

Translation from German

Konrad Raiser

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Philip Potter and the momentum of the ecumenical movement

Keynote address at the public symposium to mark the 100th anniversary of the birth of Philip Potter, Hamburg, 19 August 2021

Occasionally people complain that the ecumenical movement has largely come to a standstill and lacks the impetus to move. The lament is then often combined with the wistful memory of the “golden” time when Philip Potter was general secretary of the World Council of Churches (WCC) and gave the ecumenical movement its momentum. What were the conditions that were responsible for this momentum and what was the special and distinctive contribution of Philip Potter? This is the question I deal with in the following observations and reflections on the occasion of the commemoration of his 100th birthday, which he would have celebrated today.

Among us today are a number of former colleagues and companions who will share their own memories of their time with Philip. I have been asked to make this first contribution probably because I worked closely with Philip Potter for ten years as deputy general secretary and continued my ties of friendship with him after our time together in the leadership of the WCC. By now, of course, it is also possible to get an impression of Philip’s work in the ecumenical movement through the careful scholarly biography by Michael Jagessar (“Full Life for All: The Work and Theology of Philip A. Potter,” 1997) and the two volumes of collected speeches and essays (in English: “Life in all its Fullness” 1981; and “At Home with God and in the World,” 2013). But his very distinctive charisma could be felt most strongly when he was speaking in person and in dialogue. Often his speeches lost much of their forceful power in printed form.

In preparing this contribution, I had a little difficulty in that I have already prepared several texts with an appreciation of Philip Potter and his work as general secretary. I will mainly refer to his essays or speeches which are now available in German. From his wide-ranging legacy, I will pick out some of the aspects that are particularly important to me today.

A major reason for the momentum that Philip gave to the ecumenical movement lay in his background and the way that he had been brought up before he came into contact with the ecumenical movement. Following his speech as a youth delegate at the first assembly of the WCC in Amsterdam, he became one of the first people from the churches and cultures of the global South to help shape the ecumenical movement. It is true that there were important and influential representatives from the churches in Asia, especially India and China, very early on; and that in 1996 the so-called Third World was represented for the first time on something that approached an equal footing at the Geneva Conference on Church and Society, leading to the election of Dr M.M. Thomas from India as moderator of the central committee after the Uppsala Assembly [in 1968]. But Philip was the first general secretary of the WCC from one of the churches of the South and therefore embodied in his person the “change of perspective” in the work of the WCC – and that would be later be much discussed – from an agenda driven by the issues and expectations of the historic churches in Europe and North America to the experiences and agenda of the churches in Asia, Africa and Latin America, as well as those from the Pacific and the Caribbean.

At the end of a symposium on “Cultures in Dialogue”, organized in 1994 to mark his departure from the leadership of the WCC, he said of his origins: “I happen to come from an area where probably the earliest, intensive and somewhat violent meeting of cultures took place. I contain in my own self many cultures, from Mongolian (which the Caribs were) all the way to Africa, with Europe in between. I contain within me oppressed and oppressors, white and black and yellow. Therefore, this dialogue of cultures has been going on inside me all my life. It has not been difficult for me to be conscious of both the tensions and the marvellous privilege of sharing so much of humanity. ... I have not seen the meeting of cultures as a threat but as a promise and a joy.”¹

Besides his cultural and geographical origins in the small Caribbean island of Dominica, one of the first points of contact of Columbus in the “New World”, and thus a critical context for the origins of colonialism and racism/slavery, his religious background also predestined him for later ecumenical commitment: he grew up with

¹ *Cultures in Dialogue: Documents from a Symposium in Honour of Philip A. Potter, Switzerland, October 3–7, 1984* (Geneva: WCC, 1985).

a devout Methodist mother and a Roman Catholic father, or rather grandparents, since his father was largely absent. For him, the inclusive Protestant Methodist tradition of Anglicanism, Lutheranism, and Moravian Pietism merged with his respect for the breadth of Catholic ecclesiality that was represented by the cathedral in Roseau. Even though he first worked as a Methodist missionary in Haiti and later for the Methodist Missionary Society in West Africa, he lacked any inclination toward denominational separatism.

And still another early influence had a long-term effect, namely his initial legal training in a lawyer's chambers and his assignment as a legal assistant to the Attorney General of Dominica, followed by his theological studies in Jamaica and England with a focus on biblical theology and biblical languages. His training in the handling of legal issues enabled him to deal skillfully with complex situations and to develop realistic structural frameworks and strategic perspectives. A passion for the biblical languages, which he gained early on, made him a master of bringing to life the narrative biblical theology in which all Christian traditions are ultimately linked together. He combined these two influences with a keen interest in historical conditions, in terms both of church history, not least the history of the early church, and of political, economic, and social history.

All these threads intertwined to form what was an almost self-evident interest in ecumenism. Soon after beginning his theological studies in April 1944, he joined the Student Christian Movement (SCM) in Jamaica; he became its study secretary and the following year was then elected secretary of the Jamaica Youth Movement. After moving to London in 1947 to complete his studies, he was soon delegated by the SCM of Jamaica as its representative to the World Conference of Christian Youth held in Oslo in July 1947 under the theme "Jesus Christ is Lord." Taking part in this youth conference was apparently a turning point in Philip's life. He even spoke of a "conversion experience"; in any case, it was here that he became aware of the true meaning of the ecumenical movement.² The following year, after successfully completing his studies, he attended the founding assembly of the WCC in Amsterdam as a youth delegate and was chosen as a speaker to present the "message of youth." Here he was a self-confident representative of the ecumenical

² See Michael Jagessar, *Full Life for All: The Work and Theology of Philip A. Potter* (Zoetermeer: Boekencentrum, 1997), 50.

and missionary tradition with its “crusader spirit” founded decades earlier by the World Student Christian Federation, the Young Men’s Christian Association and the World Federation of YWCAs, emphasizing the evangelization of the young generation as a “huge task” for the churches. After the assembly decided to establish a youth department, Philip was soon appointed to the relevant committee and became a staff member of the department after the WCC’s second assembly in Evanston in 1954. After returning to London from Amsterdam, he took on the role of Overseas Missionary Secretary of the British SCM for two years from 1948-1950 before being sent by the Methodist Missionary Society as a missionary to Haiti for four years until 1954

II

Philip Potter was attracted to the ecumenical movement because of his ecclesial and theological orientation toward the missionary understanding of Christianity. This was a background he shared with many of the first generation of ecumenical leaders, such as J.H. Oldham and John R. Mott, organizers of the Edinburgh World Missionary Conference [in 1910] and founders of the International Missionary Council in 1921, the year of Philip’s birth. In contrast to these predecessors, however, who were influenced by the European/American understanding of mission, his approach to the understanding and practice of mission and evangelization had developed through active participation in the life of a self-confident “young church” that had emerged from European missionary activity. It was clear to him very early on that there was only one missionary mandate of the Church in “all six continents” and that the movement of mission ultimately comes from God and is not an activity of churches from traditionally Christian countries.

The slogan John R. Mott had given to the Christian student movement as well as to the missionary movement was aimed at “the evangelization of the world in this generation.” The focus was not on the churches but on the world, which was to be “conquered” for the lordship of Christ and for the rule of the kingdom of God. It is true that Philip was increasingly critical of the understanding of mission as a “crusade,” something shaped by the colonial tradition. But looking to the world as the space for God’s work and the conviction that the aim of mission transcends the awakening of personal faith and the founding of Christian congregations toward the eschatological promise of the transformation of the world were the foundations of his work, first

within the framework of the Methodist Mission Society and then in his increasing participation in the ecumenical movement.

The orientation to the world that was characteristic of the missionary movement had also been carried over to the ecumenical movement and the way that Philip dealt with the perspective of “ecumenism.” In the fourth meeting of the WCC central committee after the founding assembly in Amsterdam, the committee felt compelled in Rolle 1951 to take a stand on the relationship between mission and the church. This statement said: “We would especially draw attention to the recent confusion in the use of the word ‘ecumenical.’ It is important to insist that this word, which comes from the Greek word for the whole inhabited earth, is properly used to describe everything that relates to the whole task of the whole Church to bring the Gospel to the whole world. It therefore covers equally the missionary movement and the movement towards unity, and must not be used to describe the latter in contradistinction to the former.”³

Because his impression that the use of the term “ecumenical” to refer primarily to the search for the unity of the church had begun to prevail in the ecumenical discussion, Philip Potter very consciously took up this terminological issue again at the beginning of his mandate as general secretary. Thus, in a speech in Hamburg in 1971 on the occasion of the award of an honorary doctorate from the university’s faculty of theology, he spoke about “The Third World in the Ecumenical Movement.” Referring to the influence of Third World representatives on ecumenical discussion, he said: “Today we are on the threshold of a new era when the ecumenical movement is becoming more truly worldwide in terms of participation, of the issues being faced, and the methods of thinking and expression. The Third World, or more correctly the two-thirds world, has a significant role to play in this movement, as they have tried to do in the past. The Third World has contributed greatly toward enlarging the understanding of the ecumenical movement from the early view of cooperation toward unity to one of renewal in mission for unity and to unity for more effective mission. More recently, the immensely complex problems of social and racial injustice, of development and peace have forcibly reminded us that ‘ecumenical’ rightly understood is about ‘the whole inhabited earth,’ the world of men, of cultures,

³ “The Calling of the Church to Mission and Unity,” *Ecumenical Review* 41:1 (1951), 68.

religions, social and political structures. These are the concerns of the ecumenical movement and in a new and urgent way.”⁴

In his first report as general secretary to the WCC central committee in Geneva in 1973, he echoed these programmatic statements about the widening of the nature and scope of the ecumenical movement, stating: “Even more important is a clearer understanding of ‘ecumenical’ as referring not only to the coming and being together of churches, but more biblically to ‘the whole inhabited earth’ of men and women struggling to become what they were intended to be in the purpose of God. As the Psalmist affirms, in a liturgical setting ‘The earth is the Lord’s and all that is in it, the world (*oikoumene*) and they who dwell therein’ (Ps.24:1) The ecumenical movement is thus seen to be wherever Christians and others are one way or another seeking to work for the unity of mankind.”⁵

These basic orientations determined Philip’s work as general secretary and beyond, and they run through almost all his speeches and contributions up to his final report to the WCC assembly in Vancouver in 1993. He is concerned with God’s *oikoumene*, which embraces not only the churches but all of humanity and creation. Similar to the realization in the mission movement that mission in the sense of the *Missio Dei* denotes God’s action of mission and only secondarily an action of the church, Philip emphasized “that *the ecumenical movement is the triune God’s, not ours.*”⁶ It is God’s gift to the Church and tests our faith, especially with regard to our trust in “God’s plan (*oikonomia*) for the fullness of time to unite all things in Christ, things in heaven and things on earth” (Eph. 1:10). In a speech in 2001 on the occasion of the award of an honorary doctorate by the University of Vienna, he spoke about “justice in a globalized world” and, in addressing the question of the path towards justice, drew on the biblical concept of “God’s economy” as unfolded in the Letter to the Ephesians. “God’s economy is that justice and peace should become incarnate among human beings and that creation be cared for and preserved to be at the service of all. That is why we use the word *oikoumene*, ecumenical, to describe the

⁴ Philip Potter, “The Third World in the Ecumenical Movement,” in *At Home with God and in the World: A Philip Potter Reader*, ed. Andrea Fröchtling et al. (Geneva: WCC Publications, 2013), 180–81

⁵ Philip Potter, “Report of the General Secretary,” *Ecumenical Review* 25:4 (1973), 416–17.

⁶ *Ibid.* 417, (emphasis in original).

movement in which the churches are seeking to make God's economy known and effective in our world.”⁷

Ultimately, Philip's conviction about the prophetic mission of the WCC was rooted also rooted in this eschatological interpretation of the existence of the ecumenical movement. In his basic article on this question, which he wrote in 1978 as a contribution to a commemorative publication for the then EKD council president, Bishop Helmut Class, he explicitly referred to the affirmations from the letter to the Ephesians mentioned above, stating: “Prophecy therefore aims at the renewal and unity of all humanity in Christ, and it is an indispensable part of the mission and proclamation of the church.”⁸ This eschatological orientation underlines the dynamic process character of the ecumenical movement. Philip repeatedly used the image of the pilgrimage in this context, a journey that inevitably leads into conflict and through the desert. In his report to the Vancouver assembly he stated: “There is a profound sense in which the Church is by its very nature always in the wilderness on its pilgrim way to the City of God or, as the Letter to the Hebrews puts it, to the world (*oikoumene*) to come (2:5). The Church is the people of God, created and consecrated through the Exodus and the death and resurrection of Christ. It is called to participate in the sufferings of Christ for the salvation of our broken, divided world.”⁹

III

Whenever Philip Potter spoke about the beginnings of his ecumenical commitment, he mentioned the 2nd Ecumenical Youth Conference held in Oslo in 1947. The experience, as already mentioned, was like a conversion experience for him. Here he had become aware of the true meaning of the ecumenical movement.

At various times, such as in the Alex Wood Memorial Lecture in London in 1974 at the invitation of the International Fellowship of Reconciliation, he mentioned that the decisive impetus came from meeting the young Czech chairperson of his working group, who was also part of the conference steering committee. When, at the end of the conference, five participants from different backgrounds were selected to speak

⁷ Philip Potter, “Justice in a Globalized World,” in Fröchtling et al., *At Home with God and in the World*, 149.

⁸ “Der prophetische Auftrag des Ökumenischen Rates der Kirchen in biblischer Perspektive,” in “. . . damit Du das Leben wählst”, ed. Andrea Fröchtling et al. (Göttingen: Edition Ruprecht, 2011), 111f.

⁹ „A House of Living Stones,” in Fröchtling et al., *At Home with God and in the World*, 216.

at the conference, she proposed that Philip be one of them. He then chose as the motto for his speech the sentence: “To confess Jesus Christ as Lord is to live not by the love of power but by the power of love.”¹⁰ The sentence, he said, had a double significance for him. As a member of a people who had suffered from the “naked exercise of power,” he had come to believe, based in his Christian faith, that “only the power of love could heal the wounds of the past.”¹¹ Thus, in the “horrible years of the 1930s, I had chosen the pacifist option.”¹² Moreover, the sentence expressed his “conversion experience”: “At that meeting I had been radically turned, away from myself and my life history in the Caribbean, toward my fellow human beings of every race and nation and therefore toward devoting my life to the enthronement of Jesus Christ as Lord – and that meant for me the enthronement of love. My consciousness was awakened to the true meaning of the ecumenical movement.”¹³

In his Alex Wood address his intention was to expound on the theme “The love of power and the power of love” in the context of the ecumenical movement. Many who worked with him knew that this pithy play on words was of fundamental importance to him. But I, too, only understood through reading his London speech that here we come to the core of Philip’s fundamental self-commitment to a non-violent, ecumenical way of life characterized by dialogue. This origin of his prophetic commitment to justice and peace remained hidden particularly from his critics.

At the beginning of his address, he takes up the various explanations of the literal sense of the word “ecumenical” already mentioned several times. But here he expands the biblical reference beyond Psalm 24 and sets out, for example in reference to the verse in the gospel of Matthew: “And this Gospel of the Kingdom will be proclaimed throughout the earth (*oikoumene*) as a testimony to all nations, and then the end will come” (Matt. 24:14). In these and other passages, the challenge is issued to the Roman Emperor and all who exercise power over human beings.” For: “The world belongs to the Lord, not to a Roman Emperor or any human power . . . The love of power, as displayed by the Greek and Roman Empires, was opposed by the power of love as revealed in God’s action in history through the people of Israel

¹⁰ Philip Potter, “The Love of Power or the Power of Love,” in Fröchtling et al., *At Home with God and in the World*, 91.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Ibid.

and supremely in Jesus Christ.”¹⁴ Using the literal meaning of *polis* and *urbs*, he explained that the exercise of political power and dominion is based on the establishment of clear divisions and demarcations. “It was in the midst of this principle of exclusion that Christ came preaching the Gospel of the Kingdom of God, that power of love which includes all men and all things, which breaks through the barriers of separation and exclusiveness. The *oikoumene*, the whole inhabited earth, is the sphere of God’s Reign, and his is the reign of love, the re-uniting of humanity from separation, from apartheid.”¹⁵ And he continued: “The ecumenical movement is therefore God’s call [his *oikonomia*] to us to become participants in his purpose of bringing the whole *oikoumene* under his power of love. No human being, nothing that belongs to human life, is excluded from his purpose. God has in Christ broken the separation by assuming our humanity and reconciling us to himself and to each other by his blood. That is the central reality of our faith. The ecumenical movement is, therefore, the testing ground of our faith.”¹⁶ And this, Philip believed, is why the WCC, as an expression of the ecumenical movement, was engaged in the various struggles about social justice and human rights. This inevitably brings controversy; but the WCC should not avoid it. The ecumenical movement, he said “will cease to be controversial only if it ceases to move. I am glad to report that I see no such prospect in view!”¹⁷

With this we have really said all that needs to be said. But for Philip, everything that has been said or summarized so far is only the framework for his penetrating reflection on human coexistence caught between power and love. As a consequence of his conversion experience in Oslo, he had consecrated his life to the lordship of Jesus Christ as Lord and thus placed it under the dominion of love. What does it mean to entrust one’s life entirely to this “power of love” as it has taken human form in Jesus Christ?

It means first of all to perceive power, in contrast to domination over people, as a relational reality, as the ability to bring the coexistence and action of people to creative development. The energy hidden in power is love. Here, Philip quotes Paul Tillich, who spoke of love as being “the ultimate power of union, the ultimate victory

¹⁴ Ibid. 92

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Ibid., 157

¹⁷ Ibid., 93

over separation.” This active power of love has its origin in God. “God is love because he has deployed his power in his Son Jesus Christ to remove the obstacles which separate us from him, the ground of our being, and from other human beings, and this means life. And this love was manifest in that Christ laid down his life for us (John 3:16). Receiving his love and life, we are given his Spirit, his power, which both unites us to him through the acknowledgment of our fellowship with his Son and impels us to break down our separation from one another. God’s love of us and our returning love of him propel us to our fellows, to a political life, to the exercise of power.”¹⁸

Against the background of this s powerful biblical and theological meditation on the power of love, Philip then turned his attention to the tragic realities in the world, such as South Africa or the Middle East, all of which represent a denial of the power of love. They require us to “live the power of love in the last resort.”¹⁹ He therefore concludes his speech by pointing to “three elements in the power of love in action – listening, giving, and forgiving.”²⁰ They describe at the same time what I previously called Philip’s self-commitment to a non-violent, ecumenical way of life characterized by dialogue.

The willingness to *listen* is the elementary prerequisite for a dialogical relationship in which the other is perceived as an independent subject, as a person with whom we share life. Philip was not only a person who lived in constant dialogue with others, but he opened up a new depth dimension to ecumenical dialogue. He repeatedly drew explicitly on Martin Buber in his characterization of dialogue as “an encounter of life with life, a relationship between persons in openness and mutual respect from the depths of their existence.”²¹ In his address in London, he mentioned that he had deliberately refrained from joining a pacifist organization with his basic pacifist convictions. He feared becoming so militant in his convictions “that I lose the capacity to listen to, to stand beside, to enter deeply into the agonies of those who have taken a different position to myself in pursuit of the same goal of justice.”²² Listening therefore also includes the willingness to endure contradictions and differences and

¹⁸ Ibid., 96

¹⁹ Ibid., 162

²⁰ Ibid., 100

²¹ Philip Potter, “Erfahrung Gottes im Dialog zwischen den Kulturen,” in *Heute von Gott reden*, ed. von Martin Hengel et al. (Munich: Chr. Kaiser, 1977), 139

²² Potter, “The Love of Power,” 99.

to learn through them. In this way, people's strengths can be mobilized for new, changed conditions. They are signs of the power of love in action.

The willingness to *give* is obviously a manifestation of the power of love to overcome separation. But giving "is of no value, unless it is part of that listening, learning, sharing attitude" that had just been just mentioned.²³ "Giving is without power if we are not prepared to receive." Its deepest expression is found in the self-giving of Jesus. "It is in the weakness of self-giving that the power of love can release the healing, reconciling love of God."²⁴

"*Forgiving* is the most searching test of the power of love. 'Power' as the capacity to do something new, unexpected, creative, as part of our inescapable relations with others, and 'love' as self-giving for others, are most signally manifest in forgiving."²⁵ In a powerful and moving account of his experience of racial exclusion and his inner struggle against the tendency to despise white people, he advances to the perception of forgiveness as a manifestation of the power of love to welcome the unacceptable in ourselves and others, to overcome the divisiveness of ourselves and others, and so create reconciliation. If "we have learned to listen and to give, we too are identified with him [i.e. Jesus] in his groan of separation from God. Thus and only thus can we be forgiven, released again and again from our separation from God and from each other, and made anew in the power of his risen life to be reconciled and enlisted in his reconciling work . . . Thus forgiveness gives us the possibility of starting afresh and beginning something new . . . That is what I learned from my Czech friend at Oslo in 1947 and which converted me to seek the reunion of the *oikoumene*, human beings of every race, nation and culture."²⁶

And this power of love that overcomes divisions must be tested out in political action. Repeatedly, as in the speech in London, Philip referred to the prophetic vision of the new city with which the Book of Revelation concludes, and "whose foundations are adorned with all the varied richness of creation. Its gates are never shut, and all the wealth and splendor of the nations in all their variety are brought into it. No more is the *oikoumene* divided by closed walls. The very leaves of the trees are for the

²³ Ibid., 165

²⁴ Ibid., 100

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ Ibid., 101–102.

healing of broken humanity (Rev. 21–22).”²⁷ This prophetic vision is the source of the momentum that Philip imparted to the ecumenical movement in his political and spiritual and theological work.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 102.