Marianne Jehle-Wildberger


The Swiss ecumenist Adolf Keller was a prominent figure in the burgeoning international movement for Christian unity between the two World Wars, yet he is now scarcely known to much of the English-speaking world. In comparison with studies on such as John R. Mott, J. H. Oldham, George Bell, W. A. Visser’t Hooft, William Temple and William Paton, little has been published on him. He does not even feature in the World Council of Churches’ Dictionary of the Ecumenical Movement (2002). This monograph by a Swiss historian is therefore to be welcomed.

Keller was a prodigious scholar and ecumenical activist, a key founder of the Swiss Federation of Protestant Churches in 1920 and, perhaps still more significantly, in 1922 founder and first director of the European Central Bureau for Relief (Inter-Church Aid). Those of us accustomed to think of European reconstruction only in terms of post-World War II do well to be informed how dire was the state of much of Europe and its churches (especially in the East) in the aftermath of 1914–18. The Central Bureau of Relief was Swiss-based but drew in support from many churches abroad and above all from the USA. The bureau served as a crucial bridge between American generosity and social need in Europe and set the pace for much ecumenical relief and development work in later years. Keller’s outstanding ecumenical role in the 1920s was as a transatlantic mediator and not only on the practical level of channelling material aid. He had an acute theological mind, had studied in both Basel and Berlin and saw the need for creative encounter between late nineteenth-century liberal theology and traditional evangelical orthodoxy. He not only seized enthusiastically on Karl Barth’s early dialectical theology but made it his business to interpret it to the English speaking world and by lecturing in Britain and in the USA in the 1920s was Barth’s earliest herald in this direction. What is more, by 1931 he was arguing specifically for Barth’s theology to provide the undergirding of the ecumenical movement as shown by his Der Weg der dialektischen Theologie durch die kirchliche Welt, published in English in 1933 as Karl Barth and Christian Unity. Following the 1925 Stockholm Conference he was an associate secretary of the Life and Work movement, and a close observer of Faith and Order too. In Geneva in the 1930s he founded and led the annual Ecumenical Seminar, fore-runner of the Bossey Ecumenical Institute. His record on Nazi Germany and the German Church Struggle, albeit in the comparative safety of Switzerland, was one of exemplary clarity and conviction in his steadfast support for the
Confessing Church and assistance for refugees from the regime. Following the Second World War and his retirement in the USA (where perhaps his longest-lasting attachments lay) his interests continued to develop and he saw the need to take seriously inter-faith relations as well as Christian ecumenism. In all this, he had an extraordinarily wide ranging intellect embracing culture, philosophy and psychology as well as theology. He was on personal terms not only with Karl Barth but with such as C. G. Jung and Henri Bergson.

Jehle-Wildberger amply demonstrates that Keller played a definitive role in promoting ecumenism in his native Switzerland, in bringing that Swiss ecumenism into wider relationships not least with America, and in being a powerful educator and promoter of the whole ecumenical enterprise. I cannot help but feel, however, that still more should have been expected from this study. In her conclusion (p. 251) she cites a revealing comment from Keller: ‘My entelechy has always been that of the inspirer and pioneer’, together with his remark that it ‘lacked roundedness’. At certain points in the book this sense of incompleteness is reflected rather than, as in the best biographies, probed and analysed. We are not given a really close-up picture of how Keller actually interacted with the organisations he set up and in which he was involved, and with other ecumenical actors. Laudatory tributes to his work by contemporaries are frequently cited, but less often the specific grounds for such appreciation. Towards the end hints are given of tensions in Geneva with, for instance, Visser’t Hooft, first general secretary of the WCC. What is being implied here? Personal clashes of differing temperaments? Generational differences? More deep-seated issues of policy and theology? Or what? We are never really told, nor are we given clear possibilities to explore. Hence the lingering sense of incompleteness, of distantly glimpsed hazy features rather than a properly contoured and coloured landscape. It does not help that the author’s grasp of the overall ecumenical history of the period is itself somewhat uncertain, for example on the actual sequence and inter-connectedness of events in the formation of significant bodies like the World Alliance for Friendship through the Churches, Life and Work, Faith and Order, and the World Council of Churches (the crucially important International Missionary Council, child of Edinburgh 1910, is never mentioned).

The author, gratifyingly, does not indulge in hagiography of her subject. But sometimes her admiring illumination of Keller leads to an unnecessary throwing of shadows onto other characters. It is true that early in the Nazi period Keller was outstandingly accurate in his perception of what was going on in Germany. But to say (p. 166) that in 1933 the American ecumenist Henry Smith Leiper ‘was among those duped’ by the apparent success and idealism of the so-called ‘German Christian’ movement and the status of ‘Reich Bishop’ Müller