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Editorial: Ecumenism in Times of Conflict and War

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This issue of *Exchange* addresses ecumenism in times of conflict and war at a time when defining historical developments take place in Europe with the war between Ukraine and Russia, as well as in the Middle East with the war between Israel and Gaza. Common to both wars are the humanitarian catastrophe for civilians, the loss of lives of thousands, and the loss of hope for a better future for millions. Historical experiences and reflections on the role of churches and ecclesial organizations in the development of ecumenism in times of conflict and war might help us think more clearly about the role of churches and the potential of ecumenism. It might also help us act more strategically in the contemporary situation where war – once again – defines the lives and futures of innocent civilians.

The four articles in this volume are reworked presentations from the Nordic Institute for Mission Studies and Ecumenics (NIME) annual general meeting and symposium in March 2023 at Lund University, Sweden. The four authors were the main presenters at the symposium entitled "Ecumenism in Times of Conflict and War: Historical and Contemporary Experiences and Reflections."

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The reason for choosing this theme was that the global missionary movement and modern ecumenism emerged in a world of conflict and war. There was a clear stance against the militarism and totalitarianism in the movement between the two world wars. After the end of the Second World War and as part of an increasingly globalized world, the ecumenical movement argued that 'yes' to life means 'no' to war and its devastations, and that 'yes' to life means saying 'no' to poverty and humiliations. The vision was that there is no genuine affirmation of life in this world without a struggle against life's negations. With the symposium we wanted to ask: What is the effect of 'ecumenism in conflict'? Can it still inspire and inform our missiological and ecumenical thinking today in our current striving for peace and justice? The articles in this volume of *Exchange* offers four different perspectives on the role of ecumenism in conflict, drawing on four different historical and contemporary cases, and offer an inspiration for how contemporary missiological and ecumenical thinking might serve as point of navigation in times of crises.

The articles in this issue demonstrate that growth of ecumenism in times of crises is not limited to the 20th century European context but can be found in African and Asian contexts as well. Furthermore, our own European experience itself shows the difference which alternative responses from churches in times of crises can do. The First World War and the Second World War were different not only in historical circumstances but also in the different consequences these two wars had on the development of ecumenism in a Europe in conflict and war, and the influence of the ecumenical movement in post-war Europe and globally during the cold war.

At the end of the First World War, in November 1918, the German Kaiser Wilhelm II abdicated and was granted asylum in the neutral Netherlands. In 1919 the treaty of Versailles was signed, a treaty with the 'war guilt clause' forced the new Weimar Republic to accept complete responsibility for the war. The economic costs and loss of land were enormous, and many Germans considered the treaty dictated unfairness and injustice. The end of First World War was accompanied by humanitarian crises in all the affected countries. Millions were dead, and millions more were wounded, homeless and traumatized. In the last months of the war, the Spanish Flu took a huge toll on civilians. Ethnic and religious minorities were pressured not least in Russia after the collapse of the Tsarist Russia where the new Bolshevik regime was leading ethnic cleansings after the revolution in 1917. Also, the collapse of Austria-Hungary and the Ottoman Empire led to emergence of a number of new nation states and streams of refugees across Europe and the Middle East, further ethnic cleansings, redistribution of lands and borders, and birth of new states. The churches responded with relief work and refugee work. This work was made possible by

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personal relationships between centrally placed clerical and lay persons, but notably without establishment of ecumenical organizations.

The end of Second World War was totally different for the subsequent ecumenical development. Again, the humanitarian crises were comparable with the First World War with millions of wounded, homeless and traumatized refugees across countries. The majority of Lutherans in Europe were Germans, and most of the European Lutheran churches were passive bystanders to the rising Nazi political development in Germany. Few European Lutheran churches had supported the allied forces during the war, and the result was a deep split and suspicion between Lutheran churches in Europe. For especially American Lutherans it became clear that the split between churches could not be overcome unless the churches themselves reached out and a reconciliation process between them was initiated. The key challenge would be the German Lutheran churches' acknowledgement of responsibility for the sufferings caused by Nazi-Germany for peoples and countries of Europe including for Germany itself. But this acknowledgement would also be the key to reconciliation between Lutherans, as was argued by the American Lutheran theologian Stewart Winfield Herman.[1] Distancing themselves from Nazism, antisemitism and racial thinking was necessary for German Lutheran churches. This became a precondition for the immediate relief to German refugees through European churches and for the starting reconciliation between Lutheran churches inside and outside of Germany. Concretely this was expressed in the *Stuttgarter Schuldbekennetnis*[2] from fall 1945, composed by the German pastor and church leader Martin Niemöller and signed by a number of the leaders from the so-called *Bekenntniskirchen*. Thus, the precondition for solidarity was acknowledgement of guilt and forgiveness. This declaration became the signal for reconciliation and a catalyst for the emergence of the new ecumenical movement, rising from the ashes of WWII. It engendered a fresh spiritual climate and a transformed social psychology, providing a fertile ground for the formation of new relationships.

The *Stuttgarter Schulderkentniss* made possible the relief engagement of American and European churches in the refugee crises in Germany and in the respective European countries. The postwar international solidarity manifested itself in increasingly international diakonia. Again, personal relations and knowledge between key actors gave the diaconal action a personal and spiritual character, and international diakonia increasingly became a way to

1 Schjørring, "Flygtningepolitik," 58.

2 The text can be found here: https://www.elk-wue.de/fileadmin/Downloads/Glauben/Geistliches/Bekenntnisse/Der_Wortlaut_der_Stuttgarter_Schulderklaerung.pdf.

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manifest God's saving action. Extending the diakonia to all of Europe gave substance to the idea that diakonia was a Christian contribution to building of common society, thus corresponding to the vision of the Life and Work movement. After the Second World War, the vision for re-Christianizing of Europe thus expressed itself in the churches' involvement in international diakonia in post-war Europe.

In Denmark, the newly formed Church Service for Refugees started operating in 1945. It was a joint – ecumenical – initiative of Protestant and Catholic, Danish and German, pastors. The target group was 250,000 German refugees in Denmark and activities included relief, worship, counseling, religious education, and leisure activities. There was much internal resistance in Danish society and in the Lutheran Church that Denmark had any obligation towards these refugees. However, the pastors involved in the early work argued differently, publishing a letter in June 1945 to Danish churches and society at large where they explained their actions theologically and ethically:

> We fought Nazism because it would not recognize the fellow human being in the Jew. In the same way, we will fight the new Nazism which fails to recognize the fellow human being in the German.[3]

The new self-awareness and willingness to self-critique characterized not only the German but also other European churches after the end of the Second World War, and in this process an alternative vision for the world emerged – an ecumenical vision. The ecumenical vision pointed to a world beyond the militarization and political totalitarianism of both West and East, beyond capitalism, fascism, and socialism, and their common disrespect for sovereign societies and free individuals. The 'third way' of ecumenism emphasized pacifism, anti-racism, unity in mission, and common faith. These experiences of ecumenical international cooperation and values underlies the organizational formation of the Lutheran World Federation in 1947, the World Council of Churches in 1948, and the Conference of European Churches in 1959. And with this, the main difference between the situation after the First and the Second World War in terms of ecumenism becomes clear. The humanitarian crises were comparable but the outcome in terms of a shared ecumenical vision and new ecumenical institutions was something new. Both the Life and Work as well as Faith and Order movements predates the Second World War, but the point here is that the ideological and practical foundation for ecumenical organizations *as* organizations was the experiences of the war and the cooperation

3 Translated from a public letter by the Church Service for Refugees, June 1945.

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after the war. We believe that the key to understand this shift in ecumenical tempers is the *Stuttgarter Schuldbekenntnis*. Without the experience of the acknowledgement of guilt – forgiveness – solidarity – the new ecumenical paradigm would not have been possible and the split between churches too deep. Without the emerging institutions, the ideas would not have been communicated and accepted as readily as they did.

This ecumenical paradigm and the nexus of international diakonia and ecumenical theological vision expanded as new humanitarian crises emerged in Palestine (1948) and Hong Kong (1948), followed by Korea in 1953 and later Biafra in 1967–1970. The newly established model for international diakonia came to be tested in all these crises, and cooperation between churches firmly established itself against the backdrop of these conflicts and the crises of the Second World War in Europe. It emerged as a response to the churches' attempt to reconcile with themselves, their societies, and the gospel. This effort culminated in the formation of the ecumenical movement and its vision for a joyfully different world. Today, the pursuit of peace and justice remains at the forefront of the ecumenical movement's mission. Contemporary conflicts and crises extend beyond traditional geopolitical boundaries, manifesting themselves not only between nations but also within nations and communities. Divisions arise among groups with differing cultural, economic, or ideological interests. Additionally, a heightened awareness of the intersectional nature of suffering and discrimination has emerged, accentuated by pandemics and climate crises. In response to these multifaceted challenges, the ecumenical movement – comprising the World Council of Churches, its partner churches, and numerous ecumenical organizations – engages in a diverse range of programs. These initiatives span the realms of peacebuilding, education, equality, climate action, and interreligious relations. Through collaborative efforts, they strive to address the complexities of our contemporary world and contribute to the advancement of a more just and harmonious global society.

In her article, Sara Gehlin investigates two ecumenically important conferences – Stockholm 1925 and Lund 1952 – and brings to attention voices of ecumenical pioneers. Their message for peace in a world of conflict and war stands in contrast to other ecclesial voices who just a few years before the conference had blessed violent action, nationalism, and cannon-thunder on the political and military battlefields. Both conferences convey the same common message: overcoming pride, confessing guilt, expressing regret and walking the heavy way of conversion, that churches may break free of the destructive cycle of violence and militarism which societies had been caught up in during the wars. Also the more constructive understanding of peace as truth, righteousness, and love is emphasized in the conference discussions and

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proceedings, and the ecumenically important 'Lund Principle' is formulated: act together in all matters except those in which deep differences of conviction compels to act separately. Thus, the ecumenical movement and the ecumenical thinking became resources in the peacebuilding of churches as well as secular society.

In his contribution, Peter-Ben Smit focuses on the soteriology and ecclesiology of the Philippine Independent Church, the *Iglesia Filipina Independiente* (IFI), in the first part of the 20th century. The IFI was engaged in the striving for political independence, and the salvation amounted to – soteriology – and the understanding of the nature of the church – ecclesiology – were key ingredients in shaping the spiritual as well as the political profile of the church. However, rather than arguing for revolt against colonial administration a sense of belief in freedom as a key dimension in salvation became important liturgically as well as politically in its vision for freedom of church and freedom of nation.

In the third article, Reggie Nel investigates the role of ecumenism and missiology in violent conflict from an African postcolonial perspective. The war in Ukraine affects not only Europe but also the Global South although in a different manner. Nel presents an analysis of the debate between two South African theologians, Tinyiko Maluleke and Emmanuel Katongole, on the role of African churches and theology in face of the traumas of war. With the recent development of the BRICS countries and the inclusion of Ethiopia, a shift appears to be taking place from a Western orientation and value set. Instead, there is an emerging trend towards a more self-conscious and critical, postcolonial approach to Western theology and Eurocentrism.

The fourth and concluding article by Dimitrios Keramidas focuses on the inter-Orthodox and ecumenical discussions on a common stance to war in general and the war between Russia and Ukraine in particular. Keramidas argues that the politicization of the ecumenical movement should be balanced and corrected by the ecclesiological principle of Christian witness. The traditional Orthodox model of a 'symphony' between state and church has been challenged and proven impotent in face with the war in Ukraine when Orthodox churches did not immediately condemn the Russian military invasion of Ukrainian territory. In contrast to viewing the church as an instrument of the state, the perspective that sees the church as a sacrament and an anticipation of the Kingdom urges leaders, theologians, and believers to actively strive for peace. In other words, being rooted in ecclesiology and emphasizing synodality serves as an antidote to nationalistic and ethnophilistic tendencies in contemporary theology.

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The theological idea of the Kingdom of God as depicted in the New Testament writings, might be described with the somewhat paradoxical notion of 'already, not yet'. In essence, it suggests that the Kingdom is both present but simultaneously not fully realized. It is a dynamic state that can be sensed and prefigured, leaving an imprint from the future upon the present. This theme of 'already, not yet' threads through the articles in this volume, delving into the nature of ecumenism as prefiguring a joyfully different life. The discussions explore what the collective celebration and actions of churches can do to bring about this change, even in vastly diverse historical and political circumstances.

We want to thank the Lund Mission Society for economic support for the symposium in March 2023, as well as the presenters who generously agreed to rework their presentations into proper peer reviewed academic articles. We would also like to thank the Centre for Theology and Religious Studies at Lund University for hosting the seminar, and the editorial team at *Exchange* – especially Aron Engberg and Martha Frederiks – for the invitation to publish the papers as well as for their support in the process.

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