ECUMENISM AND THE WORLD COUNCIL OF CHURCHES

American Decades 2001

The Ecumenical Spirit

The 1940s brought an unprecedented lessening of tensions between faiths and cooperation between denominations. A spirit of ecumenism, or cooperation between churches, dominated. This new spirit had a variety of sources, including the impact of the Holocaust, the development of Catholic modernism, wartime cooperation between British and American churches, and the suburbanization of churches. At the popular level the new spirit sought to do away with longstanding religious animosities, especially between Catholics and Jews and between Protestants and Catholics. The ecumenical spirit also created new organizational cooperation between denominations, especially in charity work, missionary activities, and political programs. These activities found expression in the creation of the World Council of Churches in 1948 and would result in the creation of a formal ecumenical body, the National Council of Churches, in 1950. By the end of the decade the ecumenical movement had thus become a worldwide phenomenon that was led by many American clergymen, including Henry Van Dusen, John Bennett, and Reinhold Niebuhr.

Wartime Cooperation

Before World War II differing Protestant denominations routinely cooperated with one another in charity work or social reform. In the 1940s these informal experiences became formalized and organized. The Depression led the way, forcing fragmented denominations, such as the Methodists or the Lutherans, to unify for the sake of economic efficiency. World War II especially advanced cooperation. Protestant denominations set aside their theological and liturgical differences to assist one another in ministering to the spiritual needs of soldiers and their families. Coming from diverse back-grounds and often ministering to a broad spectrum of denominations and faiths, army chaplains specialized in harmonizing various elements of different faiths and received an education in the theologies of other faiths in the process. Servicemen themselves set aside religious differences to work with one another during the conflict and were instrumental in eliminating a pervasive anti-Catholicism present in American culture.

Tolerance

Ecumenism and interfaith tolerance had strong intellectual foundations in the 1940s. The Holocaust thoroughly discredited anti-Semitic cultural tendencies, especially among intellectuals, and demonstrated to all but the most insensitive the dangerous possibilities of vitriolic religious intolerance. Among theologians of the three great American faiths, the war and the Holocaust engendered a sense of humility and sparked a restructuring of the theological roots of all three faiths in order to reassert their humanist core. Catholic theologian Jacques Maritain, Jewish intellectual Martin Buber, and Protestant thinkers Reinhold Niebuhr and Paul Tillich borrowed liberally from one another and created rigorous, humanist theologies for their respective faiths.

World Council of Churches

The World Council of Churches was the ultimate expression of Christian ecumenism. A federation of Protestant and Eastern Orthodox churches, the World Council of Churches sponsored cooperative
mission work, theological study, and humanitarian assistance. The first steps toward the World Council of Churches were taken at a World Missionary Conference in Edinburgh, Scotland, in 1910. An attempt to coordinate the missionary activities among various denominations, the conference established a basis for broader interdenominational cooperation. Thereafter, British theologians especially sought reconciliation between various Christian denominations. In the United States similar goals were pursued by the Federal Council of the Churches of Christ, an interdenominational group that coordinated peace activities with funding from Andrew Carnegie. World War I also advanced ecumenical tendencies, thanks in part to the ardent participation of Eastern Orthodox clergy. Various conferences continued to pursue the ecumenical ideal throughout the 1920s and 1930s, especially in response to Nazi attacks upon German Jews and churches. In 1937 the second World Conference on Life and Work convened in Oxford, England, and drafted the organizational foundations for a World Council of Churches. World War II interrupted this work but at the same time greatly advanced it. The World Council, not yet formally convened, nonetheless acted as an administrative agency to coordinate church activities in occupied Europe; it also abetted the flight of refugees and provided services for prisoners of war. The American Bible Society donated a constant stream of devotional literature, distributed through the World Council. When war ended in Europe, the World Council was preoccupied with reconstruction assistance, working with the United Nations Relief and Rehabilitation Association (UNRRA) and the International Refugee Organization (IRO). World Council members were especially instrumental in rebuilding a denazified German church. In 1948 the World Council convened its first conference as an official body in Amsterdam. Ecumenism had been institutionalized in American Christian life.

Sources:
