CHURCH AND STREAMS: 
TOWARDS A NEW MODEL?

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When church histories catch up with the modern era, it is likely that two currents will be singled out as significant global moves of the Holy Spirit that have changed the face of the Christian world in the twentieth century - the ecumenical movement and the pentecostal-charismatic movements. Both date from the first decade of the century, and both are still major forces in its last decade. But as the 20th century draws to a close, only a minority of Christians are actively committed to both these movements. Rather there is a polarisation between the "ecumenicals" on the one side, who are found within the mainline historic denominations and churches, and the "anti-ecumenicals", who belong to the revivalistic movements (evangelical, pentecostal, charismatic) often coming from denominations or groupings opposed to or suspicious of conciliar ecumenism. In fact, the mainline-ecumenical versus evangelical-charismatic polarisation contains within itself what are really two distinct though related conflicts: (1) that between the "liberal-critical" and the "fundamentalist"; and (2) that between historic church and revivalistic movements. The former is more focused on theological understanding, the latter is more a conflict between historical continuity and sacramental structure on the one hand and an emphasis on immediacy of the Spirit and free association on the other hand.

In this article I want to focus on the second dimension of the ecumenical - revivalist conflict, that between the historic churches and the evangelical-pentecostal-charismatic currents, and in particular on the relationship between the Roman Catholic Church and the revivalist streams. These two blocs often seem to live, think, decide and act as though the other does

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1 The ecumenical movement is normally dated from the world missionary conference at Edinburgh in 1910, and the pentecostal movement from the Azusa Street revival in Los Angeles that began in 1906.
2 This article represents a further development of ideas first examined in my article "Ecumenical Dialogue: The Importance of Dialogue with Evangelicals and Pentecostals" One in Christ XXX/2 (1994) 101-123.
3 This is the aspect of this challenge examined by Mark Ellingsen in his article ‘What is the Point of an Ecumenical-Evangelical Dialogue?’ Mid-Stream 37/2 (1998) 213-229. The need for ecumenical-evangelical interaction had earlier been urged in Ellingsen’s book The Evangelical Movement: Growth, Impact, Controversy, Dialog, Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House, 1988.
not exist. Their common perceptions of each other are negative: the historic churches, particularly the Catholics and the Orthodox, commonly label the revivalistic groupings as “sects”, often using strongly pejorative language in their regard, as for example the “ravenous wolves” of Pope John Paul II’s address to the Latin American episcopate and the negative reaction of the Russian Orthodox to the influx of Western missionaries since the collapse of Soviet Communism. The “sects” are perceived as dangerous, destructive of true religion and piety, a menace to culture and to society, invaders of “our turf”. On the other hand, the evangelicals and pentecostals typically see the historic churches, particularly the Catholic and the Orthodox, as “apostate,” ignorant of the gospel of salvation, in thrall to “spirits of religion,” and hence as major obstacles to revival, spiritual life and biblical faith.

The suspicion and opposition of the evangelical world to the ecumenical movement seems to have intensified since the 1968 Uppsala assembly of the World Council of Churches, seen as the point at which the WCC opted more strongly for political involvement and social transformation at the expense of direct proclamation of the gospel to individuals. Evangelical opposition was no doubt further accentuated by the official entry of the Roman Catholic Church into the ecumenical movement, the consequences of which were becoming apparent around the time of the Uppsala assembly.

This tension/confrontation between the ancient churches and the newer revivalistic streams is serious because it represents sharp opposition and strongly negative attitudes between the largest and most powerful blocs among those who confess the name of Jesus Christ. The Roman Catholic Church and the evangelical-pentecostal-charismatic bodies probably represent the Christian groupings with the greatest influence in the contemporary world. The Catholic-evangelical divide is found in virtually every continent. It is therefore a serious blow to the credibility of the ecumenical movement, which is representing a decreasing percentage of the Christian world and is being opposed by an increasing number of Christians. If there is no constructive encounter between the historic churches and the revivalist streams, and the two sides lapse further into bitter and destructive recriminations, the consequences will be serious. The challenges they pose to each other are great, with a potential either for immense advantages or for great harm.

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5 The Keston Journal, Religion, State and Society, often has well-documented articles on Orthodox attitudes: the June 1998 issue (26/2) contains several articles relating to Orthodox suspicion of Western missionary work in Eastern Europe.