

Ecumenical Prehistory: Philip Schaff and the Evangelical Alliance

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[Note to participants: I am sorry that due to a disrupted schedule consequent on a family bereavement last month, this paper comes later and in more abbreviated form than I would have wished.]

On 2 October 1873 the sixth general conference of the Evangelical Alliance convened in New York City. It was an international event on an impressive scale with over 500 participants. Alongside nearly 300 Americans there were 75 delegates from Great Britain, 28 from continental Europe, 56 from British North America, and 4 from as far away as India.¹ Numerous Protestant denominations and theological perspectives were represented. Over the ensuing ten days papers were presented addressing a wide range of topics, including Christian union, infidelity, the Christian life, Christianity and civil government, missions and social reform. For Philip Schaff, then professor at Union Theological Seminary and the main driving force behind the conference, it was a powerful demonstration of the potential for Christian unity.

What a conference! It has surpassed the most sanguine expectations. The Spirit of God took hold of it and subdued all explosive elements and antagonistic interests, national ... sectional ... sectarian and personal, and has made it a grand and imposing exhibition of Christian unity. God has shown what He can do when He chooses, and He will bring about a real unity in His own good time to the amazement of the world. ... All my labors of four years are abundantly rewarded. Thus ends the most important chapter of my life, too rich to be noted down here. God be praised. I never felt more thankful and more humble.²

As Schaff was well aware, however, the conference also highlighted the current limits of thinking about Christian unity – following the day spent on union among the Protestants, a subsequent day focused on the rivalry of ‘Romanism’ and Protestantism. For the Evangelical Alliance, although not necessarily as we shall see for Schaff himself, a Protestant conception of Christian unity was defined against Roman Catholicism rather than as conceivably including it. Moreover, although planning for the 1873 New York conference had begun

¹ Philip Schaff and S. Irenaeus Prime, eds. *History, Essays, Orations and Other Documents of the Sixth General Conference of the Evangelical Alliance held in New York 2-12 October 1873* (New York: Harper Brothers, 1874), p.14.

² David S Schaff, *The Life of Philip Schaff* (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1897), p. 273.

before the Vatican Council of 1870 had convened, it inevitably appeared as something of a Protestant riposte and counterpart to events in Rome three years before.

Indeed in its origins a quarter of a century earlier the Evangelical Alliance embodied the paradox of a Protestant unity expressed in opposition to Roman Catholicism. Its founding conference in 1846 convened in London against the backdrop of the intense anti-Catholic feeling stirred by political controversy over the Maynooth grant the previous year. Nevertheless, with its emphasis on positive Protestant unity rather than negative denunciation against Rome, its polemic was always more moderate in tone than that of contemporary organizations such as the Scottish Reformation Society and the American Protestant Society. Its conception of Christian unity was, however, explicitly contrasted with a Roman Catholic one, as 'unity in diversity' rather than in a single hierarchical ecclesiastical structure. The Alliance affirmed the underlying spiritual unity of all 'true believers', seeking to bring them together as individuals rather than as churches.³

It was an appealing project, but one that had quickly run into practical difficulties when in 1846 the Alliance sought to define the core elements of true Christian faith that would be a basis for membership. Prolonged theological wrangling achieved compromises but ones that inevitably left some would-be supporters uneasy. In the event, however, the most divisive issue was not a primarily theological one, but rather the matter of slavery in the United States. When British anti-slavery activists sought to exclude slave-owners from membership, the Americans objected. Although predominantly northerners themselves, they saw this as inappropriate and divisive interference in American domestic matters. Consequently, despite a substantial American presence at the founding 1846 conference, for its first two decades the Evangelical Alliance remained a predominantly British and European organisation that lacked active support in the United States. Within this constraint, however, it maintained and developed a significant international profile bringing together members of a wide range of Protestant churches at a further London conference in 1851 followed by conferences in Paris in 1855, Berlin in 1857, Florence in 1861 and Amsterdam in 1867. It was regarded with suspicion in some quarters however: for example the prominence of members of the Free Church of Scotland in its activities meant that the Church of Scotland held largely aloof, many Anglican Evangelicals were reluctant to associate with

³ John Wolffe, 'Unity in Diversity? North Atlantic Evangelical Thought in the Mid-Nineteenth Century', in R.N. Swanson, ed., *Unity and Diversity in the Church: Studies in Church History*, 32 (1996), 363-75.

Nonconformists who were avowed opponents of episcopacy and state connection, and the 1857 Berlin conference encountered ‘sharp antagonism’ from conservative Lutherans.⁴

After the victory of the North in the Civil War essentially settled the slavery issue, the Evangelical Alliance in the United States was reconstituted at meetings in New York in June 1866 and at the Amsterdam general conference the following year, the American delegates invited the assembly to hold its next general conference in New York.⁵ The initial assumption was that few Europeans would be prepared to cross the Atlantic and that the event would accordingly be a relatively small scale one,⁶ but Philip Schaff, who became the leading organizer of the event, had more ambitious ideas.

Schaff⁷ was born in Chur, Switzerland in 1819, educated in German universities and in 1844 emigrated to the United States to take up the post of professor of church history and biblical literature at the German Reformed Church’s seminary at Mercersburg Pennsylvania. He was to remain there for two decades before, during the Civil War, moving to New York, where he was subsequently appointed to a professorship at Union Theological Seminary that he was to hold until shortly before his death in 1893. Schaff’s proto-ecumenism was rooted in his position as a leading exponent of the so-called Mercersburg theology, first articulated in his inaugural lecture for the seminary in 1844, published as *The Principle of Protestantism*. While affirming the timelessness of the essential truths of the Reformation, the authority of Scripture and justification by faith alone, Schaff believed that Protestantism was still in a process of historical development, thus holding out the prospect of eventual unity between the fragmented churches that claimed a shared Reformation heritage and even of reconciliation with Roman Catholicism itself. In the intense anti-popery climate of the mid-1840s Schaff’s position was anathema to those in his own church, led by Joseph Berg, a prominent Philadelphia minister, who perceived Roman Catholicism in apocalyptic terms as

4 Ibid.; John Wolffe, ‘British Protestants and Europe, 1820-1860: Some Perceptions and Influences’ in Richard Bonney and D.L.B. Trim, eds, *The Development of Pluralism in Modern Britain and France* (Bern: Peter Lang, 2007), pp. 217-20.

5 Edward Steane, ed., *Proceedings of the Amsterdam Conference of the Evangelical Alliance, held in August 1867* (London: Evangelical Alliance, 1868), p. 243.

6 *Sixth General Conference of the Evangelical Alliance*, p. 3.

7 My main source for Schaff’s life is the 1897 biography by his son, David Schaff. Unfortunately, due to COVID-19 constraints on visiting libraries I am currently unable to access the more recent studies by George H. Shriver (1987), Klaus Penzel (1991 and 2004) and Gary K. Pranger (1997). This paper does however also draw on Schaff’s diaries and papers and those of the American branch of the Evangelical Alliance held at Union Theological Seminary, New York.

the ‘mystery of iniquity’ and the Babylon of Revelation. However, when Berg instigated heresy proceedings against Schaff they were decisively defeated in synod.

This early vindication of his position gave Schaff the confidence throughout his career to advocate a more comprehensive and eirenic understanding of Protestantism than that held by many of his contemporaries. His broadminded openness to different Christian traditions was evident when one Sunday in January 1854 during a visit to London he attended Southwark Catholic Cathedral in the morning, Westminster Abbey in the afternoon and the Scottish Presbyterian Church in the evening. He noted that the Catholic service made ‘a strong appeal to the senses’ and appreciated the ‘fine liturgical’ character of the Anglican one. The preacher at the Abbey was the old-style High Churchman and future bishop of Lincoln, Christopher Wordsworth, whose denunciation of both ‘Roman schism’ and ‘Protestant dissent’ was distasteful to Schaff. At the Scottish church Schaff heard a sermon from John Cumming, a militant anti-Catholic, but whose target on this particular evening was the Unitarians. Schaff noted Cumming’s ‘easy facility’ in expounding Scripture but felt his style was ‘leavened with vanity’. Schaff’s other contacts in England were equally diverse – among others he met Pusey, F.D. Maurice, and Max Muller and stayed at Cuddesdon with Samuel Wilberforce where he had ‘long conversation’ with the bishop’s brother Robert, who was shortly to convert to Roman Catholicism. In his subsequent stay in Germany he visited equally diverse contacts, including Krummacker, Ranke, Schelling, Tholuck and Tischendorf and enjoyed dinner with King Frederick William IV whom he pithily described as a man of ‘large information, much goodness of heart, but little decision’.

Schaff was thus ideally qualified for the task of ambassador and recruiter for the New York conference, formally given to him by the American Evangelical Alliance. He was highly energetic, bilingual in English and German, and possessed of the interpersonal skills and the open-mindedness that enabled him to move comfortably in diverse social and religious circles. Nevertheless his task was not an easy one. The conference was twice postponed, initially from 1869 to 1870 because the British in particular concluded more time was needed for effective organization, and then again because the Franco-Prussian war made it impossible or inadvisable for European participants to travel. Schaff made four journeys to Europe, in 1869, 1871, 1872 and 1873 and his diary and lists of names in the Evangelical Alliance archives testify to his assiduousness in approaching a very wide range of potential

participants. While European figures of the standing of Emperor William I and Archbishop Tait of Canterbury were hardly likely to attend the conference, Schaff elicited their support for the event. The actual attenders lacked the high profiles of some of the invitees, but they were still a significant and influential group that was representative of many strands in North Atlantic Protestantism. For example, the British and Irish contingent included the prominent Congregationalists Thomas Aveling, Joseph Parker, Charles Reed and John Stoughton, the leading Baptist James Angus, the Methodist James Harrison Rigg, Willian Arnot from the Free Church of Scotland, and the Irish Presbyterians Thomas Killen and Richard Smyth. Interestingly identified Anglican participants were not staunch evangelicals of the Bickersteth or Ryle stamp but rather Stanley Leathes, Professor of Hebrew at Kings College London, Robert Payne Smith, the Dean of Canterbury, and the prominent liberal William Henry Fremantle.⁸

The New York conference was a significant and memorable achievement notably in diffusing a sense of transnational and interdenominational Protestant unity that inspired the delegates as they returned home. However, its limitations were also very much apparent. Scandinavia was unrepresented reflecting the caution of the state churches there to an organization that especially in an American setting seemed critical of ties between church and state. And while the gathering was valuable as an end in itself, the insistence that participants were attending in an individual capacity without being in any formal sense representatives of their respective churches meant that it lacked lasting ecumenical significance. In subsequent years as Schaff aged and was superseded by Josiah Strong as the dominant figure in the American Evangelical Alliance, its emphasis shifted from an expansive internationalist vision of Christian unity to preoccupation with the spiritual and moral crisis that Strong perceived in the United States itself. In 1887 in the face of Schaff's objections the executive committee of the American Evangelical Alliance decided not to participate in a proposed international Evangelical Alliance committee, because it wanted to preserve its own independence and was clearly sceptical as to the value of broad international action of this kind.⁹ It was a significant parting of the ways indicative of how an American religious nationalism was proving a more power force than the Protestant internationalism represented by Schaff with his ability to

⁸ *Sixth General Conference of the Evangelical Alliance*, p. 756.

⁹ Union Theological Seminary Archives, New York, Evangelical Alliance Executive Committee minutes, 27 March 1887.

move so easily both physically and intellectually between the United States, Britain and Germany.

Nevertheless Schaff's own vision of Christian unity was undimmed. In 1893, shortly before his death, he prepared a paper on the reunion of Christendom for the World Parliament of Religions in Chicago.¹⁰ Due to his frailty it had to be read for him, but its content was a cogent and eloquent final statement of the ideas that had inspired his efforts in his prime. He began by acknowledging the difficulty of the problem, but affirmed his confidence that God would bring about Christian unity in his good time. He emphasized the core doctrinal and ethical common ground that already existed and noted that Christians of all traditions sang many of the same hymns. He offered a brief historical survey, covering divisions in the early church, the eleventh-century schism of East and West, the Reformation, and the advance of toleration and freedom of religion in Britain and the United States. Such divisions, he argued, had positive advantages in that they enabled Christianity to adapt to different national and social settings, and had stimulated the expansive energy of movements such as Methodism and the Free Church of Scotland. Hence future unity should not be uniformity but be grounded in acceptance of variety in which each denomination retained its distinctive characteristics and would respect those of others. For example Baptists would retain their distinctive approach to baptism but would need to accept the baptismal practice of other denominations as legitimate; Protestants would not need to accept the authority of the Pope, but would need to stop denouncing him as anti-Christ and recognize him as the legitimate earthly head of the Roman Catholic Church; Calvinists and Arminians both needed to learn to hold the truths of divine sovereignty and human freedom in balance.

Schaff then outlined three kinds of Christian union, which he labelled individual, federal and organic. Individual union meant Christians from different denominations working together in a common cause and was already exemplified by the Evangelical Alliance and by Christian Endeavour societies. Federal union would be an ecclesiastical counterpart to the political constitution of countries such as Switzerland and the United States, and was a model that appealed to Schaff as it combined 'general sovereignty' with 'intrinsic independence'. He noted that such structures were already taking shape within particular denominational 'families' in organizations such as the Alliance of Reformed Churches and the Anglican Lambeth Conferences. Indeed Schaff suggested that the Lambeth quadrilateral of Scripture,

10 Philip Schaff, *The Reunion of Christendom* (New York: Evangelical Alliance, 1893).

creeds, two sacraments and historic episcopate provided a potential basis for wider such federal union, although it would be necessary to drop insistence on episcopacy or to widen it to the idea of ‘historic presbyterate’. There were precedents for organic union in the creation of the United Evangelical Church in Germany in 1817 and in recent reunifications of divided Presbyterian groups in North America.

Schaff then turned to explore the possibility of a wider unity with the Greek and Roman churches. He was clear that such unity could not be on the current terms envisaged by the papacy of the Roman Catholic Church absorbing other Christians into an organic whole. He suggested specific ways forward, such as addressing the ancient controversy over the ‘filioque’ clause in the Nicene creed by an amending ‘*proceeds from* the Father and the Son’ to ‘*sent by* the Father and the Son’. He also rather whimsically suggested that the Pope should infallibly declare himself fallible, at least as far as non-Catholics were concerned. However, for Schaff the primary means of fostering unity was through applying the results of recent insights from the exegesis of the Bible, the study of history and the progress of science to demonstrate that past causes of division were rooted in misunderstandings or in doctrinal positions – such as the belief that unbaptized infants are destined to damnation – that were no longer maintained in any Christian tradition. He then advocated immediate practical steps to foster unity, by friendly relations with Christians of other traditions, through cooperation in philanthropic and missionary endeavours, through the study of history, and by prayer. He concluded by affirming the ‘glorious’ history of all the mainstream Christian churches, and acknowledging the contributions and insights of Unitarians, universalists and the Salvation Army.

Schaff’s readiness at least to contemplate a form of eventual unity with Roman Catholicism was very much ahead of its time and against the trend to a hardening of Protestant-Catholic barriers in the last quarter of the nineteenth century evident in the German *Kulturkampf* and in the activities of new anti-Catholic organizations such as the American Protective Association and, in Britain, the Protestant Truth Society. Schaff also appears to have been unaware of Leo XIII’s condemnation of Anglican Orders in *Apostolicae Curae* published in the previous year 1892. More characteristic of the position of most of the Evangelical Alliance’s supporters was the view of Edward Henry Bickersteth, Bishop of

Exeter and son of one of the Alliance's founders, stated in his sermon celebrating its jubilee in 1896:

...there are those, even in Protestant lands, though I believe they are very few, who advocate corporate reunion with the fallen Church of Rome. Now, it is true there are many of God's own people in that Church ; but while she holds the mediatorship of the Virgin Mary and Saints, compulsory confession, Papal Indulgences, Transubstantiation, the sacrifices of Masses, and the infallibility of the Pope, we can only echo the Apocalyptic voice, 'Come out of her, my people, that ye be not partakers of her sins, and that ye receive not of her plagues.' They must come to us: we can never, never go to them.¹¹

In her 1954 contribution to the *History of the Ecumenical Movement* Ruth Rouse provided a telling appraisal of the achievements and limitations of the Evangelical Alliance during the second half of the nineteenth century. Its encouragement of united prayer, its successive international conferences, its dissemination of information regarding diverse Christian activity around the world and its advocacy of missions and religious liberty were all substantial innovations that established important preconditions for subsequent ecumenical activity. On the other hand, Rouse saw the Alliance as limited by its refusal to engage with structural relations between churches, and by a lack of sustained leadership and programmes.¹² My own analysis of Schaff's contribution supports this assessment. For a few years in the late 1860s and 1870s Schaff himself offered important leadership in bringing about the New York conference, but ultimately his gifts proved more those of the academic thinker and visionary than those of the activist organiser. However Schaff's and the Alliance's limitations were also understandable in the context of the times in which they were operating – any sustained attempt to bridge the intense Protestant-Catholic and intra-Protestant institutional rivalries of the period would surely have been doomed to acrimonious failure, and the only viable strategy for promoting Christian unity was through individual activity and a vision of a long-term and eschatological future.

Schaff's paper at the World Parliament of Religions was thus the prophetic testimony of a dying man rather than a set of proposals for immediate implementation. In a more recent appraisal of his legacy John C Meyer has argued that his ideas did indeed foreshadow significant ecumenical developments in the twentieth century such as the formation of the

11 A.J. Arnold, ed., *Jubilee of the Evangelical Alliance: Proceedings of the Tenth International Conference held in London June-July 1896* (London: John F. Shaw, 1897), p.445.

12 Ruth Rouse, 'Voluntary Movements and the Changing Ecumenical Climate' in Ruth Rouse and Stephen Charles Neill, eds, *A History of the Ecumenical Movement 1517-1948* (2nd edn, London: SPCK, 1967), 321-4.

World Council of Churches and the changes in the Roman Catholic position inherent in Vatican II.¹³ The present conference too needs to acknowledge the existence of this significant if ambivalent prehistory to the period with which it is primarily concerned.

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¹³ John C. Meyer, 'Philip Schaff as an Ecumenical Prophet', *Ecumenical Review* 47 (1995).