E.M. Forster’s famous motto does indeed transfer easily from literature to ecumenism, which could almost be defined as the art of forging connections between disparate Christian confessions and religious traditions where none had appeared possible. Konrad Raiser has scrutinised the terms ‘ecumenism’ and ‘the religions’ and the ways in which they are perhaps too much taken for granted, and this needs to be kept in mind as we explore connections within and between them. To the extent that ecumenism retrieves the ancient concept of the oikoumene, the whole inhabited earth as it was conceived in the Hellenistic world and appears in the New Testament, it involves more than just churches, and its modern revival was led by missionary, not just ecclesiastical, concerns. The comparative study of religions using modern historical and philological scholarship inevitably raises the question posed by Schleiermacher and put before us again by Hans-Peter Großhans: in what sense is Christianity one of the religions, and is there a universal concept of religion that covers them all?

For organisational reasons I was asked not only to contribute a reflection on the consultation at the closing session, but also a review of ecumenical developments for the opening panel. Because of the short notice it was agreed that I should do this in a semi-autobiographical format, as I am of an age to have experienced some of these developments at first hand in their particularly dramatic effect on my own Roman Catholic tradition. In the event, this provided the opportunity to survey the road that has led us to the present juncture (I) and to look ahead, drawing on the contributions made at the consultation, to future developments which are already beginning to take shape (II), and this will be the structure of the following unabashedly personal reflections.

I. Towards an Integral Ecumenism

The Second Vatican Council irrupted into my seminary studies of Catholic philosophy and theology in far-off Canberra and Melbourne with an impact that in
many ways became life-defining for my generation. Our curricula were so exclusively Catholic that we were not even allowed to read Protestant books, and every significant work of the European Enlightenment was on the Index of Prohibited Books. Yet in a missionary order the foreign missions, as they were then called, were kept before us: we were aware of the work of evangelisation in northern Australia, Papua New Guinea, the Philippines and Japan, and some of us eventually started reading about the cultures and social problems of Aboriginal Australia, the Asia-Pacific and Latin America. But any formal study of the religions of these peoples was not even on the horizon. This intellectual ghetto was created by the policies of successive popes determined to ward off the corroding influence of secularism, indifferentism, relativism and other modern evils.

Two events worked as powerful catalysts to begin transforming our awareness: the granting of the right to vote to Australia’s indigenous inhabitants by an amendment to the constitution in 1967 (without however formally recognising their status as original inhabitants of the land and at a time when the forcible removal of Aboriginal children from their parents, unbeknown to us, was still going on) and Australia’s participation in the war in Vietnam. Quite apart from issues of human rights and pacifism, and in the context of mounting anti-American protests, these two events marked the dawning of my wider theological awareness. The writings of the anthropologist W.E.H. Stanner showed beyond doubt, albeit in the face of scepticism in his own scholarly circles, that Aboriginal culture was profoundly spiritual and in some sense religious, irrespective of its contact with Christian missionaries; and those who were most determinedly but peacefully protesting about the actions of all sides in the Vietnam war – even to the point of self-immolation – were Buddhists. The theology we were learning was in no way capable of dealing with either of these realities.

In 1967 I was sent – very much against my will, though I cannot deny a frisson of excitement at the prospect of leaving Australia for Europe – to complete a Licentiate of Theology at the Gregorian University in Rome. I later reflected ruefully that this was something like sending a communist to Moscow at the time when Gorbachev was introducing perestroika and glasnost: the atmosphere was one of uncertainty and even instability in the immediate aftermath of Vatican II. How was Roman theology to react to the ferment unleashed by the Council’s opening to ecumenism, the non-Christian religions and the modern world? The professor of
ecumenism, the affable Jesuit Jan Witte, was allowed to attend the Uppsala Assembly of the WCC in 1968 and I was free to start reading Bonhoeffer, Barth and Bultmann; I was even permitted to write my thesis on the secular in the novels of Samuel Beckett! Though this awakened my interest in the ecumenical movement and its bold initiatives in pursuing dialogue not only among Christians but between the churches and the cultures and sciences, as in its Geneva conference of 1966 and in Paul VI’s encyclical *Ecclesiam Suam* in 1964, it also made me aware that the equally bold initiatives undertaken in documents such as *Lumen Gentium* on the church, *Unitatis Redintegratio* on ecumenism, *Nostra Aetate* on the religions, *Dignitatis Humane* on religious liberty and *Gaudium et Spes* on the church confronting modernity were in many cases ill-defined and vulnerable to manipulation. As if to confirm this, what Catholics ever since have referred to simply as ‘the encyclical’ – *Humanae Vitae* on the morality of artificial contraception, 1968 – signalled a drawing back from the brink of actually changing church teaching to adapt to modern conditions.

To my complete surprise I was accepted for doctoral studies by Walter Kasper in Münster, and to my even greater surprise I was allowed by my order to pursue them. He proposed church unity as my topic, which I began to investigate without great enthusiasm, but when he accepted the call to Tübingen a year later I transferred to Peter Lengsfeld at the Catholic Ecumenical Institute, who suggested that I take up the theme of the unity of humankind, which had played such a part in the Uppsala Assembly and in *Gaudium et Spes*. In those adventurous times the Institute was preparing itself for a linguistic and sociological analysis of ecumenical relations. It concentrated mainly on the ecumenical stagnation of the German churches, at least as far as practical measures to change things such as religious instruction in schools or inter-church marriages were concerned. The result was a research project which has recently been rediscovered but was virtually ignored at the time.¹

Over and above this, however, it was the high point of progressive theology in Münster, witnessing the last semesters of Karl Rahner’s teaching career, the apogee of Johann Baptist Metz’s brilliance, and the exegetical originality of Joachim Gnilka and Erich Zenger. But for me the most stimulating environment was the *Mittelbau* of rising academics such as Helmut Peukert, Norbert Mette, Hubert Frankemöller and my comrade in arms and lifelong friend Heinz-Günther Stobbe. Adèle-Théodore

Khoury was already doing sterling work in introducing German Christians to Islam, my fellow doctoral student Hans Hermann Henrix was at the start of what was to be an internationally recognised role in promoting Jewish-Christian relations (he invited me to participate in my first such dialogue). For my part I was taking first steps to understanding Buddhism, learning Sanskrit and Pāli and attending seminars at the Department of Indology. I was also in touch with an Irish Jesuit named Michael Hurley about his conception of what he called «ecumenics», which seemed to resonate with what we were doing in appropriating the methods of the human and social sciences for ecumenical theology. It was this concept that seemed to open up the prospect of bringing all my disparate interests together under one head, as the realisation grew that the various methods and themes we were experimenting with needed to be integrated in order to identify and focus on ecumenical problems; but that time was still some way off.

As if to make perfectly clear that it was not I who was writing the script for this particular *curriculum vitae*, I was approached by Theodor Ahrens, later professor for Missiology and Ecumenics at the University of Hamburg, on the way back from a conference at the Ecumenical Institute in Bossey, about working with the Melanesian Council of Churches in Papua New Guinea. He was at that time the North Elbian Lutheran Church mission secretary for India and PNG, and he was aware that the Council of Churches and ecumenical relations generally were in a state of rapid decline in the latter country, which had become independent in 1975. It was typical of his hands-on approach that he managed to persuade his counterpart mission agency in the Bavarian Lutheran Church (Neuendettelsau) to sponsor a Catholic theologian and his family for a three-year contract to do ecumenical work in what my colleague Garry Trompf described as «the most exciting country on earth». With its 830 languages, its Council of Churches embracing Catholics and Anglicans as well as Baptists and the Salvation Army, and numberless Pentecostal, Evangelical and Adventists churches besides, PNG certainly provided an ecumenical challenge, not to mention the grave social problems in areas such as health, education and development.

I prepared a position paper for Dr Becker, the Mission Director at Neuendettelsau, proposing that ecumenism has to have an «anthropological dimension» if it is to be adequate in such a context, and his barely concealed look of dismay told me that my particular approach to ecumenical theology might not be
immediately appreciated in Protestant circles. Much European theorising, in fact, seemed remote and irrelevant in a country of extraordinarily diverse peoples and landscapes grappling with elemental challenges of cultural adaptation and social change. The Council of Churches gradually staggered towards recovery, but the most satisfying part of my work was with the young indigenous theologians in the member colleges of the Melanesian Association of Theological Schools as they sought to express their aspirations for their churches and their country. The Melanesian Institute in Goroka, Eastern Highlands Province, provided invaluable resources and expertise, as well as a home for my family and me. It was here, in this battle ground of competing fundamentalist churches, who were exclusivist even towards one another and thought nothing of 'sheep stealing' from the 'mainline' churches, that I formed a conviction which has guided all my work since: 'successful' evangelisation creates new ecumenical problems over and above those inherited from the Reformation and the split between Greek and Latin traditions in Europe. As a Catholic priest, who is now a bishop, said at one of our orientation courses: «The best sign of inculturation is that the missionary won’t like it». This hesitation to attribute theological significance to cultures or to recognise their religious dimensions creates tensions which can lead to further divisions when Christians in their local contexts insist on asserting their own cultural identities. To be fair, though, most churches had enough internal problems of their own without worrying about ecumenism.

After four and a half action-filled years in this immensely stimulating environment came the next surprise: my appointment as Director of the Irish School of Ecumenics in Dublin, founded by Michael Hurley SJ in 1970 and pretty well the only one which embodied my idea of what an ecumenical institute should be. With extremely limited resources the School was able to offer an M.Phil. degree validated by Trinity College Dublin which integrated the three constitutive streams of the ecumenical movement: relations between the Christian churches; Christian commitment to justice, peace and reconciliation; and the dialogue of religions. Michael Hurley’s framework for achieving this he called ‘ecumenics’, meaning not just ecumenical theology but what we in Münster had called ecumenical theory-
formation, invoking the human and social sciences to investigate the non-theological factors in Christian divisions.²

In 1987 the Irish ‘troubles’ had reached rock bottom. The economy of the Republic was barely ticking over, despite aid from the EU; young people were emigrating in their thousands; and in the North there were almost weekly shootings and bombings. In ways very difficult to analyse the Christian confessions were involved in the violence, as components in each side’s ideological legitimation but also as forces for reconciliation. ISE, with its students from all parts of Ireland and many countries around the world, was a laboratory of ecumenism in its most fundamental sense. On the ground in Northern Ireland there were evening and weekend courses for laypeople, which later evolved into a program of ‘community theology’ with over 1000 participants in any given year.³ Masters programs in Peace Studies and Reconciliation Studies were initiated, the latter based in Belfast, inviting comparison with international relations thinking and reconciliation processes in South Africa and Central America. As a relative newcomer to the scene I was invited to join the Interchurch Group on Faith and Politics, a loose semi-official body of a dozen or more participants roughly equally divided between Catholic and Protestant, north and south, clergy and laity and – eventually – men and women. Here the ambitious ‘political theology’ of Metz and Moltmann was tested in the crucible of real conflict as Christians whose traditions had become alienated argued face to face about intractable issues such as conducting funerals for murdered paramilitaries, coping with unemployment, reconciling memories of past injustices and assessing the political negotiations between the Republic, Northern Ireland and Great Britain.⁴ I was able to observe at first hand the work of practical reconciliation carried on by the Corrymeela Community in Co. Antrim, the Glencree Community in the Wicklow

² While I was still in Münster Michael sent me the article which may be regarded as the charter for ISE: MICHAEL HURLEY, Ecumenism, Ecumenical Theology and Ecumenics, Irish Theological Quarterly 45 (1978), 132-139, and in which I found confirmation for our research program as I had outlined it the year before: JOHN D’ARCY MAY, From Ecumenical Theology to Fundamental Ecumenics, Journal of Ecumenical Studies 14 (1977), 304-312.
⁴ See AN INTERCHURCH GROUP ON FAITH AND POLITICS, Breaking Down the Enmity: Faith and Politics in the Northern Ireland Conflict, Belfast 1993.
mountains outside Dublin, and the annual ecumenical conferences at Glenstal Abbey near Limerick. I am convinced that the hard-won agreement that led to the peace treaties and the setting up of the Northern Ireland Assembly was made possible in ways that are real but hard to verify by this patient but largely unacknowledged work of bringing people from opposing sides together and overcoming deep-seated differences. A bus tour through Belfast, however, down the Shankill Road festooned with British flags and up the Falls Road with its IRA memorials, brought home to consultation participants that at ground level reconciliation and the healing of memories of hurt have a very long way to go.

At ISE my role was to co-ordinate the area of interfaith dialogue, teaching courses in the theology of religions and Buddhist-Christian dialogue, as well as a course called Social Sciences and Social Ethics designed to bring together students from the (theological) Ecumenical Studies and the (secular) Peace Studies programs. Since I retired from Trinity College in 2007 the programs have evolved into a wide palette of courses embracing intercultural theology, comparative theology, interreligious studies, world Christianity, religions and international relations, conflict resolution, religions and ethics, the politics of development, human rights, ethics in international affairs and more specialised topics within each area. These developments go a long way towards realising my dream of what «ecumenics», when taken to its conclusion, really involves. In a university environment of pragmatic specialisation and managerialism, however, it is not easy to make the case for holding all these facets of ecumenical studies together; but it is precisely their interrelationships that make the discipline of ecumenics so rich in possibilities for collaboration.

This has come home to me even more forcefully since I returned to Australia in 2010 and took up honorary positions with a number of institutes devoted to interreligious dialogue and social justice in Melbourne. Australia, for all its folk memories of lonely battlers surviving in the bush, is now one of the most highly urbanised and multicultural societies on earth. Though still small in absolute terms, the percentages of «other religions» are growing steadily, especially Buddhists (4 per cent in Melbourne and the fastest growing overall, from 2.1 to 2.5 per cent), Muslims (4.7 per cent in Sydney, ahead of Eastern Orthodox, growing from 1.7 to 2.2 per cent) and Hindus (nearly doubled from 0.7 to 1.3 per cent). For the first time, «no religion» increased by 29 per cent to overtake Anglicans, making this category second only to
Catholics (25.3 per cent). Much of this rapid increase is due to migration, and ‘no religion’ can be interpreted to mean no particular religion, but the picture of a predominantly Christian society dominated by Catholics, Anglicans and Presbyterians (the latter now absorbed into the Uniting Church, which has shrunk to 5 per cent) with a handful of irreligious eccentrics has gone forever.

The media, which by no means reflect the views of the wider population, are characterised by an aggressive secularism and atheism, which remain entrenched in the universities. Nevertheless, the study of religions and the dialogue of religions are now established academically in a way they never were before, though religiously neutral religious studies departments have not fared well. The teaching of religion in schools is controversial: in Victoria, an evangelical Christian organisation called Access Ministries is allowed to provide the majority of religion teachers in state schools, but it is accused of proselytism, and there are calls for the ‘neutral’ treatment of all the main religions or simply classes in philosophy and ethics. The Catholic Church is on the defensive because it has protected the perpetrators rather than the victims of clerical sexual abuse, and thanks to a long-standing policy of over-cautious episcopal appointments it is overwhelmingly conservative and unadventurous. The Anglican Church is deeply divided by issues such as the ordination of women and gays. Meanwhile, the condition of Aborigines continues to deteriorate to levels that surpass those of the poorest Third World countries, and politicians seek in vain for a solution to the steady trickle (not flood!) of refugees arriving by boat from Iraq and Afghanistan via Indonesia or even direct from Sri Lanka.

We shall pick up the thread of this complex situation in the next section.

Taking it as a snapshot which shows affinities with what is happening in Europe and indeed globally, it is time now to pause for reflection on how Christian ecumenism can come to terms with it. The simplest definition of an ecumenical problem is the breakdown of communication – or, more theologically, communio – among Christians. In light of the above facts this is a singularly unfortunate time for this to be happening, but it is. Quite apart from the rise and rapid growth of self-proclaimed Christian churches which can only be called fundamentalist but which offer a sense of community and solutions to life’s problems, even within the supposedly so monolithic Catholic Church there are deepening divisions between an older Vatican II generation of progressive priests and laity and a younger John Paul II generation of extremely conservative clergy and laity seeking refuge in doctrinal certainty. In the field of
theology of religions, theologians such as Gavin D’Costa cleave to the authority of the Magisterium, whereas the equally Catholic Paul Knitter gives primacy to human experience. These and similar tensions within, not to mention between, other confessional traditions may fairly be said to bar the way to the far more fundamental problems raised by communication between the religions themselves. This, one would think, should be the issue at the forefront of Christian ecumenists’ minds, together with the challenge of transposing theological discourse and the language of religion into the language of philosophy and the sciences, without significant loss of meaning. My preliminary conclusion is that attention to these concerns, far from diluting the ecumenical movement or undermining interchurch dialogue, is in fact foundational for all future ecumenism – provided they can be seen in an integrated framework which allows them to complement and enhance rather than work against one another. It is just such a framework to which I gave the name ‘integral ecumenism’.  

II. From Comparative to Collaborative Theology

What difference does interreligious dialogue actually make to ecumenical relations among Christians? What, indeed, is the aim of interreligious dialogue, which can hardly aspire to some kind of unification of all the world’s religions? Is it the promotion of what has well been called an ‘ethic of survival’ for the whole of humanity and the planet itself, or does it contribute to this by going further to inspire a vision of hope for all humankind? If the former, can the religions demonstrate that their contribution to ethical globalisation is indispensable; if the latter, can Christians come to terms with being just one religious option among many? These are some of the questions which underlay our consultation.


As we have just seen, religious pluralism and multiculturalism have become the “new normal” in societies around the world; indeed, it is almost impossible to find a country to which they do not apply, often with the accompaniment of religious conflict and ethnic violence. Though religion is often coded as “cultural” in secular discourse, and despite the studious attempts of the media to ignore it, this situation represents a religious ferment of unprecedented proportions, and it is global in extent. One wonders whether “reconciled diversity”, the ecumenical model first proposed by Harding Meyer of the Strasbourg Ecumenical Institute for relations between churches, is not more appropriate to this plurality of religions. What is lacking, however, is what Mika Vähäkangas called a “shared language” with which to communicate within this diversity as Christianity shifts south, inculturation develops into interculturation and witness becomes interreligious.

It is perhaps some consolation to recall that this experience of inadequacy is by no means restricted to Christians. All the traditions, whether the localised cultures of indigenous peoples or the purportedly universal faiths of the world religions, are struggling to come to terms with their respective religious “others”, and each has its own internal reasons to consider itself uniquely authentic and superior — even supposedly so tolerant traditions such as Buddhism and Hinduism. Ottmar Fuchs has coined the term “meliorism” to capture this deep-seated tendency to regard what is distinctive about one’s own tradition as innately superior to others. Within each, tensions are generated by the attempt to answer the question how one should respond to religious difference — as can be seen emerging even in Islam. Religion, in a word, has been deregulated, and phenomena such as “double belonging” are becoming more common and are attracting the attention of theologians. Ecumenists tend to see interreligious relations in terms of “Christianity and [another religion]”, but they are

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7 For a recent assessment of the implications of this for Christian believers in the Australian and New Zealand contexts from a sociological point of view, see GARY D. BOUMA, Being Faithful in Diversity, Adelaide 2011.


proliferating rapidly, not only as Sunnis engage with Shi’ites and Theravadins confront Mahayanists, but as Hindus try to relate non-conflictually with Muslims or Buddhists and Buddhists encounter Jews or Muslims.

In the case of Christians, the encounter with other religions opens old ecumenical wounds. The questions raised are so fundamental that each confessional tradition is thrown back upon the principles and doctrines at the heart of its self-understanding, producing what Arnulf Camps called the ‘theological inhibitions’ peculiar to each. Oliver Schuegraf’s defence of ‘consensus ecumenism’ against the ‘conflict ecumenism’ advanced by Ulrich Körtner and Eilert Herms takes on a new relevance in this context. The intensity of interreligious contacts can trigger the ‘re-branding’ and ‘re-profiling’ of confessional identities so well characterised by Johanna Rahner; what it should do is what the early ecumenical encounters did in Lund (1952) and what John XXIII’s call to aggiornamento did at Vatican II: recall us to the fundamentals of the faith we hold in common. Schuegraf’s critical analysis of The Basis and Object of Faith project and his alternative proposal of a ‘differential ecumenism’ based on a ‘differentiated consensus’ is worthy of serious consideration in this connection.

The stabilisation of Christian identity is particularly important as we come to grips with the phenomena of globalisation, magnified and accelerated by electronic communication and the ‘open media’ this makes possible. In the ‘real virtuality’ (Manuel Castells) thus created, extreme reactions such as cyber bullying and other invasions of privacy are provoked, and we find a heightened individualism accompanied by the leaching out of substantive identities, both personal and social. In Europe there is talk of ‘Eurabia’ as Muslim influence increases, in the Asia-Pacific of ‘Chindia’ as powerful cultural and religious – not just economic and military – forces come into play, and other unfamiliar power constellations are taking shape between South Asia and Eastern Europe, the Middle East and Latin America. Christians are caught up in these transformations, which are no longer controlled by the West, and traditional boundaries are under pressure: some are hardening, as can be observed in the convulsive religious politics of the United States, others are softening, as the deregulation of religion and its liberation from traditional institutional forms demonstrates. Geraldine Smyth identifies this obsession with boundaries as one of the greatest obstacles to progress towards reconciliation in Northern Ireland. The conviction that ‘there is no conflict like ours’ allows people to invest heavily in walls
of separation, and this profound dualism deepens alienation. Yet as Mika Vähäkangas observed, the borders of Christianity are becoming porous, and a «grey zone» of indeterminate religious identity is spreading in the face of this «hair-raising plurality».

Another way of putting this is to say that the public sphere is becoming at one and the same time intensely local and increasingly global. Indeed, some political scientists say that a global civil society is in the process of formation, a global forum for the instantaneous exchange of information and the airing of views which will no longer be controlled by traditional media such as newspapers or traditional structures such as nation states and political parties. This global civil society will not necessarily be simply an amplified version of the secular liberal democracies of the West. In ways yet to be determined, it is likely that the world’s religions – not just the purportedly universal ones but the localised traditions of numberless indigenous groups – will play an active part in this emerging public sphere, just as Christian theology will have to become public theology, no longer taking for granted either the presuppositions or the privileges it has traditionally enjoyed in Western cultural contexts. In this new situation, freedom of opinion becomes not just a matter of human rights but a theological issue. Statements such as that of Hans-Peter Großhans, that «The religions that are not monotheistic are not as developed as those that are in regard to this question [of freedom]» will have to be scrutinised anew. In finding their place in this global civil society, the religions will have to come to terms with pluralism while critiquing the standard Western account of neo-liberal Enlightenment orthodoxy. Indeed, this could be said to be the ecumenical question of the coming century. ¹⁰

The theology of religions, which has served us well as we Christians try to sort out the different historical and systematic approaches to the plurality of religions, is becoming bogged down in ever finer distinctions and is about to be replaced by theology by the religions, each engaging the others in its own way and in their own right. We are now beginning to see interreligious witness, what Felix Wilfred calls «reverse» or «incoming universality», as they begin to interpret us. ¹¹ We are also

¹⁰ German readers may wish to consult the article based on workshops I was invited to conduct during the Salzburger Hochschulwochen in 2009: JOHN D’ARCY MAY, Die ökumenische Alternative. Die eine bewohnte Erde neu denken, Salzburger Theologische Zeitschrift 14 (2010), 187-202, which documents and develops these perspectives.

learning, as Tim Noble pointed out in his paper on the interactions of Russian Orthodox exiles around Nikolai Berdyaev with French Catholic philosophers and theologians in Paris, that interreligious relations have to have what these intellectuals called a ‘personalist’ dimension over and above the doctrinal, in order to attain the level of empathy illustrated in Joseph Palmisano’s paper. Inderjit Bhogal reminded us that each participant in dialogue needs to be in touch with his or her own spiritual roots if fruitful communication is to be sustained.

A big step in this direction has been taken in recent years by proponents of comparative theology, especially Francis Clooney in Hindu-Christian relations and James Fredericks in Buddhist-Christian theology. Clooney in particular lays great emphasis on patiently acquiring deep empathy with the traditions one chooses to study – in his case south Indian Śrīvaiṣṇavas and their Tamil poetry, hymns, treatises and commentaries – while carefully collating their texts with possible Christian counterparts. In this way, both authors identify theological problems – for example, ways of conceptualising the divinity or ultimate reality – which are the same or similar across the traditions. This approach simply lets differences stand without trying to theorise them in higher-level theological frameworks, e.g. by constructing theories of religious pluralism. The drawback, of course, is that few of us have the expertise necessary for appreciating Tamil poetry or Nāgārjuna’s Sanskrit verse, and sooner or later the larger issues involved in treating religions in this way are going to force themselves upon us – some of which we have already noticed, such as the legitimacy of regarding Christianity as one of the religions, or the problem of finding a common language in which to express the results of comparison and translation. Nevertheless, Annemarie Mayer rightly pointed out that this could be a ‘fourth paradigm’ in interreligious relations over and above the now somewhat shopworn and constantly shifting classification into exclusivism, inclusivism and pluralism.

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We have at least learned to communicate: this is an immense advance over previous ignorance and antagonism. Interreligious communication, indeed, is the indispensable presupposition of understanding through comparison, and it is also the precursor of theological collaboration. A movement known as «scriptural reasoning» has pioneered this by inviting Jews, Christians and Muslims to interpret each other’s sacred texts to one another, and some Buddhists are beginning to speak of «Buddhist theology» in conscious imitation of their Christian colleagues. There is also a long tradition of Indian Christian theology starting from Hindu premises. There is need here to develop a hermeneutic springing from empathy, as advocated by Joseph Palmsano, in order to identify and accept the «alien in oneself» and establish a balance between rootedness in the inescapably particular stories of origin cherished by one’s own religious tradition and the detachment necessary for undertaking journeys of discovery, passing over into the religious worlds of others and returning their offers of hospitality. This is not just abstract theorising; increasing numbers of believers are setting out on these journeys in their own spiritual lives, so that their encounters and their incipient theologies are personal and existential.

What we are envisaging might be called with Felix Wilfred «religious cosmopolitanism». This term is likely to awaken the same anti-ecumenical resentment as Hocking and the «liberal» wing of the early ecumenical movement did – not without reason – among the followers of Karl Barth, who had taken a stand against Nazism with a resolutely evangelical theology and harboured a deep suspicion of any compromise with merely human cultures and civilisations. In our own time it is necessary to insist that ecumenism is not just liberalism or tolerance, it is not the soft option that avoids the unambiguous confession of faith. It is not acquiescence in, but engagement with differences in an interactive pluralism, which respects commitment and offers others the courtesy of receiving their witness to the convictions that motivate them. But such a course demands linguistic and conceptual innovation, leaving behind what Felix Wilfred calls the «dead habits» of «religious ontologies»

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15 A standard work in this field is by my predecessor as Director of ISE, ROBIN H.S. BOYD, An Introduction to Indian Christian Theology, Madras 1975, 2nd rev. ed.
impervious to change.\textsuperscript{17} It also involves resisting the temptation of premature \textit{a priori} theoretical frameworks and overarching institutions; here the caution of the comparative theologians is justified. Above all else, such interreligious ecumenism would resolutely set out to renounce violence and collaboratively explore practical ways to build peace.\textsuperscript{18}

This brings us back to our starting point: the continuance of a profoundly sectarian Northern Ireland in a secular and pluralistic United Kingdom. Geraldine Smyth’s urgent reminder that Northern Ireland remains a «tinderbox» until the last vestiges of enmity and alienation are removed at the level of homes, streets and workplaces, and Jude Lal Fernando’s moving account of the challenges facing reconciliation in his war-torn native country, Sri Lanka, brought home to us all how intricately deeply held religious beliefs are interwoven with the motives for conflict, «non-theological» as these may be. In both cases, not forgetting past wrongs, but transcending the legacy of suffering through the reconciliation of memories is the way ahead. As Andrew Pierce pointed out in his opening address, this discussion needs to take place at the level of ecumenical paradigms with a view to establishing anew the «equilibrium» between the fundamental ideas which regulate experience. Only a sufficient expansion of theological imagination, nourished by the witness and wisdom of traditions that owe nothing to Christianity, can accomplish this in our global situation of unprecedented openness. That the reaction to this openness is all too often the closure of religious imagination, the hardening of boundaries and the refusal of consensus is perhaps the ecumenical challenge specific to our generation.

\textsuperscript{17} See \textsc{felix wilfred}, From World Mission to Global Christianities: A Perspective from the South, Concilium 2011/1, 13-26.

\textsuperscript{18} See \textsc{john d’arcy may/linha hogan}, Visioning Ecumenics as Intercultural, Inter-religious, and Public Theology, Concilium 2011/1, 70-81.