Chapter 4

A “Christian Internationale”
Christian Realism on the Frontlines of World Protestantism

“Christians hold the world together.” That was Van Dusen’s reminder to readers at the onset of World War II (he was quoting the anonymous second-century Letter to Diognetus). Van Dusen’s edict underscored the seasoned idealism of American churchmen as they gazed upon global disarray. Their ecumenical community (sans the Niebuhrs) was growing certain that Evangelical Catholic reformation was the singular solution to the demise of nation-state-based internationalism. Having just ended an eight-month world tour in preparation for the IMC meeting at Madras, India, in 1938, Van Dusen was in a prime position to report on Protestantism’s planetary achievements. His travels had included stops at what missionaries termed “Younger Churches” in China, Korea, the Fiji Islands, and New Zealand, among others. Van Dusen had been greeted by former UTS students while in Japan, confirming that his world truly had become small.

Symbolized by Gandhi’s warm welcome at Madras, Van Dusen worshipped with those still awaiting the advent of Wilsonian self-determination for subjugated souls. Anticolonialist commitment most often took the form of ecumenical support for indigenous theological and liturgical development. Yet Van Dusen also could not help registering disgust with the heavy-handed way in which his countrymen were proposing to modernize the Two-Thirds World. While in the Dutch East Indies, he had encouraged natives to embrace Western educational and medical expertise. Van Dusen’s stay in Fiji, however,
became an occasion to critique the effects of Westernization—namely, the deleterious effects of American movies upon Island youth.

Ecumenical Realist anti-imperialism glossed over grand WCC designs for the peoples Van Dusen visited. In his survey, Van Dusen fired liberal Protestant imaginations with prospects for a worldwide “united Christendom” to arise out of the still-warm cinders of the Middle Ages. He echoed Miller, the first American to suggest that Protestants devote themselves to exporting Christendom. The dilemma, of course, concerned how Eastern and Southern nationals might join in liberal evangelical appropriations of classically Western constructs. “How can usage of Christendom referring to old Europe be meaningful to Chinese Christians in a World Council of Churches?” Van Dusen complained elsewhere.¹

Van Dusen’s companions wanted to enlist what they had just begun calling the “World Christian Community” in the struggle against totalitarianism, broadly conceived. But were Western church leaders’ interests in line with those still fighting for freedom from Realists’ European allies? Was Van Dusen’s faith in indigenization tough enough to accept communist-backed anticolonialism throughout the Two-Thirds World? Or, would Realists rather move the brewing battle between “civilization” and “barbarism” into those lands?

To understand how American Evangelical Catholicism became wedded to the international crusade for God’s Totalitarianism, we must more closely examine Realists’ closer cooperation in and with the ecumenical movement. Unlike the 1920s gatherings that they generally followed from a distance, Theological Discussion Group members were active participants in the landmark 1937 Life and Work meeting at Oxford and the Faith and Order meeting in Edinburgh. Those conferences, in turn, proved foundational to realizing Miller’s World Council on Christian Strategy—officially the World Council of Churches—during and after World War II. Realists and colleagues couched discussion of expanding world Protestant ecumenism in an innovative nostalgic discourse centered on “rescuing Christendom.”

Protestant ecumenism was the offspring of foreign missions movements, and so this first section looks at the particular constellation of ideas about missions that most moved Realists and their associates. During the 1920s and 1930s, “new” liberal missionaries like E. Stanley Jones were reframing missionary work as religio-cultural ambassadorship instead of a strategy for soul conquest. Efforts to meet the Two-Thirds World on terms of mutual exchange targeted the end of Western paternalism. However, liberal missionaries (as