

# Liberty or Liberation: the Dilemma of the WCC

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The identity of the World Council of Churches is not easy to define. Looking at the activities of the WCC one sees a great variety of study-programmes and working-projects which often follow one other in rapid succession, and one gets the impression of a lively organism, readily taking up new initiatives and responding to new challenges. This complexity does not make it any easier to define exactly "What in the world is the World Council of Churches".<sup>1</sup> It has many aspects, it issues a variety of statements and reports, it has many different representatives and shows the world and its own member-churches many faces. It is clear that not all its activities are equally appreciated by all its adherents, but the fact that this world-wide fellowship of such diverse churches exists in our world, torn apart by cultural, racial and political tensions and by national, religious and ideological passions, is in itself a most remarkable and happy phenomenon. The best description, probably, is to call it the centre of a network of inter-church relations and of the many concerns of its member-churches.

The question becomes more complicated still when we try to ascertain what the diachronic identity of the WCC is. The Council has changed considerably since its creation in 1948 and its perceptions and positions differ from those in the early years. To understand this we have to take note of what is said in the Constitution about public statements:

In the performance of its functions, the Council through its Assembly or through its Central Committee may publish statements upon any situation or issue with which the Council or its constituent churches may be confronted. While such statements may have great significance and influence as the expression of the judgment or concern of so widely representative a Christian body, yet their authority will consist only of the weight which they carry by their own truth and wisdom.

Thus, statements of the WCC have no formal authority and it seems that one just has to find out whether a declaration, which one might deem to testify of much truth and wisdom, is still accepted in the ecumenical fel-

lowship or whether it has been filed in the historical archives. Does this mean that there is no diachronic identity, that there is no continuity in the young ecumenical tradition? Could it be that what once was called "the heart or the central conviction of the ecumenical movement" later on lost all relevance? Some declarations of earlier days like the Toronto declaration (1950) about the ecclesiological status of the WCC seem still to be widely accepted, but what about the Declarations on Religious Liberty, issued by the Assemblies of Amsterdam (1948) and New Delhi (1961)?

What is the diachronic identity of the WCC on the issue of religious liberty and what is at present the authority of these statements? Can they still function as guidelines for the work in this field? No other declarations have been published since by "so widely representative a Christian body". The *Declaratio de libertate religiosa. Dignitatis Humanae* of the Second Vatican Council has shown that a real convergence has come about among the Christian churches regarding their views on social religious liberty.<sup>2</sup> It is moreover a fact that there have never been any requests from the side of churches in Eastern Europe to revise these declarations, although their representatives raise an obligatory protest when the declarations are applied to their situation.

The question is of more than passing importance, because in speaking of the situation of the churches in Eastern Europe it is very useful to have a sound basis in Christian principles on religious liberty. It must constantly be made clear by those who speak, publish and inform about the life of these churches and try to evaluate their position in society that they are not inspired by political motives — the accusation of anti-communist agitation and cold-war propaganda is repeatedly raised against them in the Soviet media — but find their standards and guidelines in the great declarations of world Christianity, which express a commonly held position on social religious liberty.

It may be that a too emphatic public judgment on the implementation of the rights of religious liberty in communist countries is not deemed possible for international church organisations in which churches from these countries participate. W. A. Visser 't Hooft wrote as early as 1949 that "our inevitable and necessary reactions to the infringements of religious liberty and to totalitarian practices will create formidable tensions."<sup>3</sup> It seems that the WCC wishes at all costs to avoid this sort of tension, which came to the surface for a short while at the Nairobi Assembly (1975), but it has constantly admonished the churches in the West to pursue the study of the situation as regards religious liberty in Eastern Europe. Another veteran, E. C. Blake, wrote as General-Secretary in 1972 an open letter to the Reformed Churches in the Netherlands concerning human rights in Eastern Europe. In this letter he stressed the need for better information: "The many restrictions on churches in Eastern Europe make it difficult to ask these churches to publish more about their life themselves, but studies

made and reported in the West can help to lay a solid base for real knowledge, understanding and effective help.”

This letter has been a sort of “letter of instruction” for some students of Eastern Europe to take this work in hand, with the intention of stimulating the knowledge, understanding and help of these churches. They felt this to be part of their ecumenical mission. But does the WCC still accept its own declarations on religious liberty as valid statements which can function as sound basic principles for students and institutes which deal with Eastern Europe? May we still suppose that there exists a diachronic identity in this aspect of the activities of the WCC or has a complete shift of policy come about?

Two rather disquieting developments may be observed. 1. In the first place the main declarations have been strongly criticised in recent study-papers.<sup>4</sup> According to these publications, they reflect cold-war tensions and western liberal-individualistic concepts, and are as such apparently of very limited importance. Historically the concept of human rights is regarded as a product of the French and American revolutions and nothing is said of the long tradition of suffering and oppression of Christians belonging to minority groups in Europe.

The declarations are now depicted as weapons designed for the cold war and as sublimated expressions of Christian egoism, which wants to restore forlorn privileges and regain former positions of power. But in that case one is providing a justification for the ancient accusation that any effort towards the implementation of religious liberty is political agitation and a threat to peaceful co-existence. When religious liberty is not seen as a basic human right, it can be devalued into a product of the bourgeois revolution and linked to the rights of the private ownership of the means of production and free trade. Religious liberty has then become a completely western concept and its advocates can be unmasked as the lackeys of capitalistic exploitation and neo-colonial domination. Instead of being the motor of human liberation and emancipation, religious liberty risks being considered a tool of human oppression. When the WCC declarations on religious liberty are considered mainly as a product of western culture and the furthering of its implementation as a tool of western politics, then we are moving into a sphere which seems to be alien to that in which they were originally conceived. It is self-evident that the study and discussion of the Christian conception of religious liberty has to be pursued and that the experiences and biblical insights of other peoples have to be taken into account. The Christian basis and the clear biblical anthropological background has certainly to be more fully unfolded. The endeavour of the Central Committee (1979) to start a renewed study of this issue has failed completely but should be pursued by theologians.

For the time being it might be a wise policy to respect the work done by

the "old guard" and to resist even subtle forms of its defamation.

2. Another development which is very disquieting is the denial of support which those who are committed to the cause of religious liberty in Eastern Europe encounter in the World Council of Churches. A report by a staff-member of the Commission of the Churches on International Affairs (CCIA) contains some very biased remarks and seems to put into serious doubt the honest intentions of a number of past and present ecumenists.<sup>5</sup> Two passages must be mentioned. In speaking about the post-war developments in Europe the author states that:

many Christians in the West saw the possibility of propitiating for their sins of omission during fascist rule by turning to a fervent commitment to the religious liberty of their sister churches in Eastern Europe. And in doing so they played directly into the hands of a political manoeuvre which has succeeded in tearing the continent even further and irreparably asunder, a confrontation which has since been called "Cold War".

From a historical point of view this is a completely false statement, as this author has tried to show elsewhere,<sup>6</sup> and it not only disavows the "old guard" of European ecumenists, but is even insulting to all those who suffered under and fought against fascist rule. The involvement of the generation engaged in the ecumene in the days of the First Assembly and thereafter in the struggle for liberty and democratic values against fascism, had sharpened their awareness of the fate of those who are victims of injustice and enslavement in the totalitarian regimes. The ecumenical generation which cared for the fate of the sister churches in Eastern Europe can be made responsible for tearing asunder our continent only by those who have a completely distorted view of European ecumenical history.

A second deplorable passage in the CCIA booklet speaks about the contribution of the Russian Orthodox Church to the programme of the WCC and of what its leaders expected from their western counterparts: understanding of their political environment and of their theological contributions.

These expectations have to some extent been satisfied, but repeatedly also disappointed. After more than twenty years, there can still be found a considerable level of mistrust, which has been fed by forces hostile to the ecumenical movement. The Russian Orthodox Church in particular has been the object of such hostility, its leaders having been portrayed as agents of the Soviet government, through whose activities the WCC itself becomes a tool of Soviet policies. This has been the stock argument of the South African government, for example, which attempts by this means to discredit the WCC . . .

These sentences are taken from a chapter which discusses the Nairobi

Assembly (1975) and the public debate on religious liberty in the Soviet Union which took place during that Assembly. It is essential to rectify the misconception that raising the subject of religious liberty can be interpreted as a hostile attack on the churches concerned. Usually they are regarded as the victims and not the authors of the restrictions on social religious liberty and the Nairobi debate has been regarded by many as a sign of solidarity with Christian believers in the Soviet Union; which indeed it was meant to be. But whatever this whole passage with its different allegations might mean, it raises the suspicion that those who apply the declarations of the WCC on religious liberty to the situation in Eastern European countries are out of order in the ecumenical fellowship and are, at best unintentionally out of naivety, but otherwise wilfully, part of a dark anti-ecumenical conspiracy. It would be unwise to attach too much importance to this pamphlet, but it is indicative of a climate which is not very susceptible to an open discussion of the issue of religious liberty in Eastern Europe and of the problems which the ecumenical collaboration with the churches in that region involves.

The question of the diachronic identity of the WCC in the field of study and action on social religious liberty is thus not easy to answer. The least one can say is that the profile of the WCC in this field is very low — certainly as far as Eastern Europe is concerned. The main declarations were republished in 1980<sup>7</sup> but one gets the impression that this is more an act of piety for the past or a reminder of former engagements, than a reflection of the importance which is attached to them at present.

### *Critics of the WCC*

The critics of the WCC form a very mixed crowd. In the Netherlands Reformed Church, one of the founding members of the WCC, there has always been a segment, increasing rather rapidly at present, which is very critical of the ecumenical movement. There are also many critical voices in the Russian Orthodox Church, but for them it is difficult to make themselves heard other than by way of *samizdat* publications and through appeals and letters to the outside world. In the Russian churches the ecumene is the official business of high church authorities, who have permission to travel abroad and visit international conferences. It is the terrain of the Department for External Church Relations. The rank and file of the believers have never been able to share in the ecumenical process at the parish level.

The believers of the Russian Church never harboured any special illusions about the membership of the Moscow Patriarchate in the WCC; that act was sanctioned by the government during the period of extremely brutal persecution of religion, and obviously followed the government's own strategic aims,

wrote Gleb Yakunin and Lev Regelson to the Nairobi Assembly. The believers are cut off from information about the WCC, they do not know anything of its history, traditions and life and they belong to a church which even at the 1948 Moscow Congress appealed to all Orthodox churches to adopt the most effective measures for the purpose of preserving the principles of true Christianity in the world from the powerful seductive influence of the modern ecumenical movement. These believers sometimes realise that their leaders are not in a position to bring their sorrows and concerns before a forum of the world church. Sometimes they hope that nevertheless this will be done, but they can see no signs of solidarity from the western churches. It is true that the West cannot be of much help in easing their situation. We know all the reasons why, but the fact remains that they have every reason to feel abandoned by fellow-Christians. Is it not understandable that a certain bitterness prevails when they speak of the world-ecumene? In the face of these critics we can only bow our heads.

#### *Liberty and Liberation*

A growing uneasiness can be noticed in the western churches about the silence of the WCC on human rights problems and especially the religious liberty issue in Eastern Europe. But the critique should be addressed in the first place to responsible bodies in these churches themselves and to their ecumenical representatives. The WCC should not be turned into a scapegoat for the failures of the western churches to formulate a clear policy in respect of their ecumenical relations with Eastern European churches. When the WCC is dealing more with problems of liberation than with problems of liberty, this is also a reflection of what is happening in the churches themselves.

In the western churches and in the small groups of those who deal with ecumenical questions, there exists a tension between those who are engaged in Third World problems and put the main emphasis on liberation, and those who occupy themselves with the Second World and give special attention to liberty. Interest in, knowledge of and contacts with the Third World are very extensive within the western churches. This is historically understandable on the basis of the fact that the Third World has been the traditional mission-field. Personal involvement in Third World problems is rather intensive, especially among world-oriented, idealistic Christians. It is possible for them to go and live there and to demonstrate their solidarity with the needs and expectations of the people and to cooperate in the building up of a new society.

All this is not possible in the case of Eastern Europe. The historical ties of the churches with Eastern Europe have been few and what interest there is, is of recent date. Eastern Europe is a closed society, where young

intellectuals cannot go to study social problems or engage in interesting initiatives and where the language-barrier is high. Idealistic expectations about a new future are hardly to be found there, especially after the "Prague Spring" of 1968. On the contrary, those who really get to know that part of the world are inclined to become more and more sceptical about the ways of Marxist-Leninist socialism. During a short period the GDR functioned as model of a new society for some groups of Christians for Socialism, but that has passed rather quickly.

There are a considerable number of reasons and acceptable explanations for the fact that the attention of those involved in ecumenical programmes of the churches has focused on the Third World. It is regrettable however that this has been accompanied by a growing neglect of the problems of the Second World and an alienation from those who occupy themselves mainly with this area. This alienation has been aggravated by the fact that involvement with Third World problems is often coupled with expectations of radical renewal which could be brought about by revolutionary changes inspired by Marxist concepts and with a criticism of western society which is accused of opposing this process of renewal and is made responsible for the present situation.

Those who direct their attention to the Second World tend on the contrary to become more and more negative about "socialism as it really exists" and can regard only with sorrow the way in which this is sometimes presented as a new and better way of life and as a workable alternative. This is undoubtedly one of the roots of the present tensions between ecumenically oriented Christians. Those who deal with liberation dominate the ecumenical field whilst the others remain standing in front of the gate. However, the tide is turning and a number of organisations have taken up a task which in their judgment has been neglected by the churches and by the WCC. There is both wheat and chaff among them, but the more serious ones present to the ecumene its unpaid bills. They should not be denounced as part of an anti-ecumenical plot but taken seriously.

They should more especially be considered as an incentive for the western member-churches to reconsider their ecumenical policy and their passive role in the collaboration with Eastern European churches. Of course, the western churches should not dominate the WCC or use their financial or intellectual influence to dictate the agenda. This is repeated over and over again and has been understood. But an over-reaction leading to isolation and "flagellatism" is equally undesirable. The western churches have to make up their minds and when this has been done they should make it clear what they regard as the right policy and stand by it. It must be possible to say to our Eastern European partners: if you cannot speak with us about your problems of liberty, we cannot speak with you about our problems of liberation. If you have constantly to take account in the ecumenical discussion of the possible reactions of your government, we

have to take account of the possible reactions of the majority of our church people.

It is not unthinkable that the pressure on the governing bodies of the western churches may increase to such an extent that they might feel obliged to give their participation in certain aspects of the work of the WCC a low profile. It is rather alarming that the western participants in international bodies seem to be more inclined to retire than those from the socialist world. And the participation of the churches from Eastern Europe in the WCC is rather advantageous for their governments. It enables them to present an image of respectability and of religious freedom to the Third World, to prevent critical observations about their social and international policy and to obtain via the churches a trustworthy opening to public opinion in the West and the Third World. And for all this they need no concessions. The free import of Christian literature is still not allowed, except in some rare cases; any western influence on the church membership can be prevented; information about those aspects of the ecumenical programme which are not quite acceptable can be censored; and the authorities can deal as they like with dissenting priests, even those, like Gleb Yakunin, well-known in the West. The western churches were satisfied that he was given a Bible in his prison on the eve of the Vancouver Assembly!

It seems very unlikely that the churches from the Soviet Union would be prevented by their government from continuing their participation, and the same applies to the other Eastern European countries. The western churches should not allow themselves to be silenced by threats of retreat from the churches in socialism. In determining their policy, they must among other things ask whether the CCIA is still a useful and relevant ecumenical commission and in what way it serves the ecumenical collaboration of the churches. Most western churches have institutes and advisers at their disposal. They have well-informed commissions for Third World problems, a great deal of expertise and a network of relations with these churches. Most of these bilateral and multilateral ecumenical contacts pass beyond the CCIA. It has become quite clear that statements on international affairs which have been drawn up together with representatives from communist countries do not carry much weight and have repeatedly caused much trouble. The communist governments disregard them completely, as for that matter do western governments. But what is more serious is that the western public opinion has begun to have doubts, and as public opinion is the only means for the churches to influence governments' policies these statements are losing their relevance and have an opposite effect to that they were really intended to achieve.

Bishop W. Krusche of the GDR has said that the churches must act independently in their own context, and the truth of this again became evi-



dent at the Vancouver Assembly. A resolution on the policy of the USA in Central America and one on Afghanistan were proposed by the CCIA. The fact that these two resolutions were proposed is a reminder of what has been called "the central conviction" of the WCC, that there should be no selectivity in its prophetic witness. But the very different tone of the two resolutions caused fierce controversies and gave rise to very negative reactions, not because of a dark conspiracy of hostile forces as has been suggested, but because of the failure of the WCC "to speak with one voice" as a GDR representative remarked. What would have happened if the WCC had had to operate without a CCIA?

The resolution on Central America was a clear expression of what the NCC in the USA has stated before on the policy of its government. The American churches could have told the Assembly: We are going to present it to our government. We will discuss it with you and take note of your remarks, but it is our resolution about the policy of our government. We invite you to discuss with us what you have done in your country.

Let us exchange ideas about the task of the church in society, but not at all costs try to pass together resolutions addressed to governments on matters of immediate concern.

The western churches try to fulfil their critical function in society, maybe not everywhere and always, but the CCIA does not contribute much to it. One of its aims is "to encourage respect for and observance of human rights and fundamental freedoms, special attention being given to the problem of religious liberty"; another aim is: "to suggest ways in which Christians may act effectively upon these problems in their respective countries and internationally." But unfortunately little help has come from the CCIA in defining a policy for the churches on religious liberty in Eastern Europe, given that the WCC itself cannot do much in this field. How can we support our sister churches living under Marxism-Leninism, which are estranged from their task of witnessing and serving in society and subjected to a neo-constantinian enslavement which wants to change them into a collective chorus of assent, a temporary decoration on the facade of socialism and a cultic ghetto? What has the CCIA done to stimulate the information and research done in the churches on Eastern Europe? The section of the Vancouver report devoted to World Affairs in Ecumenical Perspective says:

It is imperative that member churches and the WCC continue to identify and denounce gross violations of religious freedom and extend moral and material assistance to those who suffer oppression and even persecution because of their religious beliefs and practices.<sup>8</sup>

This is a very courageous statement, but did the representatives realise what the consequences would be? Experience has shown that the WCC

can do and does do very little for the implementation of the fundamental right of social religious liberty in Eastern Europe. If this is not openly recognised the disappointment and the criticism will increase. Would it not have been wiser simply to admonish the member churches to be more diligent in this matter and to formulate their own policy on how to deal with this issue?

The western member-churches should take common counsel — as do the member-churches in Eastern Europe — on how they can act together in international affairs, especially in the field of human rights. One of the fundamental questions should then be: do the member-churches genuinely still accept the fundamental aim of the CCIA: “witness to the lordship of Christ over man and history by serving mankind in the field of international relations”? It seems that a rather influential group of churches, for confessional and socio-political reasons, does not really accept this any more or interprets it in a way which is not in accordance with its original meaning.

#### *Western churches have their specific responsibilities*

At a meeting of young and dedicated activists of Amnesty International a Russian historian, lately emigrated or rather expelled from his country, reported his experiences in prison and psychiatric clinics in the Soviet Union. As a member of a human rights group he was imprisoned for three and a half years, but according to his testimony he had been treated better than most of his fellow-prisoners because of the fact that his case had become known in the West and numerous letters had been sent to make it clear that his case had not remained unnoticed in the rest of the world.

The work of Amnesty International, and other organisations like the International Commission of Jurists, has gained recognition and popularity in church circles, but not because it conforms to the prejudices of western church people. These organisations earnestly try not to be selective in their protection of those persecuted for conscience’s sake. They endeavour to put into practice what the Vancouver Assembly called upon the churches to do: to identify and denounce gross violations of religious freedom and extend moral and material assistance to those who suffer oppression and even persecution because of their beliefs and practices. Neither do they usually do this “from a safe distance, i.e. from outside the country in question” as the CCIA pamphlet quoted above suggests. Only in those cases where their activities are expressly forbidden by the governments are they forced to speak from outside the country, although their evidence is always based on testimonies from those directly concerned.

We know of course that these organisations have a different methodology from that of the WCC. They are orientated towards action and deal

directly with individual cases of human rights violations, more especially in the field of civic and political rights. This is a restricted task, but worthy and honest and it should be accomplished. The WCC has set itself a much wider task. In the Vancouver statement on Human Rights we read:

the Nairobi Assembly affirmed its commitment to the promotion of human rights under the following categories: the right to basic guarantees of life; the rights to self-determination, 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. Following Nairobi, the churches have seen the need to broaden their understanding of human rights to include the right to peace, the right to protection of the environment, the right to development and the right to know one's rights and to struggle for them.<sup>9</sup>

The churches regard it as their mission to be a church-for-others and to commit themselves to the care for and the protection of human life in all its individual and social dimensions: an immense and never-ending task. Nobody can possibly survey the whole field but it is advisable not to absolutise one aspect at the cost of others. The whole issue of human rights cannot be restricted to religious liberty in Marxist states and the broadening of the human rights concept is beneficial; but it should not function as an excuse for leaving certain aspects aside or rendering suspect those who deal especially with one aspect.

A contribution of the Commission on Public Affairs of the Evangelical Church in Germany, "Human Rights in the Ecumenical Discussion", presented to the Nairobi Assembly says:

The western understanding of Human Rights is orientated towards the individual person's right to life. Human Rights are intended to achieve and guarantee the worth of his/her existence as a human being. This western understanding of Human Rights is at present confronted by two other conceptions of Human Rights which are formed on more collective lines:

- a) According to Marxism-Leninism, Human Rights in socialist societies are secured automatically. According to this view, Human Rights are identical with the right and the obligation to participate in the realisation of socialism as defined by this doctrine. In theory, therefore, no conflict can exist between Human Rights and the legal structure of these countries.
- b) Wherever there is a struggle for Human Rights in African, Asian, or South American countries, by and large it is not a matter of the recognition and promotion of individual

interests; rather, the struggle is usually on behalf of the freedom, self-determination and right to life of peoples and nations.

Christians must try to understand, value and respect the different viewpoints on Human Rights as the expression of different political and social situations and problems. However, they must never content themselves with the fact that today practically all political systems make verbal professions of Human Rights. It is much more important:

- to determine existing areas of agreement, and, so far as possible, to make them the basis of speaking and acting together in the world;
- to recognise clearly and express the differences in interpretations; and
- to explain and communicate to advocates of other conceptions of Human Rights the historical experience which has led to the distinctly western version of Human Rights. In particular, the experience must be communicated that worthwhile human existence cannot be guaranteed without the protection of the individual from the despotism and destruction caused by the state.

Of outstanding importance in this passage is the underlining of the specific responsibility of the churches in the West to work for the implementation of those aspects of human rights which tend to be forgotten or neglected by others.

The WCC has repeatedly admonished the churches not to neglect their own task and not to expect too much from the WCC. Some churches are doing their homework rather well. The United Presbyterians in the USA, for instance, publish at regular intervals surveys of religious liberty throughout the world on the basis of stated criteria and draw up a list of the most repressive states. It would not be possible for the World Council, which includes member-churches not allowed to conduct a critical survey of the situation in their homeland, to adopt such a "denunciatory approach", but it is not forbidden for member-churches to use this method. Neither should member-churches feel ashamed when they emphasise the rights of individual freedom and plead for their implementation. A certain imbalance, to the detriment of religious liberty, can sometimes be found in WCC publications, and they appear to suggest that we have moved on from the former emphasis on religious liberty to more important social concerns.

Concentration has shifted away from a more partial approach to human rights, where religious freedom was sometimes given exclusive or exceptional attention

wrote the CCIA in its report to the Nairobi Assembly.<sup>10</sup> This was repeated in 1982:

Human Rights are fundamentally a struggle for liberation of an entire community. The earlier WCC emphasis on religious liberty provided a point of departure for a more integral approach to human rights.<sup>11</sup>

An integral approach is praiseworthy, but it does not mean that the advocacy of the implementation of religious liberty is no longer a part of this integral approach and belongs to the past history of the ecumenical movement. "The right to religious freedom has been and continues to be a major concern of member-churches of the WCC" says the Nairobi report on Human Rights.<sup>12</sup>

It is good that the Nairobi report draws our attention to the fact that churches should not plead only for their own religious liberty without active respect for the faith and rights of others. The churches have certainly done too little for the persecuted Marxists in Czechoslovakia since 1968 and do not sufficiently realise that in Marxist countries Christians are not the only victims of restrictions. But it is not certain that this was what was meant by the Nairobi report.

There is a tendency in publications on religious liberty issuing from the WCC to discourage those who are dealing with the situation under Marxist-Leninism. The study-paper on religious liberty submitted for information by the CCIA in 1980 has not been accepted by the member-churches. No reactions were sent in by them and so the study has not been pursued. It is regrettable that this report, which is rather representative of the way in which the CCIA is presently dealing with religious liberty, has not been overtly rejected. The churches should take papers sent to them by the WCC more seriously and, if these are unacceptable, should not just file them among the irrelevant mail.<sup>13</sup> One passage illustrates how those who deal with the situation in Marxist countries are discouraged:

The issue of religious liberty itself should not be used or misused for political ends. The increasing use by governments of the religious liberty issue as a propaganda weapon against other states has led to an increasing politicisation of understanding and discussion of this issue.

Is it true that the human rights issue was inserted by the West in the Helsinki Agreement only to focus attention on the misdeeds of others and to draw the attention of the public to human rights violations in Eastern Europe? Are those who ask for the implementation of the rights of religious liberty misusing the issue for political ends and as a propaganda weapon against the offending state? William van den Bercken points out that "The politics of the Soviet Union evoke in progressive circles in the

West only so-called secondary reactions, i.e. actions against reactions.”<sup>14</sup>  
Is this what the report is doing?

It is said that more attention is being paid to the deficiencies of other nations than to critical self-examination.

Those who live within any given location are best qualified to interpret and analyse their own experience and are best able to prescribe strategies for the realisation of human rights within their own situation,

stated the CCIA in a report to the 1979 meeting of the WCC Central Committee in Jamaica. Does this mean that we must ignore the situation in Marxist countries and that we must not “see the problems of others through the lenses of our own histories, theologies and world-views” as the CCIA report from Uppsala to Nairobi remarked? “Religious liberty,” continues the report, “remains a priority concern, but is now seen in the context of other recognised rights and worked at much more in terms of the particular historical situation in which it is endangered.” But what does all this really mean? Can we no longer in speaking about the situation in a communist country use “the lens” of a Christian conviction as summarised in the Nairobi statement on human rights:

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.

“A yardstick of Christian responsibility” (O. F. Nolde) has been given in many international church declarations, but now we are admonished to work for religious liberty in terms of particular historical situations, for instance in the Soviet Union. A professor at Moscow University Law Faculty described the Marxist conception of freedom as follows:

Genuine freedom of opinion is not any unhindered dissemination of ideas, judgments, etc., but only the free dissemination of progressive and revolutionary views, ideas and opinions, which correspond to the interests of the popular masses — the carriers of social progress, the moving force of history. Only under this condition is it possible to talk about genuine freedom of opinion, in particular about freedom of speech, of the press, of assembly, etc. Marxism-Leninism rejects a formal approach to this problem. Only the free and unhindered dissemination of such ideas, views and judgments which further social progress and correspond to the interests of the broad popular masses and

to their enlightenment and spiritual enrichment, may be regarded as genuine freedom of speech, of the press, of assembly, and generally of opinion.<sup>15</sup>

The Vancouver Statement says:

Cooperation in the field of human rights is emerging between the Christian community and people of other living faiths and ideologies, based upon their common commitment to human values and social goals.

As far as Marxism is concerned this is a rather euphemistic statement, unless it refers to the cooperation of Marxists and Christians within Eastern Europe. The Marxist and Christian conceptions of religious liberty are so different that before we can cooperate in this field, some serious discussions are necessary. It is regrettable that these have not yet come about and that the WCC neither invites the Marxist ideologists to such a discussion, nor starts a study without them. For how can we work otherwise at the problem of religious liberty in terms of the particular situation in the Soviet Union? And how can we assume that the Christians in the Soviet Union are best able to prescribe strategies for the realisation of human rights in their situation? They cannot even acknowledge that there *are* any problems!

Western churches must either take the initiative to start a discussion on the fundamental principle of religious liberty in Marxist-Leninist countries and about the actual situation there, or take more seriously the work already being done in this field. Western churches will have to denounce the gross violations of religious liberty and extend moral and material assistance to those who suffer oppression and even persecution because of their religious beliefs and practices. They should not pretend that they have to wait for official complaints from their sister churches' leadership because these will not be forthcoming. But the church is more than bishops and synods. Numerous complaints do reach the West from church members and, without indulging in theories about the true and the false church, current in some circles, one can hear the voice of the church in many *samizdat* publications and in letters which are sent, even if they do not bear the seal of a synod.

The western churches should take very seriously what is said in WCC studies and declarations about the many dimensions of human rights and the integral approach of their implementation. They should strongly resist any pressure to strike religious liberty from the agenda, and must not allow it to disappear quietly under the table. Some churches could covenant together to deal more specifically with this issue. There are churches which have a tradition in this field and which command expert knowledge. There should, however, be a close collaboration and a more serious discussion about a common strategy than the existing human

rights commissions of the CCIA, which have a very low profile, can provide. All this should not be done in an antagonistic spirit — in the ecumenical movement we do not behave as “hostile” churches — but with respect for the churches concerned and with the intention of helping them in their mission without, however, forgetting about those who suffer oppression and even persecution because of their religious beliefs and practices.

What we need now is a strategy which will help the ecumenical movement to extend assistance to them.

### *A strategy of assistance*

The dilemma is often presented as: either silent diplomacy or public protest. But it might well be that this is a false antithesis and that these two methods belong intrinsically together.

The then general-secretary of the WCC said in an interview in 1978:

Our faith is a scandal, it's an offence. And if we are to carry out our mission in the world, we become an offence to the world. Jesus did not promise us anything more than the hatred of the world.<sup>17</sup>

But as soon as the question of liberty, rights and ideological oppression in the Soviet Union comes into the picture we usually hear very different tones. One gets the impression that there are two world councils: the one courageous, challenging, even audacious, counting all things to be loss, defying the mighty; the other prudent, diplomatic, fawning in the presence of the mighty, shunning all offence.

There is of course room for silent diplomatic actions, but this ought to be part of a broader strategy. It is very difficult to pass judgement on the content and scope of silent diplomacy, because its most conspicuous feature is its secrecy, but one might ask what the results are. It is often the case that when unexpected concessions are made, organisations claim it as the result of their prudent and diplomatic procedures. The contrary cannot usually be proved. One may suppose by way of example that permission to import a biblical commentary in Russian, translated and printed in the West, for the Evangelical Christians and Baptists is the result of the diplomatic contacts of the Baptist World Alliance with the state Council for Religious Affairs; and the same applies to the permission given for importing a large number of new hymnbooks for the Brethren Church in Czechoslovakia in 1979.

However, many contacts with state authorities scarcely seem to bear any fruit. The first official visit of a representative of the Soviet Council for Religious Affairs (CRA) to the World Council in Geneva in December 1984,<sup>19</sup> apparently passed without any concessions on the part of the CRA. One might have hoped that this visit would be preceded by the



release of Father Gleb Yakunin, sentenced in 1980 to five years in a strict regime labour camp, to be followed by five years of internal exile. He was one of the inaugurators of the Christian Committee for the Defence of Believers' Rights in the USSR. Yakunin's memorandum to the Nairobi Assembly did play a role in his trial and the WCC addressed itself in October 1980 to the Russian Orthodox Church to convey the concern of the ecumenical fellowship. Metropolitan Yuvenali sent an answer conceding that the WCC does have the right to pose questions about it. This was all according to the newly-established pattern of consultation among the churches concerned and the letters were even published. The Russian Orthodox Church did what it could, but this unfortunately is very little. A remark in Yuvenali's letters about a misuse of the issue of religious freedom for cold war propaganda indicates that the CRA undoubtedly had a hand in the drafting of the letter. Yuvenali writes:

Unfortunately many aspects of the life of our society, including human rights and questions of religious freedom in particular, are often reflected by western information agencies in an extremely distorted manner, in the spirit of so-called psychological warfare. No small wonder, then, that as a rule, a distorted perspective of these questions is created abroad.<sup>20</sup>

It is regrettable that even when the WCC expresses the concern in the churches about a case like this the cold war accusation comes up. The letter of Konrad Raiser, Acting General Secretary, on the contrary underlined the constant endeavours of the WCC to establish "an atmosphere conducive to détente" and the fact that "a series of trials such as those now under way can only make that task immensely more difficult". It is the trials, and not the western reactions, which are conducive to a cold war atmosphere.

The Russian Orthodox Church is absolutely powerless in a case like this. Metropolitan Filaret said in a London interview:

The path followed by Father Yakunin can not be the way of our church and its hierarchy. We do not intend to enter into conflict with the authorities. In a situation like ours, our duty is to preach the Gospel and to extend pastoral aid to our flock.<sup>21</sup>

But after the exchange of letters nothing happened and we do not know whether the matter was raised again in the correspondence which has undoubtedly preceded the visit of Pyotr. V. Makartsev, vice-chairman of the CRA, who came to Geneva "to answer questions about the church in the USSR today".

Do we really help the churches in communist countries by frequent contacts with the state secretariats? After every visit to or meeting with ecumenical representatives in Eastern Europe we read that visitors were received by the representatives of the state Council for Religious Affairs.

On these occasions the officials show a paternalistic care for "their" churches which have guests from abroad. But are we not, by these frequent courtesy visits, accepting and acknowledging the rights which these state authorities presume to have over "their" churches? Are they not a silent recognition of a very reprehensible predominance of the state over the church? Should western church representatives not show more reluctance in accepting this sort of formality and resist the temptation of being treated as "important" visitors?

One of the most revealing news items concerning the visit of a state secretary for church affairs to the West can be found in the press-service of the Hungarian Ecumenical Council<sup>22</sup>, where the visit of the Hungarian state secretary, Imré Miklós, to the Minister of Culture of the government of North-Rhine Westphalen in West Germany is reported. Miklós came, accompanied by the Reform bishop Karoly Toth as his adviser, to discuss the relations between the Protestant churches of both countries and how the churches could contribute to peace and détente in Europe. A curious mission for an official of a communist state, where the illusion of a complete separation of church and state is carefully maintained.

It would be advisable for a set of guidelines to be worked out by the churches for the use of visitors to Eastern Europe. Rome has a school for church diplomats, but the western member churches of the WCC definitely have not and quite a few blunders have been made. These guidelines could include the suggestion never to make a public statement before departure from the country. Such statements or convenient passages from them have too often been misused for propagandistic purposes. Another recommendation might be never to accept an invitation for a meeting in an Eastern European country sponsored by the government of that country (for instance, a peace congress) or to receive a government official without demanding some small concessions which could be helpful for the churches. It would not be difficult to enumerate a number of such concessions which could be raised. Why not for instance demand the release of Yakunin before receiving a high Soviet official — this could easily be accorded and is not asking for the impossible. Another useful guideline would be to exercise caution in accepting invitations for a fully paid journey. One should guard one's integrity. Another point is that no group of church visitors should ever allow the government of the guest country to decide its composition, by allowing entry to some and refusing it to others. It is equally important that every visitor should try to break through the wall which is shutting him off from contacts with ordinary believers. Visits are arranged in such a way that usually one meets only those who are allowed to have contacts with foreigners. The importance of contacts and meetings should not be exaggerated but they can be useful for the life of the church if the visitors succeed in conveying the solidarity of the western churches with their host churches and their

concern with those who suffer because of the confinements to which they are subjected.

The ecumenical movement has always stressed the need for personal contacts. O. F. Nolde summed up some "clear-cut requirements" from ecumenical statements, for instance:

Commitment to make and use opportunities for personal contacts between people in opposing countries as a means of easing tensions and promoting better understanding. Keep alive the sense of fellowship with all people separated by artificial barriers and seek continuously a sympathetic understanding of changing conditions so that opportunities for personal contacts may effectively be used whenever and wherever they appear.<sup>23</sup>

Another former WCC officer, Albert van den Heuvel, said during the Nairobi debate on religious liberty:

I learned that we cannot speak about human rights in Eastern Europe . . . if we do not put it into the context of fraternal relationships and if we do not devise a language of respect and sympathy for all those churches who witness in another social system.<sup>24</sup>

But at the same time he acknowledged that churches dare not be silent. The Nairobi report which resulted from the discussion stated:

The solidarity which results from faith in our common Lord permits the mutual sharing of joys and sufferings and requires mutual correction. Christians dare not remain silent when other members of the Body of Christ face problems in any part of the world. But whatever is said and done must be preceded by consultation and must be an expression of Christian love.

Basic criteria for any action in the defence of human rights should, as Nolde suggests, be "to cultivate the spirit of reconciliation in order to make possible better relations between conflicting powers . . . and to have an objective point of view which will avoid hysterics or hatred"; to assist the churches and Christians in their plight and to show solidarity and "sympathetic identification with those suffering from the curtailment or denial of human rights."

Consultation with the churches concerned should be part of any action, but we should always bear in mind their extremely limited possibilities and the pressure exerted on them to do everything they can to suppress any action in the sphere of human rights and religious liberty. We should not allow ourselves to be drawn into the captivity in which these churches have to live. Silent diplomacy is equally part of a strategy of assistance. The authorities should know about the concern in the rest of the world for those who are suffering and be given the chance to redress injustice, show

mercy or make concessions without losing face. But it is a way full of pitfalls. Contacts between church and state in Eastern Europe are always taking place in complete secrecy and church people have become very suspicious about them. In the synod of the Church province of Saxony (GDR) in October 1976, the problem of the continuous negotiations between the church leadership and the authorities — necessary because the Constitution does not clearly define the freedoms of the church — was openly discussed. It was asked: do these contacts not alienate the church leaders from the pastors and are they not inclined in view of the next round of talks, in which they might want to obtain certain concessions, to avoid bringing up points which are controversial and which could endanger other aspects of the work of the church? The church people, however, expect a witness by their leaders that does them justice. This also applies to the secret diplomacy of our western church leaders in their contacts with communist governments. The whole issue should be openly talked over, not only in a GDR synod, but in WCC meetings and western synods.

Actions outside the sphere of publicity can be effective only if the communist authorities are fully convinced that other forms of actions are equally possible. Nolde said: "Greater reliance must be placed upon public opinion — both domestic and worldwide — as a means of assuring that governments honour their commitments." This must be an integral part of a strategy of assistance. The churches have to be consistent and sacrifice neither their witness on the altar of unity nor their advocacy for the oppressed on the altar of confessional conversations. Nor must they shrink from their obligations in the face of cold-war accusations which inevitably follow any public action. Individuals who are victimised by unjust laws must be sure that they are not forgotten by the ecumenical fellowship. A strategy must be worked out by the churches and suitable methods devised for denouncing gross violations of religious freedom and assisting those who suffer oppression and even persecution. In the case of religious liberty issues in communist countries little can be expected from the WCC because it is handicapped by the position of a number of member churches, and thus the other churches will have to act on their own responsibility. The Nairobi Assembly stated:

The churches will also be concerned with those clauses in the Helsinki Agreement which deal directly with their own position and functions (religious freedom, freedom of belief and worship, contacts between the churches, exchange of information, etc.). They will make clear to the governments their own understanding of these sections and how they could be implemented.

It also declared: "We are called to be the voice of the voiceless and the

advocates of the oppressed.” In respect to the situation in Eastern Europe little has been done by the churches and the CCIA has not given much encouragement. The initiative taken at Nairobi has petered out and has not been taken over by the member churches. The full implementation of religious liberty should remain, or once more become, a concern for all ecumenical Christians and churches.

This article is an abridged version of a chapter in the author's forthcoming book *Eastbound Ecumenism*.

<sup>1</sup> *What in the world is the World Council of Churches?* Risk series, Geneva, 1978.

<sup>2</sup> A. F. Carillo de Albornoz, *The basis of religious liberty*, WCC, 1963, pp. 35, 36.

<sup>3</sup> *Religious Liberty in Soviet Union. WCC and USSR — a post-Nairobi documentation*, edited by Michael Bourdeaux, Hans Hebly, Eugen Voss. London: Keston College, 1976, pp. 12, 15.

<sup>4</sup> *A study-report on religious liberty accepted by the Central Committee Geneva 1980*. Background Information CCIA, 1981-84; see also Weingärtner (Note 5, below).

<sup>5</sup> Erich Weingärtner, *Human Rights on the Ecumenical Agenda*, Background Information CCIA 1983/3, p. 10. See also *RCL* Vol. 13 No. 1, pp. 21-24.

<sup>6</sup> Hans Hebly, The post-war ecumenical dream in Europe, in *Eastbound Ecumenism*.

<sup>7</sup> Background Information CCIA, 1981-84.

<sup>8</sup> *Gathered for Life*, Official Report VI Assembly WCC, Geneva, 1983, p. 142.

<sup>9</sup> *Gathered for Life*, pp. 138-44.

<sup>10</sup> *Uppsala to Nairobi*. Geneva, 1975, p. 135.

<sup>11</sup> *Acting in faith*. Geneva, 1982, p. 40.

<sup>12</sup> *Breaking Barriers*. Nairobi, 1975, p. 106.

<sup>13</sup> See for a critical evaluation: J. A. Hebly, *Religionsfreiheit und der Ö.R.K.* *Ökumenische Rundschau*, 32. Jhrg., January 1983.

<sup>14</sup> *Internationale Spectator*, December 1981, p. 758.

<sup>15</sup> Quoted; J. A. Hebly, *The Russians and the WCC*, Belfast: Christian Journals Ltd., 1978, p. 136.

<sup>16</sup> *Nairobi to Vancouver*, p. 138.

<sup>17</sup> *What in the World is the World Council of Churches?* p. 4.

<sup>18</sup> *NRC-Handelsblad*, 19 January 1985.

<sup>19</sup> *Ecumenical Press Service*, 18 January 1985.

<sup>20</sup> *Ecumenical Press Service* No. 30, 13 November 1980.

<sup>21</sup> January 1980. See: *Istina* 1981, p. 421.

<sup>22</sup> *Ungarische Kirche Press*, 15 October 1983.

<sup>23</sup> *The Churches and the Nations*, p. 175.

<sup>24</sup> *Breaking Barriers*, pp. 170, 174.