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## Book Review (in Lieu of a Belated Memorial): Ecumenical Adventure [Shapers of Ecumenical Theology Series 2]

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## BOOK REVIEW IN LIEU OF A BELATED MEMORIAL

Charles C. West, *Ecumenical Adventure [Shapers of Ecumenical Theology Series 2]*. Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2019, 158 pages, \$ 34.00. ISBN: 978-1-5064-4934-0

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Even before he came to stay at my house for two weeks almost exactly twenty years ago, in May 2001, I already knew that I was going to have a very special guest. Charles West was coming to teach an intensive module on Christian Ethics at the Evangelical Theological Seminary in Osijek, Croatia, where I (Luka) was on the faculty at the time. I was happy to host him and his wife Ruth, who accompanied him on this trip, in my apartment and also to show them around a little bit.

Just how special Charles really was, unfolded to me during their stay: As I observed him each morning, having his personal devotional with a Greek New Testament in one hand and Karl Barth's *The Humanity of God* in the other, and as I heard his amazing stories.

Out of those two weeks in Osijek grew a friendship with Charles and Ruth (later including my wife, Angela as well), which was to include several encounters on two continents, at CAREE (Christians Associated for Relationships with Eastern Europe) meetings and AAR (American Academy of Religion) conferences but also at Princeton Theological Seminary and in their home.

Charles West's memoirs, which were published just five days before his death on November 10, 2019, at age 98, is a welcome addition to the expanding literature on the history of ecumenism after World War II. Scholarly interest in interchurch relationships and in the worldwide ecumenical movement during the Cold War has grown in recent years, as research efforts in both Europe and North America show. Just to mention a few examples, the Department of Church History at the University of Helsinki has coordinated and conducted research on churches and the Cold War since the late 1990s and has become an important hub for scholars interested in the topic. In Germany, Katharina Kunter and Thomas Bremer have conducted and coordinated research on this topic. In North America, Norman A. Hjelm has acted as a catalyst for spurring on further study. An international conference including representatives from the Global South brought together researchers in Bratislava in 2010,

exploring the topic with a special focus on the former Eastern Bloc.<sup>1</sup> A number of doctoral dissertations have also been written on related matters, including one on Willem Adolph Visser't Hooft,<sup>2</sup> first secretary general of the World Council of Churches. The Fortress Press series, in which the book under review here was published, is an example proving the growing interest in the (auto)biographies of ecumenical pioneers.

Fittingly titled *Ecumenical Adventure*, Charles West's book is a collection of stories, also containing portions of previously published articles, detailing the various adventures he had across the world. The relatively short volume spans several decades and a broad geographical horizon from the United States to China, from Geneva to Berlin. It is primarily personal in its focus, although it continuously references important world events and political developments as important backdrops to the stories. Indeed, Keith Clements, former General Secretary of the Conference of European Churches, emphasizes in his foreword West's prophetic role in interpreting political and ideological developments and engaging with them in carefully thought-through dialogue.

What makes reading this book so compelling, however, is that it does not only provide its readers with behind-the-scenes looks at growing up in interwar America, experiencing the Communist takeover in China or encountering daily challenges while living as a Christian in post-war Berlin, but that it does so from a very personal point of view and constantly reflecting on the author's own faith and convictions. Indeed, this motif provides the backbone of the narrative: West details his spiritual search and his subsequent commitment to Christianity and keeps returning to this throughout the book as the most important source of a foundation for his actions.

Born in 1921, West's childhood was marked by the difficult experiences of the 1920s and 1930s, as the world, disillusioned by a world war and reeling from the Great Depression, was trying to come to terms with a new global reality. The cynicism, rebellion, and disillusionment prevalent in much of society were reflected in his family as well, leading to his parents' divorce. Charles found faith as a student at Columbia College, influenced by the World Student Christian Federation (WSCF) – which helped him gain a global perspective on Christianity from the very beginning. Following further studies at Union Theological Seminary and a year of doctoral studies at Yale University with a focus on Christian Ethics, Charles and

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<sup>1</sup> Július Filo (ed.), *Christian world community and the Cold War* (Bratislava: Evangelical Theological Faculty of the Comenius University in Bratislava, 2012).

<sup>2</sup> Jan Schubert, Willem Adolph Visser 't Hooft (1900–1985). *Ökumene und Europa* [Veröffentlichungen des Instituts für Europäische Geschichte Mainz 243] (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht 2017).

his wife Ruth (together with their firstborn, Russell) set out as missionaries to China by the Board of Foreign Missions of the Presbyterian Church in 1947, only to be forced to leave two years later, as the persecution of Christians by the new, Communist regime intensified.

Several years of involvement in Europe followed: The years spent in Germany – first in Mainz, then in Berlin until 1953, which was already a divided city but had not yet been sealed off by the wall – were transformative for Charles in many ways (p. 71). Here he got to experience how Protestants were grappling with the legacy of their complicity in Hitler’s national socialist regime, while in the German Democratic Republic, they were facing the new challenges and growing restrictions imposed upon them by an anti-religious ideology. His profound encounters with East German Christians – and his discovery of Dietrich Bonhoeffer’s theology – informed much of his later engagement for peace and justice. This he continued to pursue during his long career as Stephen Colwell Professor of Christian Ethics at Princeton Theological Seminary, inspiring several generations of students. In Geneva, Charles worked at the World Council of Churches and got not only to witness but also (particularly through his involvement in the Church and Society section at the Second General Assembly of the WCC in Evanston, IL in 1954 and as associate director of the Ecumenical Institute in Bossey) to shape the beginnings of the new worldwide ecumenical movement under the visionary leadership of Visser’t Hooft.

West’s experiences with Christianity and Christians in Eastern Europe were in no way limited to East Berlin: In his doctoral dissertation, he explored the engagement of select theologians and Christian thinkers with Marxist ideology, including the Czechoslovakian Protestant Josef Hromádka and the Russian Orthodox Nikolai Berdyaev.<sup>3</sup> Through the WCC, he entered into dialogue with Russian Orthodox theologians and was among the initiators and regular participants of Christian-Marxist dialogue across the East-West divide. He cultivated a long-standing friendship and partnership with Hromádka, with whom he worked together closely in the Christian Peace Conference (out of which CAREE emerged), forming its US Committee in 1965 and chairing it for seven years, before CAREE was founded in 1972. A brief chapter (pp. 117–121) is dedicated to describing these organizations, in which West held various posts, including that of CAREE President – in addition to being Member of the Advisory Board for OPREE.

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<sup>3</sup> The dissertation was subsequently published as *Communism and the Theologians* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1958). 387 pages. In it, West also examined the work of Emil Brunner, Reinhold Niebuhr, Paul Tillich and Karl Barth, who all represented various theological stances vis-à-vis Communism in western countries.

Reading the book is like walking through a panopticon of theological and ecumenical pioneers: West's connections and friendships with people such as Reinhold and Richard Niebuhr (who were both his professors), Eberhard Bethge (who credited West with encouraging him to publish Bonhoeffer's *Letters and Papers from Prison*, p. 72), Robert Mackie of WSCF, Visser't Hooft, Hendrik Kraemer, Suzanne de Dietrich, Paul Abrecht and M. M. Thomas at WCC, Hromádka and many others are spoken of warmly and with appreciation, while occasional differences of opinion are also mentioned. Charles writes of his wife and companion for 75 years – and a scholar and educator in her own right, – Ruth and their three sons repeatedly with gratitude.

Those who grew up behind the Iron Curtain may disagree with some of West's personal assessments, but this does not take away from the general message of the book, which – rather than uncritically glorifying the past – issues a call to Christians worldwide to learn from mistakes made earlier and to continue selflessly, respectfully and lovingly to engage themselves with everyone, regardless of the faith or ideology they hold onto.

Charles West opens his memoir by saying: “I was born a participant in history” (p. 1). After reading the book and reflecting on his life and achievements – now in the centenary of his birth – one can only agree that this was in no way an overstatement on his part.

