

Report on the “From World Mission to Interreligious Witness” Conference, Dublin, 16-18 June 2010 - Trish Madigan op

The Conference “From World Mission to Interreligious Witness: Visioning Ecumenics in the 21st Century”, which I attended in Trinity College Dublin from 16-18 June 2010, was a remarkable experience in more ways than one. Ireland was blessed with ten days of continuous warm sunshine, which the locals kept saying they could hardly remember ever happening before in their lifetime! The Conference was co-sponsored by the Irish School of Ecumenics and *Concilium* Journal to mark the centenary of the ecumenical 1910 World Missionary Conference in Edinburgh, an event which is widely recognised as birthing the modern ecumenical movement.

Although the diversity of faiths and cultures was already evident in 1910 and provided the context in which “world mission” was envisaged, the political, philosophical and theological developments of the 20th century have recalibrated the significance of that diversity and raised radically new questions for Christianity. The issue of how the religions will relate to each other and wider society in the public square in the 21st century is one of immediate interest in the European context, as elsewhere.

An outline of the themes of the three days of the Conference:

Day 1 – From World Mission to World Christianity and Beyond

As Christianity has made its way into many cultures and regions of the world, the critical study and understanding of this cross-cultural process and of the theologies of mission which carried it, are of great importance if we are to re-vision Christian witness in the ecumenical context of World Christianity in the 21st Century. With Christianity’s evident shift to the South and the emergence of World Christianity, mission acts now as at once local and global, with ecumenical conversations among different local theologies, open to an understanding of mission as an exchange of gifts: a reciprocal sharing of Christian witness across cultures of faith. As we move into the future, the dynamics of enhanced religious pluralism and changing modes of religion in the public life in different parts of the world ask for revisiting the public character of faith and theology anew so to stage a rethinking of Christian witness in the contemporary world. What are suitable frameworks for theorizing the world we live and believe in as the challenges of this new century unfold; and how should we conceptualize Christian mission and witness in that context? The trajectory of the opening day will move towards such reflection and, from a prospect of “new modernity”, seek to offer a fresh vision of Christian witness and ecumenics as intercultural theology.

Day 2 – Cultures of Faith and Public Theology: Ecumenical Witness

The fact of religious pluralism raises, for religions, a host of critical questions regarding the nature of their “witnessing presence” in the public square. At both institutional and individual levels, one of the major contemporary challenges for religious actors is how to discern the ethical and political meaning of their faith without imposing this on others. During the second day of the conference, we will explore the implications of religious pluralism as it is lived out in different cultural contexts. The question will be raised as to how the texture of confessional identities are being challenged, developed and transformed through the encounter with the other. Our aim will be to point to ways in which the

religiously plural public square might be enhanced by such encounters, proposing a vision of ecumenics as public theology.

An evening public panel discussion will examine the intricate relations between religious belonging, identity, witness and the role of dissent in the public square: Is the possibility of dissent (from one's religious, national, or cultural traditions) an essential feature of modern day religious witness in the public sphere? How should one draw the line between so-called licit and illicit dissent? Is it possible or desirable to embrace an interreligious and pluralist environment without some form of dissent?

Day 3 – Religious Pluralism and Interreligious Witness

The reality of non-Christian faiths has, since 1910, gradually expanded an inner-Christian *oikumene* towards an ecumenics of religions, paralleled by major shifts taken in the approaches to other faiths. With the intensification of religious pluralism and of the presence of the religious other in today's globalized world, the original concern of Christian witness across cultures and faiths also becomes more complex. Has the new frontier of Christian witness now irrevocably become Christianity's encounter with world religions or the interreligious situation? Will the twenty-first century confirm a transition from ecumenical Christian witness to one of interreligious witness altogether? The third day of the conference will address these questions and, by exploring the possibilities and limits of interreligious dialogue, comparative theology, and interreligious witness, propose a vision of ecumenics as interreligious theology.

The Conference was international in its range of speakers and concerns. Keynote speakers included Felix Wilfred from Chennai on "Revisiting Christian Witness from the Global South", Will Storrar from Princeton on "Religion and Theology in Public Life", Ina Merdjanova from Sofia on "Eastern Orthodox Christianity in a Pluralistic World", Atullah Siddiqui from Lancaster on "Islam and Public Witness" and Elaine Wainwright from Auckland who presented her insights on the Pacific region. Also participating were approximately 70 young postgraduate students and academics from all over Europe as part of a larger research project entitled "Visioning 21st Century Ecumenism: Diversity, Dialogue and Reconciliation" funded by the Irish Research Council for Humanities and Social Sciences.

Most of the presentations touched in various ways on the general theme of the important contribution to be made by interfaith and intercultural relations in maintaining the fabric of the public sphere.