

## **A Light to the Nations**



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## The Indian Presence in the Ecumenical Movement in the Twentieth Century

*Edited by Jesudas M. Athyal*

*Foreword by Michael Kinnamon*



**World Council  
of Churches**  
Publications

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Edited by Jesudas M. Athyal

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## FOREWORD

Michael Kinnamon

**It would be a great mistake to think that this book, which is about** leaders in the church in India, is only *for* Indian Christians. Anyone who cares about the unity and mission of the church will find much to reflect on in these engaging studies.

For one thing, the very organization of this volume reminds us that the ecumenical movement, so often reduced to a study of texts or a listing of conferences, is actually embodied in persons who carry a vision of the church united and renewed. In many respects, the ten individuals profiled in this book are very different. Some are Protestant, others Orthodox; some have written prolifically, others very little; three are lay, while three are bishops; one was born in 1874, while another remains in active ministry at the time of this writing. And yet, readers will likely be struck by the commonalities that emerge from these very individual lives.

One overwhelming impression is how attentive these leaders were (and are) to local realities. This volume focuses, for the most part, on figures who have been known for their contributions to global ecumenism. But such global leadership is clearly rooted in their response to a context marked by religious plurality, caste oppression, endemic poverty, and the struggle to build a post-colonial nation. Nearly all of these figures saw a strong connection between

the reformation of the Indian church and the reformation of the wider Indian society.

As this suggests, a study of these Christian leaders poses a challenge to those who would split the ecumenical agenda. Throughout these pages—including the helpful essay by the editor, Dr Jesudas M. Athyal—readers will see an integration of themes: unity *and* mission, social justice *and* evangelism, spirituality *and* social action, education *and* worship. Holiness, for these leaders, does not mean withdrawal from the social revolutions of their day, but engagement in them on the basis of Christian faith. Unity is not pursued at the expense of justice, but as a sign and instrument of God's reign of justice and peace. Perhaps most significantly, interfaith relations is not, for them, an alternative to passionate commitment to Christ, but an authentic expression of it.

In the same way, this book should help lay to rest certain persistent myths. One of these is that the impulse for unity in the Indian church came primarily from Western missionaries. As we see from these chapters, ecumenism in South Asia was a protest, initiated by Indian Christians, against the imported pattern of denominational fragmentation and missionary paternalism. Another (closely related) myth is that the ecumenical movement, at root, is a European phenomenon whose early intellectual leaders all hailed from the North Atlantic. This volume will do much to help set that record straight. Not only the subjects of these chapters, but also the authors, bear witness to how extensively the movement was and is shaped by Christians from the Indian subcontinent.

I will end on a personal note that reinforces the point I want to make in this foreword. While I have taught, lectured, and traveled in India, I am by no means an expert in Indian Christianity. And I found the book compelling. It gave me fresh insights into persons with whom I was familiar, while also introducing me to persons whose work I barely knew. Most significantly, I found while reading it that I was continually inspired by this witness to what God has done in the lives of leaders from another part of the church, even as I was challenged to think in new ways about my commitment to unity and mission in my own setting.

## INTRODUCTION

Jesudas M. Athyal

**The address that V. S. Azariah, the first Indian bishop of the Anglican Communion, delivered at the Edinburgh Mission Conference in 1910 to an overwhelmingly Western audience—“You have given your bodies to be burned. We ask for love, give us FRIENDS”—is often cited as a turning point in the history of the ecumenical movement and hailed as “the first shot against missionary imperialism.”<sup>1</sup> At the other end of the 20th century, Ninan Koshy, in his capacity as the director of the Commission of the Churches on International Affairs (CCIA) of the World Council of Churches (WCC), led successfully the efforts to bring the church in China back to the fellowship of the WCC. He also initiated and led a process which brought together representatives of churches in South Korea and Christians in North Korea for the first time after the Korean War. The period between Azariah and Koshy saw an impressive line of Indian Christian leaders who left an indelible mark on the modern ecumenical movement. This volume will discuss this remarkable period by focusing specifically on some of these leaders.**

It was not merely that some Indians played key roles in ecumenical institutions. There were also historic moments. In 1947 four different church traditions came together to form the Church of South India (CSI), setting in motion a process of organic unity of the churches across the globe. And in

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recognition of the ecumenical significance of the churches of the nations of the non-Western world, the third assembly of the WCC met in New Delhi in 1961. Further, in the 1970s, when civil liberties and democratic rights were curtailed in the wake of the Indian Emergency, the country's ecumenical leaders were key participants in the movement toward freedom and democracy, and their voices reverberated at the WCC Nairobi assembly in 1975. This volume will also attempt to recapture some of these historic moments.

Again, it was not only that there were certain Indian Christian leaders who contributed to the modern ecumenical movement or that some significant ecumenical developments occurred in India, but also that these developments triggered a process that resulted in a remarkable redefining of the core of ecumenism in our times. In the decades that followed Sarah Chakko's becoming the first woman on the presidium of the WCC in 1951, a sharp focus on women's participation in the church and society emerged and has remained at the vanguard of the ecumenical movement ever since. Further, in response to the increased industrialization of Asia since the 1960s and the widening gulf between the urban and rural contexts, Harry F. J. Daniel and others pioneered the concept of Urban Industrial and Rural Mission at the Asian and global levels, a movement that shaped the Christian response to the challenges of the modern society. Again, Masilamani Azariah's forceful representation at the WCC Vancouver assembly on the plight of the marginalized Dalits of India redefined the Programme to Combat Racism (PCR) to include social discrimination everywhere. These movements set in motion a process that led to a fundamental paradigm shift in the ecumenical agenda from a visibly non-Western perspective. In this publication, we will relive some of those moments as well.

This volume discusses people, movements, and institutions that were trendsetters in the ecumenical movement. While the story outlined here by no means claims to be a comprehensive account of the period, the book does explore aspects of the Indian component that were decisive in the history of the movement. This is a chapter of the ecumenical movement that, we believe, has not yet been fully written, and hence the relevance of this publication.

The editor and contributors of this volume are fully conscious of the many "ifs" and "buts" in this narration. Why the focus on India? Why not the other parts of the world? What was the criteria for selecting these ten persons to discuss in detail? Why not others? We wish to clarify at the outset that by no means do we imply that these particular ten persons were more important than others. We had to make a selection, realizing fully the risk involved. But

we believe that during the course of the ecumenical movement, as Christian unity became an important agenda for the church, as justice concerns were recognized as an integral part of unity, and as ecumenism became a truly global movement, these leaders, in their diverse ways, represented important movements and trends in the ecumenical movement in India and Asia. The only person among these ten who is still in our midst at the time of this writing—Ninan Koshy—continues in this great tradition. He can, perhaps, be described as one of the most distinguished ecumenical diplomats in the history of the WCC.

Further, we wish to locate this discussion in the context of the *Asian* presence in the ecumenical movement. Indians were among a galaxy of distinguished Asian ecumenists who led and enriched not only the regional context but provided Asian perspectives to the worldwide movement. In our discussion here, therefore, we stand on the shoulders of D. T. Niles, U. Kyaw Than, T. B. Simatupang, Bishop K. H. Ting, and countless other men and women of God who pioneered the Asian awakening in global Christianity.<sup>2</sup> The Indian contribution was only a part of this larger Asian picture. In the ultimate analysis, therefore, this is not the story of a few individuals; it is the history of the ecumenical movement at the Indian, Asian, and global levels.

The scope of this publication is confined to the mainline Protestant and Orthodox churches and traditions that come broadly within the fellowship of the WCC. This limitation does not disregard other crucial voices in the discussion. Especially following the Second Vatican Council, the Roman Catholic Church—at the Indian, Asian, and global levels—made significant contributions to the ecumenical movement. Of particular relevance is the Catholic Church's work as an active participant in the Faith and Order Commission, in the area of interfaith relations, and the grassroots-level social action and developmental work in the villages and towns, often carried out in an ecumenical spirit. The perspectives of the Evangelical and Pentecostal churches, too, are important. Even though the YWCA and YMCA are integral parts of the ecumenical movement, for logistic reasons, their work could not be included here.<sup>3</sup> While these important angles do not come within the purview of this publication, these remain valuable perspectives that need to be studied in a similar fashion.

In this volume, we deal primarily with ecumenical *thought* and *trends*. Our source of information is, essentially, published literature and ecumenical documents. Biographical notes and incidental details, wherever necessary for such

a discussion, along with references needed for further reading, are generally confined to the notes. This pattern has especially been followed in the essay that follows this introduction. The subsequent chapters are focused on certain individual leaders and, hence, they each have a section that serves as a biographical note; but they, too, go on to discuss the thought and trends that person represents. It needs also to be added that, at least in a few cases, the lack of available literature on an ecumenical leader or movement has limited the scope of the discussion in that area. Even with such difficulties, we are convinced that a viable review of the ecumenical movement is possible only within such a framework.

Further, in the last few decades of the past century, a long line of Indian Christians were active participants in the ecumenical movement, at the local, state, national, and larger levels. There were also many who were leaders in their own denominations or confessions, up to the international levels. Attempts to review the contributions of such a large group posed enormous hazards that went beyond the scope of this study. We, therefore, had to proceed in this discussion with some self-imposed restrictions. The decision was to limit the discussion to individuals who played decisive roles in ecumenical institutions, especially at the international level, and to leaders who produced significant literature in this area or on whose contributions scholars had done considerable work.

It needs to be stressed that this volume deals with the ecumenical history during the *20th century*. As such, the scope of this study is essentially *historical* in nature. However, it is heartening to note that today an able team of Indian leaders is carrying forward the rich legacy of the past century. Apart from the names mentioned in this volume, there are several others. In the field of Christian mission, for instance, Geevarghese Mar Coorilose, Sudipta Singh, and several others are making significant contributions. Mar Coorilose, along with Raj Bharat Patta, Shibi Peter, Sweety Helen, and others also provide new impetus to the Student Christian Movement (SCM). In the area of ecumenical theological education, there is a rich team at the national, Asian, and global levels, including such names as Sathianathan Clarke, Jayakiran Sebastian, Wati Longchar, George Zachariah, and Marina Behera. On the foundation laid down by the ecumenical women of the past century, a new leadership consisting of Monica Melanchthon, Priscilla Singh, Evangeline Anderson-Rajkumar, Jessica Richard, and others are charting new courses in women's participation in church and society. In the area of Dalit theology, too, leaders like Peniel



Jesudason Rufus Rajkumar and Philip Peacock are making signal contributions. Dinesh Suna and Sudipta Singh are active in ecumenical social action. And the list goes on. There is no doubt that the work of these leaders, as well as recent ecumenical trends and movements, too, will, in the future, be studied in a similar fashion.

This volume discusses not only the areas of “strength” the Indian presence represents in the ecumenical movement but also the weaknesses. In all humility, we accept that there are areas of crucial importance where the Indian voices have been muted, disinterested, had little to contribute, or were dominated by others. The first chapter in this book mentions two such areas—the Orthodox perspective and women’s presence. Despite the long history and rich liturgical and social tradition of the Orthodox Church in India, the Orthodox presence in the ecumenical movement has been more pronounced in other contexts, such as eastern Europe and the Middle East. Similarly, even though an array of distinguished Indian women has been present in the ecumenical movement at various stages, their voices have not yet been fully recognized. As the history of the movement in the 21st century is written, let us hope that these, too, will be among our strong points.

## **The Chapters**

The first chapter in this volume is an overview of the Indian presence in the ecumenical movement during the 20th century and shows how the Indian church helped define and advance central elements of the ecumenical vision. The article draws on both key figures and significant events during this period.

The subsequent chapters focus on ten Indian Christians who contributed significantly to the ecumenical process. They span the spectrum of the 20th century, from the first to the last decade. Let me briefly introduce the chapters:

In his article, Roger Hedlund introduces V. S. Azariah as a leader who was a key participant in church unity discussions that culminated in the formation of the Church of South India (CSI). Azariah’s distinctive contribution might well have been his focus on the necessity of an Indian Christian identity, of “church unification as part of a larger program of church indigenization,” meaning, a church of India. In that sense, he was a forerunner of the reality of “world Christianity” as it now is seen, its leadership increasingly from India.

Raj Bharat Patta discusses in his article the life and witness of Augustine Ralla Ram, who is considered the architect of the SCM of India, and how, with his farsightedness and pragmatic missiological characteristics, he played an indispensable role in the ecumenical world. Ralla Ram was an ecumenical visionary in a true sense, which he demonstrated throughout his life in all the capacities that he had served. The SCM and churches in India are indebted to him.

While discussing the contributions of Sarah Chakko, who was the first woman on the presidium of WCC, Aruna Gnanadason points out that Chakko's ecumenical formation was culled out of her life story. Chakko's life and commitment stands as testimony to how Orthodox Christian women have stayed in solidarity with women of other denominations, and with the ecumenical movement, over these decades.

According to David Scott, P. D. Devanandan's fundamental concern was to assist the Indian church to understand Jesus, the Christ, as the key to and fulfillment of God's work in and for the world of Indian religion, culture, and society, and to restate and communicate that truth. The theology of religious pluralism is indeed an ecumenical issue of immense importance and consequence to which Devanandan made a significant contribution.

In his article, K. C. Abraham portrays M. M. Thomas as one of the key architects of the modern ecumenical movement. According to Alf Tergel, Thomas, along with Willem Visser't Hooft, has had the greatest influence on the ecumenical movement. Convinced that the gospel offers the dynamics for Christian engagement in politics, he wrote extensively about the political responsibility of Christians with a clarity and commitment that is rarely matched.

K. M. George discusses the life and message of Paulos Mar Gregorios, who was endowed with a rare form of holistic intelligence and broad intellectual curiosity of a polymath, with a sincere quest for a new and just order of the world and deep compassion for the least ones. As a person who was always tormented by intellectual puzzles and internal spiritual conflicts, Mar Gregorios was not obviously a person who would easily fit into ecclesiastical or ecumenical straitjackets.

Stanley Samartha's personal traits and qualities, according to Wesley Ariarajah, contributed a great deal in removing some of the initial hesitations that people of other religions had about Christians wanting suddenly to engage in dialogue with them. Samartha did much to remove the notion among many

Hindus and Buddhists that dialogue is yet another tool in Christian zeal for evangelism. He argued that we “cannot limit the extent or the mode of God’s redeeming work, because it is as universal as His love which embraces all humankind at all times.” We therefore need to recognize God’s saving work in “areas outside the hedges of the Church.”

In his article, Jayakiran Sebastian argues that for Russell Chandran, faithfulness to the mission mandate involved both an uncompromised commitment to Christ, as well as the openness to the variety and diversity of the revelation of God in the lives of human beings. As a lifelong proponent of interreligious dialogue, Chandran argued that we cannot absolutize our manner of practicing our commitment as the only possibility for others. Rather, in dialogue one has to be open to a combination of God’s self-revelation and human wisdom, leading to the possibility of accepting the diversity of religious faiths as contributing to the beauty and richness of the complex spirituality of the human race, and to the greatness of national as well as global cultures.

George Zachariah, in his article, portrays Poulose Mar Poulose as a prophet who followed Jesus the Christ as his model and, as a leader of SCM, insisted that the ecumenical students should become Christ-centred as they strive to bear witness in our context. Mar Poulose’s life was short, “but he still lives in the ecumenical youth and student movements as they continue to remain *out of control*, challenging the ecumenical mafia and the pharisaic church.”

Ninan Koshy’s main contribution within the Commission of the Churches on International Affairs (CCIA) of the WCC, according to Preman Niles, was in the analyses he had to carry out of critical international situations, in developing theological and conceptual clarity in the area of international affairs, and exploring possibilities for what may be called “ecumenical diplomacy.” Almost from the time he joined the staff of CCIA, and certainly from 1979 onward, Koshy drafted the public statements of the WCC on international affairs. This meant that he was actively involved in policy-making on public issues.

Within this overall context, this volume seeks to capture the essence of the Indian presence in the ecumenical movement in the 20th century. The movement, now in the second decade of a new century, is emerging from a Western and institutional framework into a phase that is more catholic, pluralistic, and decentralized. Accounts such as those outlined in this book, of non-Western origin, are especially relevant at this stage. Even with such exciting prospects, we are acutely conscious of the grave limitations in this storytelling. The accounts that fill these pages are mostly that of the privileged;

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primarily, upper-caste *men*. Also, despite the increased participation of the Orthodox, Catholic, and Evangelical traditions, the ecumenical movement, we need to admit, is still very much an account of the *Protestants*. Further, the voices of several geographical areas in India—notably, North East India, which has experienced the greatest surge in Christianity in the last century—are not duly represented in the ecumenical history of the past century. Until the last decades of the last century, the Dalits and tribals were almost totally absent from the ecumenical process. We have attempted to include in this volume as many “little traditions”—voices from the margins—as possible, but we sincerely hope that as the history of the ecumenical movement in the 21st century is recorded, we will be able to tell a different story that is more just, participatory, and inclusive.