

M.M. Thomas' Contributions to the Worldwide Ecumenical Movement

- *Mathews George Chunakara**

It has been attributed and widely recognised that in the history of the ecumenical movement M.M Thomas belongs to the generation of ecumenical leaders who have shaped not only ecumenical theology but the global ecumenical movement itself. The metamorphosis of the ecumenical thought of M.M Thomas was an outcome of his direct involvement in the ecumenical movement for more than six decades. He made remarkable contributions in the Indian, Asian and global ecumenical movement through various Christian, ecumenical and secular organisations and platforms including the Mar Thoma Youths Union, Student Christian Movement, Mar Thoma Youth League, Youth Christian Council of Action, Inter-religious Student Fellowship, National Christian Council youth forum, World Student Christian Federation, World Ecumenical Youth Assemblies, International Missionary Council, World Council of Churches, East Asia Christian Conference (EACC) now known as the Christian Conference of Asia (CCA) and the Christian Peace Conference.

M.M. Thomas started his international ecumenical journey by the usual route in the years preceding the creation of the WCC: through his leadership in the Indian Student Christian Movement and in the World Student Christian Federation (WSCF). He was on the staff of the WSCF from 1947 to 1949 in Geneva and continued to work for WSCF in various capacities until 1953 operating from India. He was instrumental in preparing the study on 'The Christian in the World Struggle' together with David McCaughey, which became an influential guide to Christian student groups in that period. This study was the first ecumenical response to the "revolutionary changes" resulting from the worldwide political upheaval following the Second World War, and the national independence movements in Asia, Africa and Latin America. His position as a WSCF staff in the Geneva secretariat brought Thomas in contact with leading theologians and ecumenical leaders in Europe and North America allowed him to be part of the discussions of the formation of the World Council of Churches prior to its official founding in 1948.

* *Dr. Mathews George Chunakara currently serves as the General Secretary of the Christian Conference of Asia (CCA). He served the World Council of Churches in Geneva as Asia Secretary (2000-2009) and Director of the Commission of the Churches on International Affairs (2009-2014).*

He gained international recognition for his contribution to the first World Christian Youth Conference held in Oslo in 1947. M.M. was invited the same year to take part in the preparations for the consideration of social and political questions at the first WCC assembly in Amsterdam. He was the only person from the Third World who was part of the preparatory discussions on a sub theme of the Assembly, "The Church and the Disorder of Society". Five years later in 1952, M.M. chaired the second World Christian Youth Conference held in Kottayam, Kerala, India - the first to be convened outside the Western hemisphere. Immediately after the Kottayam Youth Conference, he was invited to be one of the leaders of a WCC-convened study conference in Luknow on the church and social issues in Asia. It was based on the Luknow Study Conference report that Evanston Assembly made a recommendation that the WCC should focus for the next seven years on the social and political questions facing the churches in "developing" countries. When the newly created WCC department on Church and Society launched a six-year programme on "The Common Christian Responsibility towards Areas of Rapid Social Change" in 1955, M.M. was also selected as a member of the Working Committee and he became the staff representative in Asia for this project. At the same time his contributions to the wider ecumenical concepts and principles were demonstrated through the Christian Institute of Studies in Religion and Society (CISRS). At the international Christian Conference on "Rapid Social Change" in Greece in 1959, he and John Bennett of the USA co-chaired the section on "Christian Responsibility in Political Action", producing a report which became a guide for worldwide Christian reflection and action. This kind of a creative work increased M.M.'s responsibilities and role in WCC. He presented the findings of the Rapid Social Change study at the New Delhi Assembly together with Egbert de Vries of the Netherlands.

M.M.'s contributions in shaping WCC's ideological and theological values were evident mainly through his direct involvement in various areas of WCC's programs such as Mission, Church and Society and Inter-religious and secular ideologies. M.M. was directly involved in the preparations for the First Assembly of the WCC in Amsterdam. He was made a consultant for various preparatory meetings of the Assembly. He attended the first Central Committee meeting of WCC held in Whitby, Canada in 1949 as a substitute for Juhanon Mar Thoma Metropolitan. At the Evanston Assembly Thomas spoke on "Christians in the Struggle for a Responsible Society in India". Sunand Sumithra of the faculty of Theology, Religion and Ethics at the Union Biblical Seminary Pune, who made an effort to expound the theology of M.M. Thomas, observes M.M.'s presentation at Evanston was basically in agreement with the understanding that the Church as the servant of the world. Sumithra says, as a layman, Thomas has always emphasised the secular witness of the Church and thus secularity came to stay in his views of ecumenical theology of mission. According to Sumithra, all the elements – "the necessity to express the Christian Faith in secular activities, the idea of participation, the inevitability of common struggles, the criteria of responsibility, human freedom and social justice and the

ideal of secular society – have continued both in Thomas' theology as well as in the theology of WCC".¹

At the International Missionary Council (IMC) meeting held in Achimota, Ghana in 1957-58, M.M was invited as a speaker. In his presentation of a paper on the subject, "The Christian Witness in the Society and Nation", he anchored his thoughts and ideas based on a generalised thematic framework of his presentation at the Evanston Assembly and spelled out what the witness to Christ as redeemer of society and nation means. M.M.'s speech at the Ghana IMC conference was seen as a decisive development in the theology of the WCC, namely a positive evaluation of ideologies and it emphasised plurality as a needed element of the theology of mission, brought the world into Christian mission as its essential part and paved the way towards the ideological interpretation of mission in the years to come.²

At the New Delhi Assembly where the IMC merged with WCC, M.M. gave a major address on the theme "The Challenge to the Churches in the New Nations of Africa and Asia". He articulated his views in his presentation that "Christ is present and active in the world of today, engaged in a continuous dialogue with men and nations, affirming His kingly rule over them through the power of His Law and His Love". M.M also advocated his convictions of a Cosmic Christ. All these ideas and theological convictions M.M spoke of at the New Delhi Assembly were taken up into the Message of the assembly and are counted among the ideological influences in the milestones of the modern ecumenical movement. After the merger of the IMC with WCC in 1961, the newly formed Division of World Mission and Evangelism had its first meeting in Mexico City in 1963. Thomas had spoken at the Mexico meeting on "The World in which We Preach Christ" and he presented the contemporary situation of the world as a revolutionary world. His main thesis out of his concern was about the development of an effective ideology which would do justice to emerging concerns such as the technological revolution, the awakening of the people for social justice, and the resurgence of religions. He was of the opinion at that point, "the search for a new pattern of human society and for an adequate spiritual dynamic for this pattern are realities of the contemporary world which are relevant to the task of defining missions today".³ While emphasising the goal of unity of mankind as a felt need, he emphasised on various efforts to achieve it and said at the Mexico meeting that, ". There is a growing sense of humanity and human solidarity in the world which finds its expression in mutual concern, a sense of participation in the struggles of others for their fundamental rights"⁴

The World Conference on Church and Society organised by the Church and Society department of WCC held in Geneva was influenced by the thinking of M.M. He was the chairman of the Conference and spoke at the Conference on the theme "Modernisation and the Struggle for a New Cultural Ethos", He said at the conference, "that the spiritual dimensions of the contemporary awakening of the people of Asia and Africa, stimulated by the Western impact and their search for a

process of building indigenous cultural formulations for modernisation". The Conference message acknowledged the fact that "as Christians, we are committed to working for the transformation of society".⁵ The report of the Conference underscored that Christian theology must expound and defend the understanding of the "human" as a criterion for judging economic and social change. M.M.'s understanding of society, revolutions and ideology were discussed at the Geneva Conference and subsequently he was appointed as secretary of the Asian Branch of the study series on 'Rapid Social Change'. In that capacity he organised a series of study conferences in India. The Indian contribution to the Study was included in M.M.'s book, 'Christian Participation in Nation Building' which was a summary of a series of meetings he organised in India.

When the impact of the Geneva Church and Society conference significantly influenced the Fourth Assembly of WCC at Uppsala in 1968, it was also due to the contributions of M.M. In his presentation at a special session of the Assembly where he was reporting about the Geneva Church and Society conference, Thomas raised the question: "What does it mean to the life and work of the Church to be relevant in a world of revolutions?". He was of the opinion that a dynamic reinterpretation of the Christian Gospel is needed as traditional interpretation of the Christian doctrines has generally been static. At the Uppsala Assembly M.M. was named an official delegate of the Mar Thoma Church and he was elected the moderator of WCC Central Committee. During the period from 1968-1975 when M.M. was Chairman of the Central Committee of the WCC, his thinking influenced substantially the programmatic emphasis of WCC., It was a known factor that there was a fear among European church leaders that M.M. was watering down the good old European tradition of Christianity. While his contributions and ecumenical social and theological thoughts started influencing and shaping the ecumenical movement many people in international ecumenical circles thought or misunderstood M.M. Thomas. Some of them expressed directly or indirectly the unspoken western anxiety that the leadership of the ecumenical movement may not be safe in the hands of non-European Christians like M.M. Thomas and the then General Secretary of Dr. Philip Potter. There were criticisms from different corners about M.M.'s theological interpretations. The late Metropolitan Paulose Mar Gregorios who was WCC's Associate General Secretary once commented that several critics in international circles thought that M.M. was substituting "Revelation by Revolution". Mar Gregorios further describes how his colleague, Prof. Hans Heinrich Wolf, the then Director of the Ecumenical Institute in Bossey, attacked M.M. in terms of his theological positions. According to Paulose Mar Gregorios, M.M. never absolutised any Revolution, but what Prof. Heinrich Wolf expressed was "merely a sub-liminal fear of the German psyche stemming from some 19th century experiences, making them terribly scared about the word 'Revolution'." What M.M. stood for was full humanisation of the human race -- the development of the awareness of dignity, freedom and responsibility in every human being. So when the Human Rights movement was launched in the middle of the seventies, it was a confirmation of what

M.M. stood for -- the centrality and priority of the human. Mar Gregorios says, "It was a good thing that M.M. was not a systematic theologian. If he were he would have been lost in the labyrinths of methodological precisions and terminological exactitudes which would have made him unreadable."⁶

Subsequently the Western world started admiring the contributions of M.M. to the ecumenical movement and the theological basis and the ideological clarity he was introducing. In this context, Sumithra cites an instance of Western Christianity's recognition of M.M.'s contributions to the ecumenical movement. When M.M. was distinguished for his contribution by the theological faculty of the University of Leiden, Netherlands, with an honorary Doctorate in Theology, Prof. Hendrick Berkhof addressed M.M. and said, "By conferring on you an honorary doctorate in theology, we want to express your great significance as a lay theologian... And as the Chairman of the WCC's Central Committee, in a period when many believed that the ecumenical movement could do without theology, you were and are the man who points to the very centre of our faith and the decisive role of theological reflection. We owe among others particularly to you, that theologians and laymen, and First and Third World, can stay together".⁷

In fact, his leadership as the Moderator of WCC Central Committee was also unparalleled. Norman Goodall noted that "the most significant symbolic change" at WCC's Uppsala Assembly "was the election of an Asian, M.M. Thomas". As the moderator of WCC's Central Committee, Thomas did not limit his responsibility to delivering only a moderator's address at the Central Committee meeting. His theological insights and deep Christian convictions were shared in a more pragmatic way which stimulated the ecumenical movement and helped to address the cardinal social issues as part of the prophetic witness of the Church. A classical example for such a contribution was evident at the World Conference on Salvation Today (1973) organised by the Commission of World Mission and Evangelism of WCC in Bangkok. When he delivered the keynote address at the Bangkok Conference, Thomas's speech loaded with theological exegesis that social justice, physical welfare, political freedom and economic sufficiency form the background against which Salvation in Christ become meaningful in the contemporary context. For M.M, the real unity of the churches is their unity in participating in people's struggles. This is what he said, "a unity of the churches which comes of internal adjustments in the interests of the preservation of common interests is not of much theological value; the unity of the churches is to be realised through their participation in the struggles for the unity of mankind".⁸ In his Moderator's report to the Central Committee meeting at Canterbury in 1969, M.M bluntly stated that "the churches are under divine judgement for their lack of solidarity with men in their struggle". In the Berlin Central Committee meeting he said "it is time for the Church to witness to Christ and His purpose for mankind" and he replaced the confessions of the Church by "participation in the struggles for the humanisation of societies". At the EACC Assembly in Singapore in 1973, he emphasised that the congregations must

spiritually and theologically educate, train and support their laymen, women and youth to respond to the Asian struggle within their secular vocations and through their associations. He added that the pastors and theologians have a large responsibility to sensitise the churches to the ethical demands of the Asian struggle.⁹ He insisted in his speech at the Singapore EACC assembly that the church should get “involved in the movement of the people for power as the path to justice”. He believes in such participation that the Church as a fellowship of forgiven sinners, rejects the identification of “any city of man with the city of God”¹⁰

M.M interpreted his concept of spirituality as a basic issue in these quests, and affirmed that the church has lost its mission if it does not get involved in the struggle of the marginalised people and communities for these goals.: “Here lies the mission of the Church: it is to participate in the movements of human liberation of our time in such a way as to witness to Jesus Christ as the Source, the Judge and Redeemer of the human spirituality and its orientation as it is at work in these movements, and therefore as the Saviour of Man Today”. The Bangkok Conference did not negate the fact that salvation can mean various things to people in various contexts and as such pluralistic approach of mission was a focal point of the Bangkok Conference. This was not digestiveto all Christian groups or churches in those days and precisely for this reason the pluralistic understanding of the Christian mission was strongly criticised by the evangelicals at the Bangkok Conference. However, the Bangkok Conference did influence WCC’s theological and programmatic direction in the following years for which M.M’s contribution was significant. The program unit of Inter-religious dialogue and ideologies came to be recognised as an important aspect of the work of WCC and paved the way for accepting the unity of mankind as a legitimate goal. In fact, M.M advocated the need and importance of “accepting the ideological framework or *ad hoc* political goals”. In his Moderator’s Report to the 1972 Utrecht Central Committee meeting he emphasised the need for common action with other faiths and ideologies.¹¹

WCC’s Fifth Assembly held in Nairobi, where M.M concluded his role as the moderator of the Central Committee, became a landmark and turning point in ecumenical history. The theme of the Nairobi assembly, “Jesus Christ Frees and Unites”, was influenced by the discussions and interpretations of plurality and salvation discussed at the Bangkok Conference. When Nairobi affirmed and accepted the principles of the unity of mankind as a legitimate goal and a shift in emphasis from ecclesiastical ecumenism to secular ecumenism, it was M.M.’s contribution that was substantial in shaping the process of the new direction and goal of the ecumenical movement at that time. In his address at the Nairobi assembly, M.M. shared a vision he developed on Christ centred approach to other religions and the need to shape a theology of dialogue between religions and WCC’s future programmatic involvement. Sunand Sumithra summarised the role of M.M. at the Nairobi assembly and he says: that the idea of unity of all mankind in Christ, the need for a spirituality for combat and the understanding of history as a movement of

the tension between freedom and unity were all Thomas' emphases at Nairobi, and they became the emphases also of the theology of the WCC in the coming years.

M.M. also articulated his ideas and concerns on Christian approaches and responses to revolutions. At the Strasbourg World Conference of the WSCF, M.M. categorically rejected the argument that revolution is a revolt against God by stating that "Jesus who is the lover of my soul is also the Lord of the world (Cosmos) and a pietistic approach has a lopsided understanding of man and Christ". He had addressed the question whether radical and rapid changes in society necessarily involve force and violence. This issue was again brought to the limelight for discussion at the Christian Peace Conference (CPC) Assembly in Prague, Czechoslovakia in 1968. He posits that the concern for the human should be the criterion in strategy of any revolution. M.M.'s theology of revolution was based on the conviction that people's participation as the necessary means to effect change in power structures through any revolution.

M.M.'s interpretations about spirituality gave new insights to the ecumenical movement to sharpen its programmatic involvement and radical action to address the emerging concerns in the world. The ideological underpinning he emphasised on spirituality was another example of his contribution to the worldwide ecumenical movement, especially in the context of the Apartheid in South Africa. He developed the theological and ideological bases which was summarised in an ideological framework he formulated, "Spirituality for Combat". Thomas classified spirituality in three ways: the mystical spirituality which concerns the expression of the union of the believer with God; a second type is the Sadhu kind of spirituality which emphasises not only on the union with God but on the renouncing of the world; and the third he describes is prophetic or incarnational spirituality, whose essence is involvement and sharing in the suffering of others in order to liberate them from their suffering. He had a firm conviction that neither the mystical spirituality of the sacraments, nor the ascetic spirituality of the monks, nor even the incarnational spirituality of sacrificial love is relevant, but a spirituality which struggles and fights. He believed in a spirituality which motivates one to legitimate struggles. A spirituality for combat which gives the very life, the spirit with which to struggle. When WCC was spearheading the campaign to end apartheid in South Africa, the theological and philosophical bases underscored by M.M. gave real impetus for the accompaniment in the struggle against apartheid. Although it was not a smooth road to convince every member of WCC's constituency to be part of this struggle, M.M. greatly contributed to sharpen the ideological and theological positions of WCC and the mobilising support for an international campaign against Apartheid.

M.M.'s contributions in shaping the theological and ideological bases of EACC were evident from the very beginning of its founding. At the first meeting of EACC in Prapat, Indonesia in 1957, he spoke on the theme "The Mission and Its Encounter with the Asian Revolution". He shared his conviction that democracy in State cannot live on in a society with an authoritarian tradition. In doing so, he was suggesting to

the Asian church leaders who gathered at the historic meeting in Prapat to discuss the future mission and evangelistic tasks of the Asian churches and their involvement in such authoritarian Asian settings. In this context, he defined mission of the church "to witness to Christ as Lord and Redeemer of the whole man". The question of Christ's Lordship which became a cardinal point in his thinking was often shared in EACC conferences. His understanding and interpretation of Christ as the Lord not only of the Church or of the world but of the whole cosmos. He lined the elements of his thinking of Christ's relationship with Asian revolution as well as mission of the church in response to emerging political realities in Asia. He approached theology of mission through politics, especially in relation to colonialism and Christian mission. In his speech at the 1959 EACC assembly, he connected Christian mission integrally with politics. He stated: "We cannot have a new vision of the Christian Mission in Asia without a Christian interpretation of Asian nationalism". In a way when M.M. was affirming the Lordship of Christ, he was validating political actions as part of the Church's mission in order to give a Christian justification of revolution. Again at the 1964 Assembly of EACC in 1964, he said the task of the Christian community as being defined by its relation to the struggles of the human community in which it lives". This thinking of M.M. has influenced EACC during the first years after its formation in 1957. In subsequent years M.M. continued to use EACC platforms to echo his views and convictions for the Asian ecumenical movement mainly in the context of Asia's pluralistic religious and ideological contexts and Christian Action in Asian struggles. At the EACC assembly in 1964, he categorically stated that secularism should be the framework for the coming dialogue on common culture between world religions for Asia's pluralistic contexts. When he reminded the delegates of the Bangkok EACC Assembly about the tide of secularisation rising all over the world, he was in a way giving a signal to the Asian churches and Christians to be mindful of emerging religious fundamentalism in their own situations. Already in 1959 at the Kuala Lumpur assembly of EACC M.M. spoke of the religious and theological renaissance as the valid basis for Asian politics. He argued at the 1973 EACC assembly that any action involves a framework of spiritual and ideological direction, without which there is no meaningful social life. He recommended to the 1973 assembly that it should give serious thought to the question of the ethos of Asian struggle.

In cooperation with the East Asia Christian Conference M.M. soon became the strategist of a vital Asian study programme on social issues. A quick and clear drafter, he produced in these years a stream of literature on Christian social witness, challenging clergy and laity in the churches of Asia to reflection and action on economic and political goals of nation-building. M.M. Thomas, a layman who engaged throughout his career in a search for the theological and ethical basis of a Christian understanding of and witness to the tumultuous social and political developments continuously sensitised the churches and the worldwide ecumenical movement through his contributions in different areas.

Swedish Church historian Alf Tergel succinctly sums up M.M. Thomas' remarkable ecumenical contribution: "Along with Visser 't Hooft, M.M. Thomas has had the greatest influence on the modern ecumenical movement."

.

,

¹ Sunand Sumithra, *Revolution as Revelation*, International Christian Network , Tübingen, West Germany, 1984, p. 10.

² *ibid* p 16).

³ Report of the IMC Mexico meeting, 1963, p.78

⁴ *Religion and Society* June 1964, p. 8.

⁵ Message of the World Conference on Church and Society

⁶ Paulose Mar Gregorios, ...M. M. Thomas A Tribute

⁷ Sumithra, *op.cited*

⁸ *Religion and Society*, March 1970, p.2.

⁹ Report of the CCA Assembly, 1973, p.10.

¹⁰ *ibid.* p.82

¹¹ *Towards a Theology of Contemporary Ecumenism*, CISRS / WCC, 1977