dialogue. Part two investigates how the movement’s international student wing, the World Student Christian Federation (WSCF), institutionalized Thomas’ ecumenics of suspicion in the later 1940s in its efforts to fashion Christianity into a ‘third way’ between the West and the Soviet

1 See, for instance, Christopher Clark and Michael Ledger-Lomas, ‘The Protestant international’, in Abigail Green and Vincent Viaene, eds., *Religious internationals in the modern world: globalization and faith communities since 1750*, Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012, pp. 23–52; James C. Kennedy, ‘Protestant ecclesiastical internationals’, in *ibid.*, pp. 292–318; David Hollinger, *After cloven tongues of fire: Protestant liberalism in modern American history*, Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2013, pp. x–xi, 18–21.

2 ‘The National Christian Youth Council’, *Guardian* [Madras], 21, 30, 29 July 1943, pp. 353–4.

3 ‘The United National Front’, *Guardian* [Madras], 21, 30, 29 July 1943, p. 354.

Union. Part three shifts to Thomas' career after Indian Independence in 1947, when he and his Federation colleague, the British theologian Davis McCaughey, developed a 'theology of revolution', that guided the wider movement's increasing focus on postcolonial nation-building in Asia, Africa, and Latin America in the 1950s. Conceiving revolutionary struggle as an instrument of Christian world order, Thomas and his ecumenical colleagues cast decolonization as the long-sought 'third way', a conceptualization that required blurring the boundary between revolution and emancipation.

By showing how the movement's engagements with communism and decolonization were connected, this article makes two main interventions. First, it demonstrates the centrality of ecumenical theology in organizing the movement's global encounters with communism. Recent scholars, whether they have cast ecumenists as bi-polar antagonists to communism or have described a more nuanced terrain of engagement and ambivalence, have largely analysed ecumenism within a spectrum of North Atlantic political opinion. However, debates over whether ecumenism was an 'anti-communist' or 'anti-anti-communist' programme occlude the variety of political orientations that ecumenical theology could authorize, enabling its appeal across colonial and Cold War divides.<sup>4</sup> Whether ecumenists embraced leftist politics or deplored them, they shared the belief that communism represented a judgement of God on the churches for their sins of nationalism, racial prejudice, and indifference to social and economic injustice. Consequently, they sought to channel the communist rebuke to reform Christianity itself, often by incorporating what they saw as the 'truths' of Marxian doctrine and even communist practice. These ecumenists believed that by metabolizing the lessons of communism they could defeat the menace of Western secularism that had produced it, along with its capitalist nemesis, by forging a universal Christian community of 'nations, races, and classes'.<sup>5</sup>

Second, by tracing how post-war decolonization transformed the bases of the ecumenical movement, this article contributes to a wider literature on ecumenical attitudes toward anti-colonial movements.<sup>6</sup> The historian Udi Greenberg has recently shown how European

4 For examples of the former interpretation, see Samuel Moyn, *Christian human rights*, Philadelphia, PA: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2015; Jeremy Gunn, *Spiritual weapons: the Cold War and the forging of an American national religion*, Westport, CT: Praeger Publishers, 2009; Philip M. Coupland, *Britannia, Europa and Christendom: British Christians and European integration*, New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006; Jonathan P. Herzog, *The spiritual-industrial complex: America's religious battle against communism in the early Cold War*, New York: Oxford University Press, 2011; and Jason Stevens, *God-fearing and free: a spiritual history of America's Cold War*, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2010. For examples of the latter interpretation, see Andrew Preston, 'Peripheral visions: American mainline Protestants and the global Cold War', *Cold War History*, 3, 1, 2013, pp. 109–30; Gene Zubovich, 'The global gospel: Protestant internationalism and American liberalism, 1940–1960', PhD thesis, University of California, Berkeley, 2014; and William Inboden, *Religion and American foreign policy, 1945–1960: the soul of containment*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008.

5 The most thorough existing study of theological engagements with communism in the movement remains Charles West, *Communism and the theologians: study of an encounter*, London: SCM Press, 1958.

6 For accounts highlighting anti-colonial orientations of ecumenical and Protestant missionary organizations, politics in the colonial period, see Andrew Porter, *Religion versus empire? British Protestant missionaries and overseas expansion, 1700–1914*, New York: Manchester University Press, 2004; and focusing on India, Jeffrey Cox, *Imperial fault lines: Christianity and colonial power in India, 1818–1940*, Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2002. Both works reflect a wider historiographical shift towards emphasis on the complexities of the missionary engagement with empire, as against earlier characterizations of missionaries as shock troops of imperialism: see Norman Etherington, 'Introduction', in Norman Etherington, ed., *Missions and empire*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005, pp. 1–18, for a useful overview of this shift focusing on the British case. For an excellent recent study of French Protestant and Catholic anti-colonialism in Algeria, see Darcie Fontaine, *Decolonizing Christianity: religion and the end of empire in France and Algeria*, New York: Cambridge University Press, 2016.

ecumenists turned against colonialism as a manifestation of the West's secularized civilization in the 1920s and 1930s, linking the cause of anti-colonial struggle with European unification as a strategy to re-evangelize Christendom's traditional heartland.<sup>7</sup> Yet, within international church institutions, the engagement with postcolonial Asia served not to advance European solidarity against communism but to detach Christianity from the force fields of Cold War politics in the North Atlantic. Only by examining the movement's efforts to assimilate communist commitment and Marxian ideas can we make sense of how it conceptualized the construction of postcolonial societies as a new focal point of anti-secular action, a shift entailing a fundamentally new understanding of the sources of Christian unity and world order. Thomas' career brings into focus the conceptual origins of the remarkable shift of the principal bodies of post-war ecumenism – in particular, the World Council of Churches (WCC) – to social problems of the extra-European world.

## Christianity meets communism on the path to independence: situating the Keralan origins of the 'ecumenics of suspicion'

Born in 1917 into the Mar Thoma Syrian Church in Travancore, an Indian monarchy under British indirect rule, Thomas joined the ecumenical movement in the late 1930s, when he became involved in the local chapter of the Student Christian Movement (SCM). Through being linked to an international network of Christian student groups founded by the ecumenical godfather John Mott in the 1890s, Thomas became acquainted with a range of ecumenical intellectuals, including the American theologian Reinhold Niebuhr, the Scottish Christian philosopher John Macmurray, and the Russian Orthodox thinker Nicolai Berdyaev, who sought to incorporate aspects of Marxian doctrine into Christianity.<sup>8</sup> Like other ecumenical activists in China, Indonesia, and Japan, Thomas embraced communism as a Christian instrument of anti-colonial aims. But his approach to reconciling Christian faith and communist commitment differed from other Asian Christian Marxists, reflecting a peculiar theological background that informed his response to wartime crises of British rule and divisions within the Indian national movement.

Thomas' early thought drew on a wider ecumenical theology of communism that became central to ecumenism's self-understanding in the interwar period. Willem A. Visser 't Hooft, a future general secretary of the WCC, expressed its basic principles in a 1931 editorial in the ecumenical journal *Student World*. He wrote that

Communism has a message from God to us. The message is a call to repentance.... [Communism] challenges us to confess our hypocrisy in using Christianity rather as a force to maintain things as they are than as a transforming spiritual power. The very attacks which Christians make upon communism today reveal how little we have to say as *Christians*. We grind political, economic and cultural axes, and the communist infers

7 Udi Greenberg, 'Protestants, decolonization, and European integration', *Journal of Modern History*, 19, 2017, pp. 314–54.

8 For biographical information on Thomas, see essays in Jesudas M. Athyal, George Zachariah, and Monica Melanchthon, eds., *The life, legacy, and theology of M. M. Thomas: 'only participants earn the right to be prophets'*, London: Routledge, 2016; and his memoir, M. M. Thomas, *My ecumenical journey*, Trivandrum, India: Ecumenical Publishing Centre, 1990.

rightly that the real face of Christianity is political, economic and cultural. When we would begin to concentrate exclusively on our real mission which is the revealing of God's power in life and word he might begin to take Christianity seriously.<sup>9</sup>

For Visser 't Hooft, as for most ecumenical intellectuals, the Marxist's judgment on Christianity was all too true. This realization was not cause for despair, but a spur to action; to accept it clarified the imperative behind the ecumenical project itself. Successfully uniting nations, races, and classes, movement leaders believed that they could demonstrate 'ecumenical' Christianity as the basis of universal fellowship, transcending worldly political and class interests. The effort to forge worldwide Christian unity thus brought with it a whole field of attempts to respond positively to the communist critique, precisely in order to overcome organized Christianity's own entanglement in secularism.

However, the approach to communism yielded surprisingly opposite political alignments in the North Atlantic and in Asia. In Europe and North America, thinkers such as Visser 't Hooft, Berdyaev, and Niebuhr sought to co-opt aspects of the communist critique of modern capitalism and Christianity, in order to oppose communism as a political movement.<sup>10</sup> In Japan, Indonesia, China, and India, the theology of communism authorized cooperation with communist parties in pursuit of national objectives deemed essential for the formation of 'indigenous' forms of Christian faith.<sup>11</sup> In 1932, a gathering of the Japanese YMCA disbanded when Marxian members went on strike, demanding that YMCA staff hand over control of the meeting to students.<sup>12</sup> In Java, the Christen Studenten Vereeniging included nationalist intellectuals like the Christian convert Amir Sjarifoeddin who declared their support for Indonesian communism in the late 1930s.<sup>13</sup> In China, leaders of the Young Men's and Young Women's Christian Associations, including the theologians Y. T. Wu and Cora Deng, reconciled Marxism and Christianity while clandestinely cooperating with the Communist Party to resist the Japanese occupation in the 1930s and 1940s.<sup>14</sup> While European and American ecumenists incorporated Marxian principles in order to oppose communism, in Asia this same theological imperative authorized cooperation with communist parties to resist colonial rule.

9 Willem A. Visser 't Hooft, 'The real challenge of communism', *Student World*, 24, 4, 1931, pp. 285–6, emphasis in original.

10 See, for example, Nicolai Berdyaev, 'The religion of communism', in *The Russian revolution*, London: Sheed & Ward, 1931; and Reinhold Niebuhr, *Moral man and immoral society: a study in ethics and politics*, New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1932, pp. 200–30. For an excellent account of the 'ambivalence' that defined American ecumenical Protestant attitudes toward communism, see Gene Zubovich, 'The Protestant search for "the universal Christian community" between decolonization and communism', *Religions*, 8, 2017, <http://www.mdpi.com/2077-1444/8/2/17> (consulted 15 March 2018).

11 On the missionary origins of 'indigenization', see Dana L. Robert, 'The first globalization: the internationalization of the Protestant missionary movement between the world wars', *International Bulletin of Missionary Research*, 26, 2, 2002, pp. 50–66.

12 Mitsuaki Kakehi, 'A student strike at the summer conference of the Japanese YMCA', *Student World*, 26, 1, 1933, pp. 68–71.

13 Geert Arend van Klinken, *Minorities, modernity and the emerging nation: Christians in Indonesia, a biographical approach*, Leiden: KITLV, 2003, pp. 120–4.

14 For accounts of student Christian–communist cooperation in China in the late 1930s and 1940s, see Philip Wickeri, *Reconstructing Christianity in China: K. H. Ting and the Chinese church*, New York: Orbis Books, Maryknoll, 2007, pp. 34–47; Daniel Bays, *A new history of Christianity in China*, Oxford: Wiley Blackwell, 2012, pp. 141–9. For Y. T. Wu's Christian materialism and later support for the communist government, see Gao Wangzhi, 'Y. T. Wu: a Christian leader under communism', in Daniel H. Bays, ed., *Christianity in China: from the eighteenth century to the present*, Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1996, pp. 338–52; Chin Ken Pa, 'The dwarf and the puppet: Y. T. Wu's "Christian materialism"', *Critical Research on Religion*, 2, 1, 2014, pp. 23–37.

Among the various traditions of Marxian theology that emerged in Asia in the interwar period, India's exercised the widest impact on ecumenical ideas and practices. As a result of the dominance of Mohandas Gandhi in the movement, and a series of debates among British and Indian SCMs over Britain's wartime colonial policies, Indian student Christian Marxism took unprecedented forms. Concentrated in the Travancore region of Kerala, it drew on neo-orthodox theology – emphasizing revelation over reason as the source of Christian doctrine and the necessity of conflict against optimistic visions of progress – to vindicate violent class struggle as an alternative to Gandhian pacifism. Furthermore, unlike their counterparts elsewhere in Asia, Indian Christian Marxists took an active, public role in national and international debates after the legalization of the Communist Party of India (CPI) in 1942, following Britain's wartime alliance with the Soviet Union. Marxist commitment thus most profoundly shaped student Christian ecumenism in India as a theory and practice of ecumenical dialogue. This was best exemplified in conversations between British and Indian SCMs over the relation between Indian nationalism and the Allied War effort in the mid 1940s. In these discussions, M. M. Thomas and his colleagues found in Marxian ideological critique the application of neo-orthodox doctrines that could expose and overcome ecumenism's own implication in British colonialism. They further showed how a Marxian approach to national liberation served the wider ecumenical goal of liberating the church from its entanglements with secularism.

Christian Marxism was never more than a minority position in India. Endorsement of 'class struggle' had to contend with the opprobrium on violence promulgated by Gandhi and his Christian supporters. Scholars have documented the attraction of many foreign missionaries, Indian church leaders, and student Christian groups to the figure of Gandhi and his ethics of non-violence.<sup>15</sup> Drawing on a liberal missionary theology of 'fulfilment', these thinkers situated Gandhi within a wider current of Hindu 'renaissance' that they asserted was the realization of the Christian missionary project.<sup>16</sup> Indian Christians such as the Anglican bishop V. S. Azariah and the YMCA general secretaries K. T. Paul and S. K. Datta, as well as missionaries like the American E. Stanley Jones and C. F. Andrews of Britain, lionized the Mahatma as an avatar of 'Indianized' Christianity, who, in Andrews' words, was 'most nearly of any one I know, the St. Francis of this modern age'.<sup>17</sup> For student Christians eager to assert their place in the mainstream of the nationalist movement, the ideals of *satyagraha* and *swaraj* were to be claimed as the fruit of Christian influence; conversely they offered a path toward the formation of an Indian Christianity through the reform of Hindu religiosity.<sup>18</sup>

15 For American Protestant missionary views on Gandhi, see Susan Haskell Khan, 'Indian mission field in American history', PhD thesis, University of California, Berkeley, 2006; for British Protestant views, see Jeffrey Cox, *Imperial fault lines: Christianity and colonial power in India, 1818–1940*, Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2002, pp. 246–9. See also D. Arthur Jeyakumar, *Christians and the national movement: the memoranda of 1919 and the national movement*, Bangalore: Centre for Contemporary Christianity, 2009, esp. pp. 59–64.

16 For the roots of fulfilment theology, see Eric Sharpe, *Not to destroy but to fulfill: the contribution of J. N. Farquhar to Protestant missionary thought before 1914*, Uppsala: Almqvist & Wiksells Boktryck, AB, 1965. On the use of fulfilment theology in Protestant interpretations of Gandhi and the national movement, see Chandra Mallampalli, *Christians and public life in colonial south India, 1863–1937: contending with marginality*, London: Routledge, 2004, pp. 98–101; and Khan, 'Indian mission field'.

17 C. F. Andrews, 'The influence of Mahatma Gandhi', *The World Tomorrow*, 7 December 1924, pp. 365–6.

18 On the involvement of Protestants and Mar Thomites in the nationalist movement, see Mallampalli, *Christians and public life*, pp. 98–132; and George Thomas, *Christian Indians and Indian nationalism, 1885–1950: an interpretation in historical and theological perspectives*, Frankfurt am Main: Verlag Peter D. Lang, 1979.

‘Gandhism’ found a serious challenger among ecumenical youth only in Kerala, where local politics enabled the formation of a robust student Christian left. Home to the subcontinent’s largest per-capita Christian population, including Protestants, Catholics, and Mar Thomites, Kerala was a region where the mainstream of the Congress Party failed to dominate nationalist politics.<sup>19</sup> Gandhi exempted two of Kerala’s three regions, the princely states of Travancore and Cochin, from the *swaraj* movement, helping to create a political vacuum in which worker and peasant movements emerged in the 1930s by linking the national struggle to local campaigns for representative government.<sup>20</sup> Kerala became a redoubt of the Congress Socialist Party, a leftist faction within the Congress Party that in 1941 merged with the CPI.<sup>21</sup> As a result, the Kerala chapter of the SCM, where Thomas received his first ecumenical education, approached socialism and communism as major players in the regional political landscape. In the Youth Christian Council of Action (YCCA), an offshoot of the Kerala SCM that Thomas helped to found in 1938, for example, its wider religious and social missions focused on the study of Marx and Lenin and ecumenical theologies of communism.<sup>22</sup> At annual retreats from 1939 to 1941, the YCCA hosted lectures on the Marxian theory of value, dialectic, the philosophy of history, and Leninism, alongside lectures on ‘Gandhism’ and the rural ‘cooperative’ movement in Travancore.<sup>23</sup>

In the YCCA, Marxian ideas went hand in hand with the intellectual tradition of ‘neo-orthodoxy’. Adopting a common Anglophone characterization, Keralan Christians grouped under the banner of ‘neo-orthodox’ a range of thinkers – including Karl Barth, Emil Brunner, Niebuhr, and Berdyaev – who attacked liberal theologians for their historicist approach to revelation and for minimizing original sin and the need for divine grace.<sup>24</sup> Within the field of student Christian nationalist politics, neo-orthodoxy offered a standpoint from which to attack Gandhian non-violence and its Christian admirers. For Thomas and his colleagues, Christian Gandhism courted heresy by endorsing a doctrine of man’s innate goodness and depreciating the difference between Hinduism and Christian revelation. Thomas argued that, despite Gandhi’s distaste for Western materialism, his ethics were captive to the same belief in human divinity that defined modern secularism. In an early essay, Thomas presented Gandhi as an example of Berdyaev’s concept of the ‘bourgeois mind’ that ‘believes that the abolition of castes and the conferring of equality in civil and political rights eradicates

19 Manali Desai, ‘Nationalism, class conflict, and socialist hegemony: toward an explanation of “developmental exceptionalism” in Kerala, India, 1934–1941’, PhD thesis, University of California, Los Angeles, 1999, pp. 68–145.

20 On the Congress Socialist and Communist Party’s roles in Travancore politics, see Louise Ouwerkerk, *No elephants for the Maharaja: social and political change in the princely state of Travancore (1937–1947)*, New Delhi: Manohar, 1994; Desai, ‘Nationalism’, pp. 132–8.

21 T. J. Nossiter, *Communism in Kerala*, Berkeley, CA University of California Press, 1982, pp. 65–104; Bidyut Chakrabarty, *Left radicalism in India*, New York: Routledge, 2015, pp. 133–57; and Desai, ‘Nationalism’, pp. 188–90.

22 George M. John, *Youth Council of Christian Action 1938–1954*, Madras: Christian Institute for the Study of Religion and Society, 1972, p. 17.

23 ‘Youth Council of Christian Action, Kerala’, *Student Outlook*, 11, 7 July 1939, pp. 12–17.

24 For the European origins of this theological movement, see Peter E. Gordon, ‘Weimar theology: from historicism to crisis’, in Peter Eli Gordon and John McCormick, eds., *Weimar thought: a contested legacy*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2013, pp. 150–78. For an account of its uptake among North Atlantic ecumenists, see Michael Thompson, *For God and globe: Christian internationalism in the United States between the Great War and the Cold War*, Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2015, pp. 122–7, and Terrance Renaud, ‘Human rights as radical anthropology: Protestant theology and ecumenism in the transwar era’, *Historical Journal*, 60, 2, 2017, pp. 501–18.

oppression' and maintains 'the natural harmony of contradicting interests'.<sup>25</sup> Gandhi and his Indian Christian pacifist supporters deserved one another. Both denied the 'tragic depths of both man and his social destiny' that was the teaching of the New Testament: humanity's incapacity to overcome the inherent corruption in most well-meaning acts. If the liberal appropriation of Gandhi was based on an unholy synthesis of politics and theology, the synthesis of neo-orthodox and communism taught Christians how to keep these fields in dialectical tension. To assume communism as a political technique entailed rejecting it as a 'religion': it was a political choice that fostered a Christian understanding of the opposition between the city of man and the city of God.<sup>26</sup>

In response to a crisis in Indian–British relations in the summer and autumn of 1942, Kerala's student Christians entered a wider field of international ecumenical debate, where their marriage of neo-orthodoxy and Marxism developed into a distinctive theory and practice of ecumenical conversation. After the collapse of negotiations to set the terms for the colony's independence after the war, the Indian National Congress followed Gandhi's lead and passed a resolution demanding immediate independence in return for Indian support of the British war effort. British authorities reacted swiftly to the so-called 'Quit India' resolution, repressing a wave of popular protests and jailing the Congress leadership, including Gandhi.<sup>27</sup> In April 1943, the SCM of Great Britain and Ireland sent a questionnaire to its Indian counterpart, probing student Christian opinion on the legitimacy of non-violence as a 'political policy', the capacity of Hinduism to provide an adequate basis of 'progressive government', and the likelihood of 'democratic' institutions being established in an independent India. The gesture was a time-tested ecumenical approach to contentious questions, inviting participants to stage common faith as a practice of overcoming conflict through personal fellowship and the recognition of difference. In India, the questionnaire was circulated among local SCM groups, whose responses were published as the basis of an ongoing 'dialogue' between the two countries. The practice's guiding principle was that give and take among political and theological perspectives manifested the universal fellowship of the Christian church, in which difference was mediated and regulated by shared commitment to the search for unity.<sup>28</sup>

Virtually all of the responses to the British questionnaire followed the script of welcoming a 'sincere effort' to promote British–Indian understanding at a moment of pitched tensions. This included responses from chapters endorsing the Quit India resolution, even though most regretted the 'misunderstandings' or assumptions about Indian politics implied in the British queries. The response of the Bengal SCM was typical of the conversation's tenor: while

25 M. M. Thomas, 'Gandhi, Marx and Nicholas Berdyaev's neo-orthodox critique of modern civilization' (1942), in M. M. Thomas, *Ideological quest within Christian commitment*, Madras: Christian Literature Society, 1983, p. 57.

26 See, for instance, Thomas' 1943 address to the Madras-Vellore branch of the Indian SCM, 'Christian social thought and action: a necessary tragedy', published as 'From utopianism to tragic realism', in Thomas, *Ideological quest*, pp. 85–106.

27 For the Quit India campaign and its fallout, see Yasmin Khan, *India at war*, New York: Oxford University Press, 2015, pp. 180–90.

28 For the origins of, and excerpts from, the exchange, see *Deadlock in India: correspondence between the Indian and British S.C.M.*, London: SCM Press, 1946. For studies of the wider practice of ecumenical study, see Justin Reynolds, 'Against the world: international Protestantism and the ecumenical movement between secularization and politics', PhD thesis, Columbia University, 2016, pp. 208–86. For accounts of the use of questionnaires at the 1910 World Missionary Conference in Edinburgh, see Brian Stanley, *World Missionary Conference, Edinburgh 1910*, Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2008. For accounts of ecumenical study in the 1930s, see Thompson, *For God and globe*, pp. 103–5; and Graeme Smith, *Oxford 1937: the Universal Christian Council of Life and Work Conference*, Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang, 2004.



objecting to the characterization of the Indian National Congress as monolithically pro-Gandhian, it applauded the ‘motives’ behind the questionnaire, assured ‘its British friends of its sense of fellowship with them’, and looked forward to the day when ‘this cloud of bitterness and suspicion will soon be lifted up and that Indo-British relationships will be placed on a happier basis’.<sup>29</sup>

A different reading came from the Travancore students, whose response was likely to have been authored by Thomas. In their view, the British questionnaire betrayed its authors’ ‘imperialistic *unwillingness to part with power*’. Since the British government’s offer of independence in 1942 had already recognized the ‘right of India for freedom’, the British SCM’s ‘blindness to the real facts of the Indian situation’ could only signal an intention to prejudice Christian opinion against the very proposition that Indians were fit for self-rule. At issue for the Travancore SCM was whether the questionnaire ought to be read at the level of its stated intention – to promote mutual understanding – or as an expression of ideology at odds with the ecumenical purposes it claimed to advance. According to the Travancore students, it made little difference whether the imperialistic ends objectively served by questioning Indian capacity for self-rule were ‘conscious, as in Churchill, Amery, and others of that ilk, or unconscious, as in the framers of the British SCM questionnaire’: prior to any ecumenical understanding, the ‘ideological’ nature of ecumenical speech itself needed to be laid bare.<sup>30</sup>

Travancore’s response echoed an article that Thomas had published shortly before in the *Madras Guardian*, ‘The British SCM and the Indian political situation’, which reveals a theological rationale behind the region’s critical response. The article focused on the questionnaire’s first prompt, which asked to what extent Indian Christians agreed that pacifism, ‘as a political policy’, was ‘an illusion dangerous to the order and peace of a fallen world’. Theologically, Thomas maintained that Gandhian non-violence was founded on a Pelagian belief in the capacity of the human will to choose good, rooted in ‘a Hindu conception of the divinity of man’.<sup>31</sup> But the same heretical orientation was present in the British questionnaire’s questioning of Indian fitness for self-rule. The questionnaire undermined the very ‘ecumenical Christian understanding’ it sought by ‘giv[ing] a halo of supernatural disinterestedness to the oft-repeated die-hard imperialist’s question of *whether we Indians have the capacity to govern ourselves*’. In this account, Marxian critique of Christian ideology expressed the doctrine of original sin:

the Christian conception of man states that all human values are ... perverted by human pride, that there is no absolute disinterestedness in the world; that all ... ideas and ideals, programmes and moralities of man are *ideology*. Christianity is quite in agreement with the Marxist conception of ideology; only the concept should be enlarged to include *all* who are in the world, including Marxists and Christians.

Insofar as intra-Christian conversation was ‘ideological’ it could not be ‘ecumenical’; it expressed human pride, not divine love. Thomas did not exempt his own position from the critique: if his reply ‘savour[ed] of more nationalist blindness than of supranationalist

29 ‘Introduction’, in *Deadlock in India*, p. 14.

30 *Deadlock in India*, pp. 20–1, emphasis in original.

31 Thomas, ‘British SCM and the Indian political situation’, *Guardian* [Madras], 21, 50, December 1943, p. 6, emphasis added. Abridged in Thomas, *Ideological quest*, pp. 80–1, emphasis in original.

impartiality', that 'only shows that the word of reconciliation is not in us, but must come from the Order of Grace'. In this combination of neo-orthodox theology and Marxian hermeneutics, ecumenical dialogue could only take form as critique, clearing away the obstacle of ideology impeding Christian unity in the very discourse that sought to promote it.<sup>32</sup>

Thomas' response represented a new approach within a longer tradition of attempts to integrate Marxian truths into Christian theology. Its innovation was to repurpose Marxian ideological critique as an instrument for prying ecumenical discourse from Christianity's entanglement with imperialism. Nothing like it emerged elsewhere in Asia, even where theological approaches to Marxism legitimated communism as a Christian option. In China, Y. T. Wu and his associates never took the step of interpreting conversation among ecumenical Christians as ideology in disguise; for them, Christian faith cleared the space of encounter and dialogue of political, national, or sectarian bias. The Marxian theology of wartime Travancore attacked this assumption, inaugurating a mode of ecumenical conversation that I label the 'ecumenics of suspicion'.

By the end of the war, Thomas had emerged as the leading spokesman of the ecumenical left in India, and his writings began to attract international notice. Over the spring and summer of 1943, repeated debates over the compatibility of violence and Christian ethics precipitated a split between Gandhians and Marxians in the YCCA. Thomas and his comrades left and founded the National Christian Youth Council (NCYC) as a para-communist organization to mobilize student support around the CPI's policies.

At the moment when the CPI was attempting to manoeuvre into India's political mainstream, Thomas became a nationally recognized speaker on the SCM circuit, lecturing on communism and Christian ethics in Colombo, and running seminars for student groups in Madras and Madura. In Christian publications like the Madras *Guardian* and the Indian SCM journal, *Student Outlook*, he endorsed the CPI's call for a 'United Front' of the Congress with the Muslim League and penned Marxian analyses of Indian nationalism's role within the world proletarian revolution.<sup>33</sup> Though, as he later claimed, the CPI rejected his bid for membership, Thomas gained new allies in the national SCM network. Malcolm Adesiah, the SCM's chairman, made him a guest editor of issues of *Student Outlook* in 1944–45, and himself gravitated toward his younger colleague's leftist views.<sup>34</sup> In 1946, with Adesiah, Thomas wrote his first article for *Student World*, the journal of the WSCF, which defended communism as the political choice that most approximated Christian ideals in India – including defeat of fascist totalitarianism in Asia, rejection of Partition, and freedom from the imperial yoke. 'The challenge of Communism in India', it declared, 'is not the challenge of a far-off utopian ideal, but the application of sane politics in the present situation.'<sup>35</sup> Embracing communism was not only consistent with Christianity; it clarified that the church's objection to communism was not 'political', but rather grounded in religious opposition to the secularist conception of humankind as the source of history and achievement. By the time it appeared, the Soviet Union's international prestige imbued the Keralan strain of Marxian ecumenism with new international relevance.

32 Thomas, 'British SCM', pp. 83–4.

33 'National Christian Youth Council', pp. 353–4; 'Students and the Indian national movement today', *Student Outlook*, 17, 3–6, 1945, pp. 28–31.

34 'Editorial: Christian students and the national movement', *Student Outlook*, 17, 3–6, 1945.

35 Malcolm Adesiah and M. M. Thomas, 'Social revolution in India', *Student World*, 39, 3, 1946, p. 228.

## Institutionalizing the ecumenics of suspicion: Thomas in the World Student Christian Federation, 1946–7

In 1947–8, Thomas' ecumenics of suspicion became an international practice of the WSCF, offering what would become a 'third way' for ecumenical Christians to bridge ideological divides during the Cold War. Scholars have shown how the early post-war period was defined for ecumenical institutions by a new debate over the relation between Christianity and communism, further shaped by the international prominence of the Soviet Union. The WCC's efforts to play a mediating role as Cold War tensions escalated is well known.<sup>36</sup> Yet the imperative to forge a fellowship 'uniting East and West' entailed a different set of institutional challenges for the WSCF: in particular, the Federation's efforts to promote Christian participation in cooperation with communist and international Soviet movements after 1945 created a space in which Thomas' Marxian approach to ecumenical dialogue became a major institutional practice of the SCM network.

In September 1946, just weeks after his article appeared in *Student World*, Thomas received a letter from Robert Mackie, the Scottish general secretary of the WSCF, inviting him to join the staff of the Federation in Geneva. The decision came at a period when the Federation confronted new dilemmas raised by the increasing popularity of student communist movements and their relationship to Christian student bodies. Following the Second World War, communist student networks attained control of major international student organizations, challenging Christian bodies in a territory that the latter had dominated for decades: in 1945, more than 500 youth groups gathered in London for the inaugural meeting of the World Federation of Democratic Youth (WFDY), which passed resolutions in pursuit of 'peace' and 'democracy' and the elimination of 'fascism' in the post-war world. The following year, in Prague, the International Union of Students (IUS) convened 600 delegates from student organizations and issued reports proclaiming similarly lofty ideas of international peace and democratic order. It was no secret to anyone in the Federation that the WFDY had been set up by the Communist Party, and that the older IUS had fallen under the control of communist students.<sup>37</sup> Responding to this turn of events, Mackie wrote that communism was 'the most dynamic theory of world political organization, which young people are meeting today ... [I]t remains the most serious claimant upon the political enthusiasms of youth'.<sup>38</sup> Against protests from American students who argued for boycotting the institutions altogether, the WSCF encouraged Christians to participate in them. A 1946 report of the Federation's General Assembly stated that the IUS and the WFDY were 'a meeting place of Christians and communists' where Christians 'can witness to their faith',<sup>39</sup> while Ronald Preston of the British SCM saw the IUS as an 'invaluable place' where, in an atmosphere of growing international

36 See Dianne Kirby, 'The Cold War, the hegemony of the United States and the golden age of Christian democracy', in Hugh McLeod, ed., *The Cambridge history of Christianity, volume 9: world Christianities c.1914–c.2000*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006, pp. 291–2; Dianne Kirby, 'The impact of the Cold War on the formation of the WCC', in Joachim Garstecki, ed., *Die Ökumene und der Widerstand gegen Diktaturen: Nationalsozialismus und Kommunismus als Herausforderung an die Kirchen*, Stuttgart: W. Kohlhammer, 2007, pp. 135–58; and Inboden, *Religion and American foreign policy*, pp. 29–62.

37 For the communist connections of the WFDY and IUS, see Joël Kotek, *Students and the Cold War*, trans. Ralph Blumenau, New York: St. Martin's Press, 1996.

38 Robert Mackie, 'Youth's dilemma and Christian hope', *Student World*, 39, 3, 1946, p. 195.

39 World Council of Churches Archives (henceforth WCCA), 213.13.1, Report from the General Assembly of the World Student Christian Federation, Bossey, Switzerland, 'Report of Section III: SCM members and political aims', p. 3.

tensions, 'Eastern and Western Europeans can meet and learn from one another'. Anything that crossed 'the "iron curtain"', he wrote, was 'to be encouraged'.<sup>40</sup>

From the moment that he arrived at the Federation offices, Thomas presented himself as uniquely suited to address these dilemmas. In a letter to his colleagues, he explained that his Keralan background – including 'participation in Movements like the Kerala Youth Christian Council of Action and the National Christian Youth Council' and his experience in 'the evangelization of the more ethically conscious participants of consciously atheistic and secular movements' – gave him experience handling the dilemmas that *all* student Christians now faced when confronted with the question of collaboration with the IUS and WFDY. It was critical for the Federation to see the silver lining in these bodies and their startling ascent: sustained engagement with communist students would enable young Christians to better perceive the entanglement of the ecumenical movement as a whole with 'Anglo-Saxon' imperialism. Toward this end, Thomas ventured that one of his tasks in the Federation would be 'to provide a critique from the South East Asia angle of the "average Anglo-Saxon" point of view', which risked displacing Christian faith as the motive behind Federation activities.<sup>41</sup> All WSCF members ought to learn the habit of ecumenical self-critique: 'though we know the Federation owes its life to an act of God beyond politics, it would only be a recognition of the fact of sin, to be suspicious of oneself and examine whether the Federation itself is allied with any group of material and political interests'.<sup>42</sup>

Federation staff did not initially welcome Thomas' ecumenics of suspicion. Philippe Maury, a Secretary of the WSCF's 'Political Commission', was confused by his new colleague's proposals:

I don't see clearly what you mean when you say 'to be suspicious of oneself and examine whether the Federation itself is allied with any group of material and political interests'. [We have to] take our stand on the ground of our faith and without bothering about what it would look like; if the Communists are happy, all right; if the reactionaries are happy, all right also. I take care to be faithful to Jesus Christ and not to support the point of view of anybody.<sup>43</sup>

For Maury, a Barthian French Reformed Protestant who cooperated with communists in the French Resistance, a Christian approach to politics meant casuistry, not suspicion: the church was an ideological ally of all and none; liberal, conservative, and communist were fellow travellers when their local ambitions coincided with the church's true 'political' concern to protect the rights of religious liberty and evangelization.<sup>44</sup> Thomas saw this as European parochialism. 'If I accept your proposition that in our political choice I must choose that State which helps the missionary and evangelistic movements most in India', he wrote to Maury, 'I have to keep supporting British power in India, though I know that Indian nationalism alone can bring that order which will mean tolerable living conditions to the peoples of India'.<sup>45</sup> In the colonial context, legal protections of religious liberty expressed an 'Anglo-Saxon', not a 'Christian', point of view.

40 Quoted in Coupland, *Britannia*, p. 151.

41 WCCA, 213.13.125, M. M. Thomas to Robert Mackie, 27 February 1947.

42 *Ibid.*

43 WCCA, 213.13.162, Philippe Maury to M. M. Thomas, 19 March 1947.

44 Philippe Maury, 'The political realism of a Christian', *Student World*, 4, 1945, pp. 295–301.

45 WCCA, 213.13.162, Thomas to Maury, 26 June 1947.

Thomas' position underscores how the meaning of 'religious liberty' was contested among ecumenists at precisely the moment when the WCC was investing resources to secure it as a fundamental human right. Additionally, it shows that enthusiasm for this campaign – led mostly by British and American lay and church leaders – was not universal.<sup>46</sup> For Thomas, the meaning of church leaders' utterances – whether they promoted religious liberty or the subordination of Christian witness to ideological and political imperatives – depended on the speaker. 'The political choice which I have made for Indian national movement [*sic*] against British Imperialism does not ... prevent me from demanding my right to evangelism from the Indian national movement, only I won't make [acceptance of religious liberty] a *prior* condition of my joining forces with it.'<sup>47</sup> A critique of the movement's idea of 'religious freedom' was a condition of achieving that freedom in practice.

Thomas' exchange with Maury typified his engagements with other ecumenical figures in the Geneva milieu. In 1947, he participated in a 'Conference of Christian Politicians', held by the WCC as part of their preparations for the Amsterdam conference. There he crossed swords with one of his intellectual mentors, Niebuhr, who had influenced his own thinking on the relationship of Marxism and Christian theology. But in Geneva, Thomas faulted Niebuhr for failing to see the politics of Christian 'tragedy' from an 'Asian point of view'. Niebuhr presented a paper arguing that, in the present polarization of Western economic systems and communist totalitarianism, 'socialism' offered the closest approximation to the Christian conception of a just society. Thomas' concern was not with socialism as a concept, but with Niebuhr's almost casual remark, toward the end of his paper, that the Socialist Party in France and the Labour Party in Britain were organizations 'bound to the principle of a Christian, or at least a democratic Society'.<sup>48</sup> Thomas declared that

Every politically conscious Asiatic knows that these two parties are supporters of anti-democratic forces in *Asia* and that they are standing against liberal values in *World politics*. The policy of the French Socialist Party in Indo-China is proof of its support of imperialism, and British Labour's attempt in India and the Middle East to find a social basis of support for themselves in the Indian princes and other feudal forces give [*sic*] the lie to Niebuhr.<sup>49</sup>

Thomas' aim was the same that animated his engagement with Maury: demonstrating the defence of European imperialism at work in theological discourse that sought to bracket the issue of ecumenism in Asia altogether: 'one is only revealing the confusion of Europe and Asia when I say that we, on our part, find that the Communist Parties of Europe are standing for liberalism in *Asiatic* politics and as bearers of liberalism in *world* politics today'.<sup>50</sup> A Marxian ideological critique provided the frame in which the two regions, Asia and Europe, could be

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46 For trans-war ecumenical promotion of human rights, see for example John Nurser, *For all peoples and all nations: the ecumenical church and human rights*, Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press, 2005; Moyn, *Christian human rights*, pp. 137–68; and John Stuart, 'Empire, mission, ecumenism, and human rights', *Church History*, 83, 1, 2014, pp. 110–34.

47 WCCA, 213.13.162, Thomas to Maury, 26 June 1947, emphasis in original.

48 WCCA, 24.185, Reinhold Niebuhr, 'God's order and the present disorder of civilization', first draft circulated for comments by the WCC's Study Department, p. 10.

49 WCCA, 213.13.162, M. M. Thomas, 'Some comments on the diagnostic papers of Ellul and Niebuhr', paper prepared for a consultation of the WCC's Study Department, June 1947, emphasis in original.

50 *Ibid.*, emphasis in original.

held in a dialectical tension reflecting the tension of the Christian himself or herself, poised between worldly concern with politics and otherworldly faith.

Thomas had little impact on preparations for the Amsterdam assembly. Though commissioned to write an essay for the preparatory volumes of Section III on 'Man's disorder and God's design', his contribution drew little interest from commentators, and his commentary on Niebuhr's paper elicited a dismissive response.<sup>51</sup> The WCC leadership saw the task of charting a 'third way' in the Cold War as a matter to be worked out through dialogue among church leaders from eastern and western Europe, and North America. Its strategy to reconcile 'East and West' relied upon recruiting pro-communist churches from the East: a campaign pursued most aggressively in efforts to entice the Russian Orthodox Church into the Council.<sup>52</sup> Thomas was not present at Amsterdam, and few Asian voices were included in the debate over the Christian relation to communism. As we shall see in the following section, in these discussions they lamented the dominance of the 'older churches'.

The Federation approached the 'third way' differently because of its focus on student evangelism. There, the task was not securing official representation from the Eastern Bloc churches but developing an evangelical strategy for use in a field of student internationalism where growing communist presence heightened political polarization. Thomas' apologetics, grounded in the idea of political struggle as a practice of revealing Christ's message of fallenness and divine grace – was well suited to this milieu. Initially sceptical colleagues came to see the international utility of his ecumenics of suspicion. Strikingly, Thomas' clashes with Maury, Niebuhr, and others reveal no effort to muzzle the new Indian arrival. Thomas' responsibilities within the movement increased. Maury wrote to Thomas in May 1947 thanking him for the 'excellent piece of discussion which has been very interesting to me', and suggested that they release their exchange as an official Federation publication.<sup>53</sup> The proposal became the basis for a series of 'Federation dialogues' – redacted conversations among student Christian leaders which were then circulated among SCMs to stimulate local and international conversation. The series included Thomas' correspondence with the British SCM secretary Ronald Preston over US aid to Greece and Turkey, and his exchange with Kendrik Baker, a young American missionary in Cairo, addressing communist–Christian relations.<sup>54</sup> Such dialogues legitimated ideological critique of political interests and served in purportedly supra-political ecumenical conversation as a means of generating 'Christian' knowledge of international politics. In a world where Federation leaders saw communism as a threatening attraction for students – illustrated by the success of the IUS and the WFDY – Thomas demonstrated how Marxian politics could be put to use within the ecumenical search for a world Christian order. Between 1947 and 1948, the Federation came to accept the ecumenics of suspicion as a discursive practice, giving concrete form to the movement's ambition to make Christianity a 'universal' faith in an era of geopolitical and ideological polarization.

51 Thomas' contribution appeared as M. M. Thomas, 'The situation in Asia – II' in *The church and the disorder of society*, Amsterdam Assembly Series 3, New York: Harper Brothers, 1948, pp. 71–9. For critical reviews of the paper, see for instance WCCA, 213.13.162, Kenneth Grubb, 'Comment on "The situation in Asia – II"'. For responses to Thomas' critique of Niebuhr, on which his contribution was based, see WCCA, 24.207, 'Minutes of round table meeting of Christian politicians, Bossey, June 13th–16th, 1947', pp. 4–5.

52 J. A. Hebly, *Russians and the World Council of Churches*, Belfast: Christian Journals Ltd, 1978.

53 WCCA, 213.13.162, Maury to Thomas, 26 May 1947, p. 1.

54 WCCA, 213.13.24, Ronald Preston and M. M. Thomas, 'Federation dialogue 1: On the USA decision to aid Greece and Turkey'; WCCA, 213.13.162, Kendrik Baker and M. M. Thomas, 'Federation dialogue 2: Christianity and communism'.

## From the ecumenics of suspicion to the theology of revolution: the birth of postcolonial ecumenism

Although Thomas embraced communism for the better part of a decade, by the end of February 1948 he had begun to ‘furiously rethink’ his political commitments.<sup>55</sup> The communist coup that brought Klement Gottwald to power in Czechoslovakia and the decision by the CPI to oppose Nehru’s government after Independence were disillusioning experiences. He began to see communism as a threat to, rather than an agent of, the anti-imperialist cause. But in repudiating communism, Thomas did not abandon the theology of communism. His concern to define ecumenical Christianity around communist politics and Marxian doctrine established a framework for him and the entire ecumenical movement to approach a new, post-war, problem: defining a Christian attitude toward the ‘revolution’ sweeping Asia in the late 1940s.

Understanding Thomas’ role in shaping the movement’s approach to the post-war global South first requires distinguishing ecumenists’ embrace of anti-colonialism from their attitudes toward processes of nation-building following the end of colonial rule. Ecumenists welcomed the end of colonialism, yet they saw the social and political construction of ‘new nations’ as a distinct phenomenon, freighted with both opportunity and peril. At a moment when most ecumenists apprehensively surveyed the field of postcolonial states – fretting over the precariousness of protections for religious liberty, communism’s growing appeal, and the menace of secular and religious nationalisms – Thomas and others in the Federation argued that decolonization represented the realization of the ecumenists’ eagerly sought ‘third way’. To understand the use to which Thomas’ theology of revolution was put by the WCC, we must first see it in relation to wider efforts to incorporate communist ideas into the movement in the post-war period.

At first, ecumenists showed little interest in the nation-building that began in the wake of the so-called ‘first wave’ of decolonization in the Philippines (1946), India, Pakistan, and Ceylon (1947), Syria and Burma (1948), and Indonesia (1949). At Amsterdam, discussion of international affairs revolved around the challenge of mediating tensions between the Western powers and the Soviet Union, while the injustices of colonialism were discussed mostly insofar as they stoked the spread of communism.<sup>56</sup> While condemning racial prejudice and ‘aggressive imperialism’, the conference report on the ‘Church and international disorder’ gave little attention to colonial or anti-colonial politics.<sup>57</sup> To the extent that that regional politics in Asia and Africa intervened on its agenda, they were viewed through the prism of efforts to promote the religious liberty and international human rights.<sup>58</sup> Elsewhere at the conference, the problems of the ‘new nations’ received little attention in comparison to US and European politics, the threat of ‘totalitarianism’, and the depersonalizing effects of technological civilization. In a judgment echoed by other non-Western delegates, the Indian theologian P. D. Devanandan lamented that the ‘entire trend’ of discussion at Amsterdam

55 Thomas Papers, United Theological College, Bangalore, Box 38, M. M. Thomas, ‘Faith seeking understanding and responsibility’, unpublished autobiographical manuscript, n.d., p. 55.

56 ‘Report of Section III’, in *The church and the disorder of society*, p. 220.

57 ‘Report of Section IV’, in *The church and the international disorder*, Amsterdam Assembly Series 4, New York: Harper Brothers, 1948, p. 193.

58 Among Amsterdam’s preparatory studies, the most detailed discussion of Asian and African politics occurred in the American ecumenist O. Fredrick Nolde’s survey of the status of human rights: ‘Freedom of religion and related human rights’, in *The church and the international disorder*, pp. 159–60.

‘veered around problems of life and thought which primarily concerned the Older Churches’ in Europe and North America.<sup>59</sup> As eagerly as it embraced self-determination movements as rebukes to Western secularism, the WCC lacked both interest and a conceptual frame for interpreting decolonization in relation to its global social and ecclesiastical aims.

Where there *was* greater interest in Asian affairs – among leaders of the movement’s missionary body, the International Missionary Council (IMC), and student groups – decolonization was associated with challenges facing the church: surging nationalism, the spread of communism, and threats to religious liberty. Since the 1920s ecumenists had inveighed against nationalism as modern secularism’s most prevalent expression, and a breeding ground for the worship of state power. Many movement leaders, even those who welcomed decolonization, highlighted the risks of national sovereignty in relation to Asia. In *Cross over Asia* (1948), a survey of church life and social transformation in the region, Stephen Neill, the Anglican bishop of Tirunelveli in India, worried that ‘the most lasting consequence of the second world war will be the consummation of Asiatic nationalism’, which he described as a ‘neurosis’.<sup>60</sup> Thomas’ associate from the Indian SCM, Chandran Devanesan, lamented that ‘both nationalism and communism have become rivals of the Christian church ... threatening its survival’ in China, Burma, Indonesia, and Malaysia.<sup>61</sup> At the IMC’s first post-war assembly in 1947, the perils of ethno-nationalism around Indian Partition and communism’s advances in China loomed large in delegates’ minds.<sup>62</sup> The official review of the conference, held weeks before formal Indian Independence, evinced little enthusiasm over the republic’s achievement of self-rule, highlighting rather the risks to religious liberty and church unity from Partition and Ceylonese policies imperilling the future of Christian education.<sup>63</sup>

This is not to say that ecumenists were wholly negative about Christian prospects in postcolonial societies. Neill saw possibilities for the formation of self-sufficient, indigenous churches and the liberation of Christianity from its captivity to Western secular culture. Surviving the transition of power, Asian churches could show that they were not appendages of European power but messengers of the eternal word.<sup>64</sup> Similarly, the American missionary intellectuals Kenneth Latourette and William Hogg welcomed the postcolonial age as one where churches could flourish unencumbered by their origins. Throughout the mission field, ‘Christianity ... [has been] freed from ties that were embarrassing to it’, and, they added optimistically, ‘is moving out to fresh victories’.<sup>65</sup> Youth Christian groups in Asia found exciting outlets for Christian activism in the building up of postcolonial societies: May Aye and Chit Sein, Burmese delegates to a WSCF gathering in Oslo in 1947, declared the need for Christians to ‘throw in their lot individually and collectively’ with the national struggle to promote ‘political independence ... economic stability, a high standard of living for everybody,

59 P. D. Devanandan, ‘Comments on the first report of the Advisory Commission on the theme of the second assembly’, *Ecumenical Review*, 2, 2, 1951, pp. 163–4. For Asian responses to Amsterdam, see Hans Reudi-Weber, *Asia and the ecumenical movement, 1895–1961*, London: SCM Press, 1966, pp. 235–6.

60 Stephen Neill, *Cross over Asia*, London: Canterbury Press, 1948, p. 16.

61 Chandran Devanesan, ‘Post-Amsterdam thoughts from a younger church’, *Ecumenical Review*, 2, 1, 1949, p. 144.

62 ‘Christian witness in a revolutionary world, Whitby Ontario’, *International Review of Missions*, 39, 1, 1949, pp. 3–35.

63 *Ibid.*, pp. 13–15.

64 Neill, ‘The Asian scene’, *Ecumenical Review*, 1, 1, 1948, pp. 67–9.

65 Kenneth Scott Latourette and William Richey Hogg, *Tomorrow is here: the mission and work of the church as seen from the meeting of the International Missionary Council at Whitby, Ontario, July 5–24, 1947*, New York: Friendship Press, 1948, p. 17.



a sound education system, a lower death rate, and a higher standard of health'. Christians could win respect in Burma only if they 'played a leading role in all the programme for peace, progress and betterment of the country'.<sup>66</sup> In the end of empire, however, these thinkers celebrated not the power of non-Western peoples but the liberation of Christianity from the grip of a moribund Western civilization.

Not itself the realization of ecumenical objectives, decolonization instead brought into focus a new problem: 'revolution'. Ecumenists had traditionally used the term to refer to *communist* revolution, yet in the 1940s it acquired a wider meaning, denoting not an ideological choice but a process: the rapid and comprehensive transformation of social, political, economic order. Maury defined revolution as 'the complete changing, the radical transformation, of society and the building up of a new, free, and just order'. In 1946 he surveyed its appeal in the 'colonies', as well as western and eastern Europe, calling commitment to revolution the 'common denominator of idealist and realist, theorist and man of action, of philosopher and technician, of unbeliever and Christian'.<sup>67</sup> Jacques Ellul, another French Reformed intellectual, declared that 'all our contemporaries are conscious of the necessity of revolution', since Western civilization had 'reached a mortal impasse'.<sup>68</sup> Most uses of the term described experiments in self-government underway in Asia. For Neill, the emergence of the 'new nations' made Asia the site of 'the greatest revolution that has ever happened in the history of mankind'.<sup>69</sup> Reviewing the 1947 conference of the WSCF in Oslo, commentators widely noted how Asian delegations evoked a 'revolutionary' mood on the continent'.<sup>70</sup> 'Christian witness in a revolutionary age' was the official theme of the IMC's 1947 conference, chosen since the gathering occurred at 'the peak of political revolution in many of the countries from which the delegates had come'.<sup>71</sup> If anti-colonialism remained an ecumenical cause, 'revolution' crystallized the challenges facing Christians in the social, economic, and political spheres following decolonization.

After 1948, Thomas' thinking took shape around the new problem of revolution. Political disappointment drove theological innovation. Touring Asian SCMs in 1948, he concluded that, while communism might still be a viable option for Chinese Christians, elsewhere, and most obviously in India, the communists had become an obstacle to Christian interests. In early 1948, under the new leadership of B. T. Ranadive, the CPI reversed its wartime commitment to a 'United Front', assailing Nehru's government for failing to align with the Soviet Union.<sup>72</sup> Thomas dismissed the Party's new line as a bid 'to march to power through chaos', even suggesting that the communists had become a left equivalent of the Hindu nationalists responsible for Gandhi's assassination. If they hoped to serve a constructive role in shaping the new India, Christians needed to find moderate political options. Thomas called for Indian churches to strengthen the forces of 'liberal-social-democracy' and 'Gandhism' by 'severing' liberal values – of political pluralism, the rule of law, and the independence of the judiciary – from 'the

66 Ma Aye and Chit Sein, 'Christian youth in Burma', *Student World*, 41, 1, 1948, p. 54.

67 Philippe Maury, 'The Christian and revolution', *Student World*, 39, 3, 1946, p. 236.

68 Jacques Ellul, 'The Christian as revolutionary', *Student World*, 41, 3, 1948, p. 216.

69 Neill, *Cross over Asia*, p. 16.

70 See C. W. Li, 'Theology and revolution', *Student World*, 41, 2, 1948, pp. 159–63; and M. M. Thomas, *The Asian leaders' conference: an interpretation*, Geneva: World's Student Christian Federation, 1949, p. 9.

71 'Christian witness', p. 4.

72 Gene D. Overstreet and Marshall Windmiller, *Communism in India*, Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1959, pp. 267–9.

shallow liberal utopian conceptions of man which inevitably must break down into totalitarian faiths, and linking them on to the Christian truth, of man as a sinner saved by Christ'.<sup>73</sup>

Thomas' newfound regard for liberal and social democratic values raised a theological question. On what basis could Christians ground their support for postcolonial regimes against either neo-colonial (or communist) threats from without or religious radicalism from within? He proposed an answer the following year, in a text that established the theological foundation for the ecumenical movement's understanding of the decolonizing world in the decade to come. Written as a Federation conference report with his colleague Davis McCaughey, a Presbyterian minister and secretary of the British SCM, 'The Christian in the world struggle' (1949) posited the struggle for power by 'submerged' peoples as a providential event, an act of God in history that formed the basis of church unity and anti-secular action.<sup>74</sup> Their conception of the church as a revolutionary agent, constituted through its solidarity with oppressed peoples, gained ground in the movement as it faced intractable difficulties uniting North Atlantic and European constituencies divided over Cold War politics.

Appointed co-secretaries of the Political Commission at the Federation's Assembly in Whitby, Canada, in August 1949, Thomas and McCaughey centred plenary discussions around the theme of 'revolution'. In the first systematic account of this phenomenon given by anyone in the movement, their report announced that the reality of the post-war world was 'a revolution... of submerged classes, nations, [and] races, demanding not simply the amelioration of their lot, but participation in the total life of society'. More importantly, they argued that 'revolution' was not the context within which ecumenists must preach and embody the Christian message, but was the content of that message itself. The 'end' of the revolution was 'justice for the whole human person', God's way of bringing his people to him.<sup>75</sup> The struggle for power constitutive of the revolution was the necessary precondition of a life of 'responsibility' to God – since, as Thomas and McCaughey pointed out, there could be no 'responsibility' without power. For this reason, 'behind [the revolution] ... the Christian sees the righteous hand of God: in men's aspirations' for a greater part of control over the conditions of their existence; 'he sees a sign that Christ has won for them better things than they have yet realized'.<sup>76</sup>

The report was immediately recognized as a major contribution to the Federation, which devoted numerous study groups and an international conference to discussing and revising the text over the next two years, before publication in 1952.<sup>77</sup> It is evident through its subsequent revisions that *The Christian in the world struggle* practised the ecumenical theology of communism, incorporating Marxian insights as a springboard for constructing theological claims about contemporary society and the church's mission. Though Thomas was by then not a communist, he and McCaughey declared that it was 'to Marx that we are chiefly indebted for the emphasis on conflict as a permanent characteristic of man's life in society'. As Marx had

73 Thomas, *Asian leaders' conference*, pp. 62–4.

74 WCCA, 213.13.2, M. M. Thomas and Davis McCaughey, 'The Christian in the world struggle', WSCF, General Committee, August 1949, Report of the Commission on 'Where is the SCM in the world struggle?' The report was presented to the conference by Leila Anderson, a secretary of the United States' SCM. For the report's genesis, see Thomas, *My ecumenical journey*, pp. 96–7. For a study of the work in relation to Thomas' shifting political and theological orientation after 1948, see Ken Christoph Miyamoto, *God's mission in Asia: a comparative and contextual study of this-worldly holiness and the theology of Missio Dei in M.M. Thomas and C.S. Song*, Eugene, OR: Pickwick Publications, 2007, pp. 104–10.

75 Thomas and McCaughey, 'The Christian in the world struggle', p. 1.

76 *Ibid.*, p. 3.

77 Philip Potter and Thomas Wieser, *Seeking and serving the truth*, London: SCM Press, 1997, p. 171.

perceived, power was ‘the midwife of all social revolutions’ and failure to grasp this point rendered Christians and non-Christians alike blind to Christ’s presence in the contemporary world. No less than he had done as an ecumenist of suspicion in earlier years, Thomas remained convinced that Christian unity required recognizing that ‘the social groups to which men belong were not either superficially or in essence in harmony with one another: they were in conflict’, and that Marx’s ‘view of history’ was the authoritative historical interpretation of this conflict.<sup>78</sup>

Thomas and McCaughey most radically re-conceptualized ecumenism through their revisions to traditional Marxism, particularly its concept of revolution. The authors denied that revolutionary action was the prerogative of the proletariat or those speaking in its name. ‘Marxist analysis ... is a simplification’, they declared, assuming that the revolutionary vanguard was always ‘identical with the proletariat or advanced groups within it’.<sup>79</sup> The contemporary moment clarified that revolutionary action was not the destiny of the working classes alone but was present in ‘the demand of national freedom, the revolt of the peasants ... [and] the passionate desire for racial equality’. It was the calling of the church to actualize revolutionary potential by uniting revolutionary agents dispersed geographically, culturally, and ideologically, and thus unable to unite themselves. Thomas and McCaughey argued that this search for unity required dialogue among diverse approaches to political action, since it was ‘in the technicalities of politics that Christ must be received’.<sup>80</sup> Whereas Thomas had previously imagined revolutionary Marxism as a corrective to the church’s Western parochialism, he and McCaughey now reasoned that a universal church could only be realized through solidarity with the struggles of ‘submerged’ nations, races, and classes.

Conceiving the Christian community as an agent of social transformation also recast the ecumenical contest with secularism. In the interwar period, ecumenists imagined their struggle with secularism as a battle for control over the bases of social ‘order’; Thomas and McCaughey now envisioned a struggle for control over the ‘revolutionary’ energies transforming societies on a global scale. In the 1949 version of the text, they had already identified two ways in which the revolution might be ‘captured’. The first was through a merely ‘technical’ approach to the revolution, which sought social and economic transformation through increased efficiency, rather than through wider ‘participation in the total life of society including the exercise of power’. The second was through the ‘demonic forces’ that were unleashed as a necessary by-product of the struggle for power: the ‘besetting temptation of all powerful groups is the exercise of power for its own sake’.<sup>81</sup> Under this threat, Thomas and McCaughey understood ‘ideologies’ to be interpretations of revolutionary aspiration that denied its proper, religious object and channelled it toward worldly ends. The struggle against secularism had a new front that ran through the Asian heartland of revolution: no longer a threat to order, the denial of God was a threat to social transformation.

The *Christian in the world struggle* came at a propitious time for the ecumenical movement. Its impact can best be understood by looking at how it offered the WCC a solution to the growing polarization of its constituency after 1948. The consolidation of Soviet influence in

78 M. M. Thomas and Davis McCaughey, *The Christian in the world struggle*, Geneva: World’s Student Christian Federation, 1952, pp. 23–4.

79 *Ibid.*, p. 25.

80 *Ibid.*, p. 8.

81 *Ibid.*, p. 3.

eastern Europe in 1948, and the communist triumph in China one year later, created a new bloc within the movement leadership: pro-communist churchmen, such as the Czech theologian Josef Hromadka and the Hungarian Reformed bishop Albert Bereczky, as well as Y. T. Wu and the Anglican priest T. C. Chao in China. Their vocal opposition to the Council's Western orientation hamstrung the WCC's ambition to take bold, united stands on Cold War issues from 1948 onwards. Presaging later developments, Hromadka clashed with the American Presbyterian and future Republican Secretary of State John Foster Dulles at the Amsterdam Conference, the one hailing and the other condemning the spread of communism.<sup>82</sup> When the Assembly's commission on 'The church and the disorder of society' advanced the idea of the 'responsible society' as a Christian alternative to both 'laissez-faire capitalism' and 'totalitarian Communism', conservative Protestants in the US and Europe attacked the report as an apology for socialism or proof of Soviet infiltration at the Council.<sup>83</sup> Privately, Visser 't Hooft acknowledged in 1949 that the WCC, only a year into its formal existence, faced an existential crisis: the "vital space" for a third position' between the rival blocs was vanishing.<sup>84</sup>

By the summer of 1951, the WCC was unable to rally its divided constituency on the major international crisis of the day. When the Council's Central Committee condemned North Korea's 'aggression' on the South, Czechoslovak church leaders, along with Bereczky of Hungary, denounced the statement as Western propaganda (adopting the tactic of ecumenics of suspicion that Thomas had developed years earlier).<sup>85</sup> Protesting the Korea resolution, Chao resigned from the WCC's five-person presidium.<sup>86</sup> The Council's determination to walk a neutral line in the Cold War undercut a range of projects envisioned for Europe as well. Having organized an Ecumenical Commission on European Cooperation in 1950 to promote Protestant involvement in western European union, the WCC was forced to give up funding and cut formal ties with the group four years later in the face of criticisms that a united Europe was a 'regional political project' that frustrated the more important task of building bridges with the East.<sup>87</sup> In the years following Amsterdam, the WCC's gambit that world Christian fellowship could mediate the conflict between East and West seemed increasingly improbable in the face of its internecine divisions. The Council's focus on what Devanandan had called the problems of 'the Older Churches' was merely exacerbating fractures in the movement.

In the face of the WCC's Cold War impasse, Thomas and McCaughey's theology demonstrated how ecumenists could reinterpret their quest for a 'third way' in global politics. Council leadership put to use their contention that world Christian unity aimed to determine the outcome of 'revolutionary' change as theological justification for its shifting priorities away from the North Atlantic in the 1950s. In December 1949, when the WCC and the IMC hosted a conference in Bangkok to assess the place and function of the Christian churches in newly forming Asian

82 Inboden, *Religion and American foreign policy*, pp. 46–7.

83 'Report of Section III', in *The church and the disorder of society*, pp. 189–90. For reactions to the 'responsible society' in the US, see Reynolds, 'Against the world', pp. 321–2.

84 WCCA, 301.014, W. A. Visser 't Hooft, 'Notes on the World Council of Churches as between East and West', confidential memorandum, March 1949, p. 1.

85 For the Czechoslovak protest, see WCCA, 37.0003, 'Letter from Prof. Josef L. Hromadka and Dr. Viktor Hajek to Dr. W. A. Visser 't Hooft', 30 November 1950. For Bereczky's protest, and subsequent exchange with Visser 't Hooft, see their correspondence in WCCA, 42.009.

86 WCCA, 428.16.2.9.1, T. C. Chao to the Presidents of the WCC, 28 April 1951.

87 For the WCC's ambivalence toward western European union, see Lucian Leustean, *The ecumenical movement and the making of the European communist*, New York: Oxford University Press, pp. 39–51. The WCC's decision to withdraw funding from, and formal association with, the ECEC is reported in WCCA, 422.005, 'Minutes of the WCC Study Department staff meeting, Nov. 25–30, 1952, Bossey, Switzerland', p. 9.

societies, Thomas was appointed the chief author of a statement on ‘The church in social and political life’, which declared that ‘the struggle for, and attainment of, political freedom has awakened the hitherto submerged peoples of East Asia to a new sense of dignity and historical mission’, and arguing that the rise of communism was ‘a judgment on the churches for their failure’ to ‘welcome the demands of the peoples for a fuller participation in the life of society at the level where power is exercised, since this is an expression of human dignity’.<sup>88</sup> Among those who praised the report was Visser ’t Hooft, who later called it ‘one of the best statements on the Christian attitude toward communism ... ever made by an ecumenical meeting’.<sup>89</sup> In framing the exercise of power by ‘hitherto submerged’ peoples as a site of religious self-realization, Thomas’ statement established the object of postcolonial Christian governance.

In the decade that followed, Asia became, as the church historian Hans-Reudi Weber put it, the ‘focal point of ecumenical interest’, and hosted a succession of ecumenical conferences.<sup>90</sup> In 1952, the WCC selected Lucknow, India, as the site of a study conference to shape the agenda for its second assembly; the gathering’s report announced that the chief concern of ecumenical action in East Asia was to guide the ‘social revolution’ unfolding there toward its God-given ends of ‘human dignity and freedom ... as befits the nature and destiny of man as a child of God’.<sup>91</sup> Between 1950 and 1953, the YMCA/YWCA hosted Asian ‘leaders’ conferences’ in Indonesia, India, and Ceylon, while the WSCF selected Kottayam, India, as the site for their next world conference of Christian youth. By the early 1950s, even ecumenists who disagreed with Thomas’ emphasis on the political nature of revolution were coming to accept his view that determining the spiritual aspirations of hitherto ‘submerged’ peoples was ecumenism’s foremost international task. For example, his colleague, the Dutch economist Egbert De Vries, maintained that, rather than offer solidarity in the power struggle, Christians in the West could give guidance in ‘economic development and the achievement of higher standards of living’ for Asian populations.<sup>92</sup> But he took it for granted that guiding ‘the struggle and strife to find new ways of life’ in Asia was the principal task of ecumenical Christianity in the post-war world. De Vries was not alone. By 1954, it was obvious to the Swedish director of the WCC’s Study Department, Nils Ehrenström, that ‘the social problems of underdeveloped countries’ constituted the ‘most important social problem confronting the churches today, whether in the East or West, and should be given attention to the exclusion of all other questions’.<sup>93</sup>

A third way had, in effect, been achieved. By 1955, ecumenists came to agree with the proposition first laid out by Thomas and McCaughey in 1949: Christianity’s chief means to establish global influence in the modern age was the realization of divine intention behind decolonization. That year, supported by US\$100,000 from the John D. Rockefeller

88 ‘Findings of the Eastern Asia Christian conference, Bangkok, 3–11 December, 1949: the church in social and political life’, in *Statements of the World Council of Churches on social questions*, Geneva: World Council of Churches, 1955, p. 27. For the origins of the Bangkok conference, see Hans Reudi-Weber, ‘Out of all continents: a review of regional developments in the ecumenical movement’, in Harold E. Fey, ed., *A history of the ecumenical movement*, vol. 2, Geneva: World Council of Churches, 1968, p. 69.

89 W. A. Visser ’t Hooft, *Memoirs*, London: SCM Press, 1973, p. 233.

90 Weber, *Asia and the ecumenical movement*, p. 222.

91 ‘The responsible society in east Asia in light of the world situation’, in *Christ: the hope of Asia*, Madras: Christian Literature Society, 1953, p. 27.

92 E. de Vries, ‘The churches and the problems of social and economic development in South and South East Asia’, condensed version of a paper delivered at the Ecumenical Study Conference for East Asia, Lucknow, India, 27–30 December 1952, published in *Christ: the hope of Asia*, p. 5.

93 WCC, 422.005, ‘World Council of Churches Study Department staff meeting minutes’, Ecumenical Institute, Bossey, Switzerland, 25–30 November 1954, p. 10.

Foundation, the WCC established a programme to promote the 'Common Christian responsibility in areas of rapid social change', encompassing Asia, Africa, and Latin America. Focused on achieving 'responsible emancipation', the programme staff included De Vries and the American theologian Paul Abrecht, with Thomas, the Japanese theologian Diasuke Kitagawa, and the Sierra Leonean politician and doctor John Kerefa Smart as consultants.<sup>94</sup> The programme was founded on the premise that world Christian unity emerged from a collaborative approach to four challenges facing societies in the global South: the theological basis of democratic self-government in new nation-states; the rebuilding of rural life under the impact of modern economic and social forces; the search for community in the face of urbanization and industrialization; and the 'critical study' of the social and political impact of foreign enterprise and international assistance in Asia, Africa, and Latin America.<sup>95</sup> The Rapid Social Change programme, whose activities dominated WCC work from 1955 through to its Third Assembly, in New Delhi in 1961, represented the institutionalization of postcolonial ecumenism.

## Conclusion

In the 1950s, the idea of ecumenical Christianity as a vision and practice of 'responsible emancipation' guided the WCC's focus on issues surrounding development and self-determination in the global South. This article has shown how Thomas' thinking, beginning in the early 1940s, furnished a storehouse of concepts, organized around the theological incorporation of communism and Marxist ideas, that ecumenists utilized in their approaches to imperial politics, the Cold War, and decolonization. Thomas' peculiar value to the movement was his use of Marxian ideas to illuminate sources of Christian 'unity' within political conflict. This approach was critical to institutions divided in the 1940s and 1950s, above all, by the political fault-lines caused by the conflicts between the West and the communist East.

On the one hand, the end of empire marked a long-sought objective of many ecumenists, who viewed European colonialism as an efflux of Western secularism. On the other hand, the destruction of the imperial world order that had, since the nineteenth century, sustained missionary and ecumenical cooperation, also transformed the objectives of the ecumenical project itself. Premised on the idea that a global fellowship of Christians could tame the centrifugal forces of secularization, the movement came to view Christian leadership of self-determination movements in the global South as a means of realizing anti-secular ends. Its post-war determination to make 'revolution' the source of a Christian world order was the product of a theology of communism that both helped to create the movement's Cold War polarization and furnished concepts through which, as ecumenists hoped, that polarization could be overcome.

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94 See Paul Abrecht, 'The development of ecumenical social thought and action', in Fey, *History of the ecumenical movement*, vol. 2, pp. 248–50.

95 *The common Christian responsibility toward areas of rapid social change*, Geneva: World Council of Churches, 1955, pp. 4–6.