The Ecumenical Contribution of V.C. Samuel

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V.C. Samuel of the Malankara Orthodox Church in India, who died at the age of 86 on 18th November 1998, was an outstanding creative theologian and ecumenically committed church historian.

V.C. Samuel began his education with the study of Syriac at the Orthodox monastery of Manjinikkara, where he later taught the language. Following under-graduate studies at union Christian College in Alwaye, he took a master's degree in philosophy at Madras Christian College. His theological education was at United Theological College in Bangalore, Union Theological Semi-nary in New York and at the Divinity School of Yale University, New Haven, where he completed his doctoral studies in 1957. Later he pursued post-doctoral studies at the University of Chicago.

His doctoral thesis on "The Council of Chalcedon and the Christology of Severus of Antioch" was basically an attempt to reappraise the pro- and anti-Chalcedonian positions which had caused so much division and bitterness in the history of the church a reappraisal that could, and happily did, lead to movements towards unity and reconciliation. Thus it is important to note that V.C. Samuel pursued his work, which involved a detailed and persevering investigation of source material in original languages, not out of some kind of antiquarian interest, but because of the insight that interrogating these ancient sources could cast light on the tangled problems of present day ecclesiology, which could in turn have consequences for the wider ecumenical movement.

From 1968 to 1975, V.C. Samuel served as dean of the Holy Trinity Theological College, Haile Selassie I University in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia (1963-66; 1968-76). For a brief period he had worked for the Christian Institute for the Study of Religion and Society. He served as a professor at Serampore College, and the United Theological College in Bangalore (between 1960-63 and 1966-68 and again in 1978-79) and at the Orthodox Seminary in Kottayam (1980-1991), where he also contributed to ecumenical enrichment and contemporary scholarship through his involvement in the Federated Faculty for Research in Religion and Culture, Kerala, and the St Ephraim Ecumenical Research Institute, Kottayam.

For several years Fr. Samuel was a member of the Faith and Order commission of the World Council of Churches. His contributions to the Eastern Orthodox - Roman Catholic-Oriental Orthodox dialogue were ecumenically significant, and his sensitive and painstaking reassessment of the council of Chalcedon played a crucial role in the dialogues between the Eastern Orthodox and Oriental Orthodox churches so much so that the main obstacle in the way of reconciliation and the restoration of communion was "the lifting of the anathemas pronounced by one side against those regarded as saints and teachers by the other side"! At informal discussions at a meeting in Addis Ababa in 1971 it was affirmed that the church has been given the authority "to bind and to lose", but the loosing may be accomplished quietly, unlike the binding.

For V.C. Samuel, the recognition that Orthodox theology is lived out in the liturgy involved work on situating the liturgy and its formation in their historical context, a detailed analysis of images and concepts contained in it and an interpretation of its transmission and use in varying cultural contexts.

V.C. Samuel contributed a number of papers to scholarly journals in both India and abroad. He also published several books in English and Malayalam, of which the most important is perhaps *The Council of Chalcedon Re-examined*, published in the Indian Theological Library series in 1977. Based on his doctoral dissertation, it incorporated the findings of his subsequent meticulous research on primary source material and also addressed the Christological task of the church in India.

The lifelong work of V.C. Samuel makes it possible, in the words of German theologian Dietrich Ritschl, for theology in the East and the West “to revisit genuine incarnation theologies of the 4th, 5th and 6th centuries in order to equip itself with powerful instruments for overcoming dualistic concepts in cosmology, anthropology and in political ethics” (in Jesudas Athyal, ed., *Keeping Hope Alive*, Madras, Academy of Indian Christian Theology and Church Administration, 1993, p.68).

Does Chalcedon Divide or Unite?, was the title of a book published by the World Council of Churches in 1981. The question is largely rhetorical. The differences between the Alexandrine and Antiochene understandings of the person of Christ were highlighted at the council in the year 451. Those who accepted its formulations were further united because of the council, as were those who rejected them. In the process the church became tragically divided. The subtitle of this book is reassuring: *‘Towards convergence in Orthodox Christology’* has steadily grown, and the churches of the West and the East are leaving behind them fifteen centuries of theological name – calling and pointless misunderstanding which were in fact often caused as V.C. Samuel showed magisterially by terminological confusion.

V.C. Samuel was never content to let dominant paradigms remain unchallenged. He passionately challenged Western insensitivity in labeling the churches of the non-Chalcedonian tradition as *'Monophysite'*. For him, such terminological assumptions, which could not be sustained by source analysis, were not only theologically and practically indefensible, but also reflected an arrogant bias on the part of Western historiography to impose categories of movements which lay outside the control.

Quite often theologians tend to be competitive, and to advertise themselves and their ecumenical achievements. Fr. Samuel was singularly self-effacing. His ecumenical commitment had a contextual dimension; it was never "for export only". We thank God for his life of sustained scholarship and his unfailing humility●

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