

THE WORLD COUNCIL OF CHURCHES

A WORM'S EYE VIEW*

I have given this talk this particular title not because I have assumed a new posture of humility, repentance and obeisance, but simply because I want to try and look at the World Council of Churches from the grass roots, as it were, or as a common or garden member of its Central Committee for the past fifteen years.

One conclusion I have arrived at is that to be a member of the Central Committee is to live dangerously! Quite suddenly you find yourself faced with a choice - to play safe and keep "mum" or really to become involved in what is going on, to share your convictions and your prejudices, your knowledge and your ignorance, and to be altogether vulnerable! For good or ill, and with no small measure of trepidation, I decided to take the latter course. I must confess that it was a salutary experience in which I gave a little, I trust, and received much.

My first ecumenical experience had been in 1939 when, as a representative of my college in Scotland, I attended the World Youth Congress in Amsterdam. This was one of the few really formative experiences of my life. It was there that I met people like Dr J. R. Mott and Dr Visser t'Hooft. It was there too that I shared in services of worship quite unlike any that I had experienced before, and which opened my eyes to the riches of Christian traditions other than my own. I had been brought up in Scotland, and this visit to Amsterdam was my very first trip abroad. The worship service in my local Baptist church was simple and sincere. My ecumenical experience was almost nil. I had met Presbyterians of course. It is difficult not to meet them in Scotland! But Lutherans and Orthodox and even Anglicans were a foreign breed. And Roman Catholics? Perish the thought! But there we were in Amsterdam, thrown in at the deep end. All together! I must confess I was deeply moved not so much by the speaking as by the atmosphere. In the Orthodox litany, I was in a foreign land, and yet I was strangely at home. Behind the form and the ritual I was able to recognise the same gospel that I myself professed, and behind the bearded faces and the strange dress I saw men of deep devotion and strong faith. In the African negro service, the mood changed, but the message remained the same. And so it was with all the others. I began to realise that my God - my Baptist God - my Scottish Baptist God - was too small. Amsterdam was the beginning of new horizons and a new vision of the variety of that unity we find in Christ's church. I remember being quite stunned by the widely varying forms of Christian expression which I found there and by the way in which different cultures, traditions and ideologies can shape that expression.

* Address given during an Extra-Mural Course on the Vancouver Assembly at Bristol Baptist College, February 1983.

This same wonder and bewilderment was experienced again when I went to my first WCC Assembly in Uppsala in 1968, and to subsequent meetings. For quite a while I felt like a fish out of water. To share in the discussions at the Assembly or in the Central Committee was, at times, a frightening experience. It is difficult enough preparing speeches at the best of times, but it is much more difficult having to do so under pressure and in response to debates which seemed to be constantly changing direction. The task was made even more difficult by the intrusion of microphones and television cameras which can be, to say the least, rather off-putting. On almost every topic that came up for discussion I discovered there were experts present; but it was a consolation to know that experts are not always right!

There were times when, I must confess, I felt very strange, and even lonely as a Central Committee member, especially in the earlier days before I had made any real contacts with my neighbours. Only gradually, moreover, did I come to appreciate that Africans, Asians, Russians and the rest, were not British, and had to be accepted for what they were, and that they came from quite different social, cultural, political and theological backgrounds. Ecclesiologically as well as theologically I learned that I had to think globally and not parochially. In particular I had to dig myself out of my British setting and, within that, out of my British Baptist setting, and try to understand how other Christians ticked within an ecumenical community. I met South Americans, for example, who were fighting for freedom against tyrannical governments; I met South Africans who were utterly degraded by that hateful thing called apartheid; I met citizens of the United States who were riddled through and through with guilt over Vietnam and over race relations; I met citizens of India who were extremely critical of the affluence of the West; I met citizens of African States who were struggling for freedom and identity; I met citizens of socialist countries in Eastern Europe who had to live under atheistic governments and be the church of God there.

I began to observe tensions which I had not been too conscious of here in Britain. Sometimes these were cultural as in the case of Red Indians in America, whose land and land rights had been taken from them almost overnight, in the name of progress and development; sometimes they were economic as in the case of India; sometimes they were social (and here British imperialism got its share of the big stick); sometimes it was sexist as in Thailand (I recall a woman saying, "In my country men are the front legs of the elephant, women are the hind legs", and again, "In my country widows are inherited like furniture"),

To the British ear some of the things I heard seemed rather extreme, and some of the people over-sensitive. But I had to learn, with patience and repentance, that I mustn't be too quick to judge from my very different situation in the West. Many people spoke out of an experience of bitter suffering and exploitation over many centuries. I remember a Kenyan

saying to me, "When you have been bitten by a snake, you jump when you see a worm". That graphic statement helped me to understand how many of my fellow Christians in the Third World felt.

In all this I had to keep careful watch on my own prejudices, recognise them for what they were and try to eradicate them. But what if I detected prejudices in others? How were these to be dealt with? On one occasion, I recall, I found myself in argument over some obscure theological point with a very articulate American negro who argued passionately but, as I thought, heretically! When I asked where he had received his theological education, he confessed that he had received none at all, and that he was a pilot with an American airline! I mention this not to discredit air pilots as competent theologians, but to illustrate that it is sometimes difficult in such discussions to find common ground.

Such tensions became quite marked in discussions concerning the Programme to Combat Racism. It was in this connection that I myself had the greatest sense of frustration. I hope I am as strongly anti-racist as my neighbour; but I discovered very deep feelings on the part of some others who seemed to interpret criticism of structure and method of operation as a betrayal of principle and an acceptance of a racist position. Some of us found this particularly hard to bear, especially when the South African papers cashed in on it and tried to make the same point but from a quite different angle. I found in this connection, as in others, that one had to be utterly honest and consistent in what one said at the Central Committee, and what one said on returning home to one's own constituency and church fellowship.

I have mentioned that Britain came in for its share of the big stick. This was so at the Nairobi Assembly, for example, where Britain was charged from the platform with being racist. I believe, on reflection, that the British delegates to the Assembly were too sensitive at that point, and too much on the defensive. The fact is that we here in Britain have a great deal to repent of. I recall a play which was put on at Nairobi which told its own story in this connection. On to the stage came soldiers with guns blazing, subduing the native Africans. After them followed closely the traders, exchanging glass beads for ivory tusks. And closely behind them, came the missionaries! The play was a caricature; nevertheless the image remains. It was interesting that all three groups spoke with pronouncedly English accents!

I have spoken about some of the difficulties of belonging to the Central Committee. Let me say something now about the benefits accruing from membership of such a body.

For one thing I formed a number of lasting friendships with people I would not even have met had I not been a member. To worship with an Orthodox Bishop with long beard and flowing gown is one thing; to go swimming with an Orthodox Bishop with long beard and baggy pants is quite another! To have a formal theological discussion with the same Orthodox bishop is one

thing; to have an informal meal with him is quite another. Friendships of this kind cut right across cultural, ecclesiological and theological barriers.

And of course, it cuts both ways. It's a good thing that Baptists, for example, should be seen and heard as part of the Universal Church. And here we owe a great deal to Ernest Payne whose standing was very high indeed in ecumenical circles, and who did much more for the reputation of Baptists than many of us realise. As a Baptist I myself have been received by the Orthodox Patriarch in Bucharest, for example, or by his counterpart in Sofia, simply because I was a member of the Central Committee and was recognised as such. What is more, I was recognised as a Baptist. This in itself is much more significant than it might appear to be. As a result of their belonging to the WCC Baptists have not only learned a great deal, they have had a considerable amount to share with others, and this has been recognised.

Membership of the Central Committee also gave me opportunity to meet some of the world's outstanding Christian leaders. Let me name just a few. I think of Philip Potter, a gentle giant from the Caribbean, theologically educated as a Methodist in Britain, and with a considerable depth of spirituality who has won the confidence of Christian people the world over. Or I think of Archbishop Ted Scott of Canada who is a man of God if ever there was one whose prayers and wise counsel and pastoral concern have helped many. There is Archbishop Sundby of Sweden whose quiet dignity and concern for peaceful relationships throughout the world have made a considerable impact. There is Visser t'Hooft, the elder statesman of the ecumenical movement whom I first met away back in 1939. There is Archbishop Sarkasian, an astute chairman, an able theologian and an influential churchman. There is Miguez Bonino; an outstanding Protestant theologian from Argentina who speaks and writes against a background of oppression and the need for liberation. There is Metropolitan Gregorios, who is incisive in his thinking and a doughty opponent in debate. There is Konrad Raiser, an able theologian and excellent administrator on the staff of the WCC. There is Metropolitan Juvenaly who is a most influential figure in the USSR as was Metropolitan Nikodim who died only a few years ago as a relatively young man. There is General Simatupang of Indonesia, a layman and a leader of the church in his country. Others include Olle Dahlen, the Swedish Ambassador to the United Nations; John Deschner, a Methodist theologian from the USA; Olle Engstrom, a College Principal from Sweden; Dr Nissiotis, a most able Greek scholar; Kyaw Than, a Baptist Professor from Burma; Karoly Toth, a leading churchman from Hungary; Bishop Hempel from Germany - and so on the names could go.

The WCC began in 1948 as a heavily weighted Western body, but the situation has changed quite markedly. Now there are able and influential church leaders from the Orthodox Church of the East and from the Third World, and this exposure to one another across traditional barriers cannot but be for the good of all.

Membership of the Central Committee has broadened my appreciation and understanding not only of other church traditions, but also of the Gospel itself. And this can be illustrated in at least three ways. First, the ecumenical experience has kept on reminding me that the Gospel has a societal and not just an individual dimension. In the Old Testament God is more involved with corporate bodies than he is with individuals, and in the New Testament the salvation of the individual is not to be separated from the gathering together of the body or the over arching vision of the Kingdom. Justice and peace of all kinds are as much God's concern as are the forgiveness and sanctification of persons one by one. Second, it reminds me that the Kingdom of God is this-worldly as well as other-worldly and that it breaks through in advance. God's purpose transcends the conditions and structures of the world; but what happens to these is none the less a critical element in what God is doing in his saving activity. The social, political and economic issues of the contemporary scene are the concern of his church.

Third, it is integral to the Incarnation to take cultures and faiths other than our own seriously, even as we offer those who live within them the only, true liberating Word.

Let me now try to illustrate some of the things I have been saying by referring to two significant documents which were adopted by the Central Committee at its meeting in July 1982.

The first is entitled *Mission and Evangelism, an Ecumenical Affirmation*¹, and is a statement of the Commission on World Mission and Evangelism. A charge sometimes levelled against the WCC is that, in the years following the Uppsala Assembly in 1968, too much stress was laid on the "horizontal" dimension of the Christian life, and not enough on the "vertical", that political and social issues were emphasised to the neglect of evangelism and proclamation. I recall a prominent Indian Christian rather scoffingly referring to proclamation as "a mere verbalizing of the gospel" and that was the mood of quite a number. The situation, however, was largely rectified at Nairobi in 1975, not least by addresses from Philip Potter, M. M. Thomas, and Bishop Aryas of Bolivia. Let me quote at this point from a personal report of Nairobi drawn up by Bishop Lesslie Newbiggin: "Some of the criticism has been (in my opinion) justified, but the issues have been confused. It is not a question of finding a right compromise between 'vertical' and 'horizontal' - which would presumably be a trajectory of 45 degrees - leading into an orbit which would touch neither earth nor heaven! It is a matter of finding the right relation between the law and the Gospel... At Nairobi we really heard the Gospel; we heard the call to faith in Jesus Christ; we were able to make together that true confession of sin which is only possible to those who know that they are forgiven". Such a statement finds corroboration in this most recent Central Committee document.

It asserts that sin is to be found both in individual and corporate forms, both in slavery of the human will and in social, political and economic structures of domination and

dependence. It recognises the "inexplicable relationship" between ecumenism and evangelisation, and emphasises that at the very heart of the church's vocation in the world is the proclamation of the Kingdom of God inaugurated in Jesus the Lord, crucified and risen. The starting point of this proclamation, it asserts, is "Christ and Him crucified", to whom men and women are invited to commit their lives. The proclamation of the Gospel includes an invitation to recognise and accept in a personal decision the saving Lordship of Christ.

But we cannot limit our witness to a supposedly private area of life. The Lordship of Christ is to be proclaimed to all realms of life. The Good News of the Kingdom is a challenge to the structures of society as well as a call to individuals to repent. The church is called not only to announce the good news of forgiveness and hope, but also to denounce principalities and powers, injustice and sin. In some countries there is pressure to limit religion to the private life of the believer. But the church claims the right to exist publicly and to address itself openly to issues of human concern. The development of science and technology in recent years at a fantastic rate raises inevitably basic theological questions that must be taken into account if we are to interpret aright the gospel of the Kingdom. In this document great emphasis is laid on one aspect of our mission which has been too long neglected, namely identification with the poor. They suffer a double injustice. They are victims of the oppression of an unjust economic order or an unjust political distribution of power, and at the same time they are deprived of God's special care for them. The proclamation of the gospel to the poor is a priority criterion by which we are to judge our missionary endeavour today.

The report goes on to face honestly the tensions created by what it calls "the inculturation" of the gospel and the witness of the church to people of other faiths. With reference to the first of these, the authors would have agreed with a Baptist theologian who wrote these words recently: "The future of the Gospel in the world may well depend on the extent to which it is allowed to clothe itself in forms appropriate to new communities, new cultures, and new times. To perpetuate its cultural captivity to the West would be not only to deny its true nature, but also to endanger its power among the peoples and societies of the future. If by A.D.2000 most of the world's Christians will live in Asia, Africa and Latin America, what will become then of a faith that has been forced into an unbreakable alliance with the categories and modes of Europe and North America?"² The attitude of the Report to "mission to people of other faiths" is summed up in these words: "Because He is the source of all life there is salvation in no other. [But] among Christians there are still serious differences of understanding as to how this salvation in Christ is available to people of diverse religious persuasions".³

It is a significant document, not least because it is truly international and ecumenical in its authorship and in its acceptance. There are things in it that we may find difficult

to accept. But for this very reason it forces us to think in new ways about our task of Christian mission. Jim Wilkie of the Conference for World Mission in an introduction to the Report singles out two matters of this kind.

The first relates to the experience of the liturgical celebration of the Orthodox Church as an agent of conversion. We do not normally think of the Orthodox Communion as particularly "evangelical", yet it can be argued that communities of Orthodox believers in Eastern Europe are having more success in communicating the faith to their own children than are many Western Christians today. The second relates to mission to people of other faiths and ideologies. There are difficult matters here that we should be ready to examine carefully, not least living as we do in a pluralistic society in Britain. Insights are given which have been debated since the days of Clement of Alexandria, and no doubt will continue to be in dispute, but the Report challenges us to revise our theological thinking in the light of modern perceptions of the ancient religions other than Christianity.

The second document to which I would refer is the *Report on Human Rights*, accepted by the Central Committee also in 1982.

Now, human rights have been an important element in the work of the WCC since its inception, but they received emphasis at St Pölten in 1974 in a conference entitled "Human Rights and Christian Responsibilities" and at Nairobi itself. This emphasis was indeed timely, because, as the Report says, "the violation of human rights throughout the world has reached epidemic proportions; the incidents of patterns of consistent and gross violations of the crudest and most inhuman type have multiplied to an extent unparalleled in human history".

At Nairobi something quite dramatic took place. A Report on Disarmament and the Helsinki Agreement was presented. An amendment to the final paragraph was proposed by Jacques Rossel of the Swiss Protestant Federation, censuring the USSR on restrictions to religious liberty. A good deal of procedural confusion followed. A separate "hearing" was arranged and at last a much milder statement was accepted referring to the "alleged denial of religious liberty in the USSR". Jacques Rossel was prepared to accept this if one further point was added: "The Assembly requests the General Secretary to see to it that the subject of religious liberty be the subject of intensive consultation with the member churches of the states signatory to the Helsinki Agreement and to make a first report to the Central Committee in August 1976". The Russian delegation abstained, not because they had no wish to collaborate with their Christian brethren in an endeavour to deepen their understanding of human rights, but because of what they called "the prevailing atmosphere... of haste, nerves, emotion and divisiveness". The other delegations from Eastern Europe voted in favour. This was a new and important precedent and things have never been quite the same again.⁴

At the same Assembly, important guide-lines on human rights were drawn up and approved. These guide-lines were a remarkable

mile-stone in the ecumenical understanding of human rights for at least two reasons: The first was that religious liberty was seen, to be inseparable from other fundamental human rights; and the second, that for the first time in ecumenical history, the churches arrived at a consensus regarding the content of human rights. Under the heading "The right to religious freedom", this important statement was made: "By religious freedom, we mean the freedom to have or to adopt a religion or belief of one's choice, and freedom, either individually or in community with others, and in public or private, to manifest one's religion or belief in worship, observance, practice and teaching. Religious freedom should also include the right and duty of religious bodies to criticise the ruling powers when necessary, on the basis of their religious convictions".⁵

Agreement was reached on the content of human rights under six headings: the right to a basic guarantee of life; the rights to self-determination and to cultural identity and the rights of minorities; the right to participate in decision-making within the community; the right to dissent; the right to personal dignity; and the right to religious freedom.⁶ Since 1975 repression has grown and the involvement of the churches in human rights has been intensified, so that, in some countries, the church is the last remaining base of protest and protection against the violation of human rights. Many national and local instruments have been created, as a result of the impetus given at Nairobi. On the one hand, there has been a new dynamic given to the churches and on the other hand new tensions have emerged both within and among the churches.

We should note in particular three programmes which have come into being and which reflect this increased involvement and concern. These are a human rights resources office for Latin America; the Churches' Human Rights Programme for the Implementation of the Helsinki Final Act (of which I am privileged to be a member); and the British Churches' Forum on Human Rights which I serve as its chairman.

Meanwhile the Churches' Commission on International Affairs (CCIA) has established for itself a reputation for accuracy and objectivity. It has concentrated on four areas of concern in particular: the problems of torture, militarism and human rights, religious liberty and theological reflection on human rights. In 1978 it appointed a Human Rights Advisory Group consisting of 25 members. It is hoped, after Vancouver, to replace this by a smaller and more effective group which would note those human rights which are of special concern to the churches in order to clarify the root causes of violations of human rights and to identify options for church action.

In preparing for Vancouver and after there will need to be intensive study of the relationship between human rights and political change, including the controversial issue of military intervention for humanitarian purposes, and also the impact of economic systems on human rights in the awareness that human rights violations are often the result of unjust structures. We do not know how important a place human rights will have at Vancouver, but already the churches have been reaping the

fruits of Nairobi, and the hope has been expressed that the work will continue with even greater dedication.

This worm's eye view shows a Christian body which will continue to be controversial because it is trying to see and implement the working out of the gospel within different nations, colours, cultures and ideologies. It will continue to inspire a love/hate relationship, and prove a stumbling block to many. But it will, I believe, continue to be used in the providence of God, to be an instrument and sign of the coming Kingdom.

NOTES

- 1 Reproduced in *International Review of Mission*, Vol.71 (October 1982), pp.427-451.
- 2 *Foundations*, vol.XXV, January-March 1982, American Baptist Historical Society, p.43.
- 3 *Op.cit.*, p.446.
- 4 For a description of these events, see *Breaking Barriers, Nairobi 1975*, edited by David M. Paton, SPCK, London, pp.169ff.
- 5 *Ibid.*, p.106.
- 6 *Ibid.*, pp.103ff.

D. S. RUSSELL

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MR ALLAN CALDER

Mr Allan H. Calder, F.C.A., a Vice-President of the Baptist Historical Society, died on 10th February 1983. Mr Calder, a chartered accountant, was the longest-serving Treasurer of the Society to date, taking over from Mr F. J. Blight in 1934 and handing over to the Revd Thornton Elwyn in 1966, at which point he was elected to be a Vice-President in recognition of this long and outstanding service to the Society. This was of course but one of the ways in which he placed his professional expertise at the service of the denomination. The immediate post-war years were very difficult for the Society financially, but the sounder position reached by the 1960s owed much to Mr Calder's service. Mr Calder's own historical interest centred on his own church, Upton Chapel, where he was a deacon for many years, and on hymns and their writers.