

EXCURSUS I

Elliott Wright on **The Structural Contradictions of the National Council of Churches**

For fifteen or more years after its founding in 1950 the National Council of Churches caused excitement in American religion. It stimulated ecumenical theology, focused church concern for international affairs, provided a platform for social reformers and, later, for minority groups seeking justice. Simultaneously, the Council raised the hackles of conservatives and thereby reaped favorable publicity at the expense of critics. Nonetheless, by the late 1960's some radicals were accusing the ecumenical agency of bowing to the status quo.

In truth, the Council's verve and visibility have steadily decreased over the past decade. In part this is the price paid by established organizations that have simply learned how to absorb criticism. Then too, all conciliar Christianity suffered as the old faith and order movement floundered when, beginning about 1964, theology meandered into the land of fads. The mix of stagnation, intellectual addiction to novelty, and resulting institutional anxiety undercut the mainline Protestant denominations upon which the stability of 475 Riverside Drive (NCC headquarters) depended. But the most important factor weakening the Council is its effort to project for itself two incompatible roles in church and society.

The Council sees its task as one of radically revising the myth of a righteous America. At the same time, the Council is to be representative of a major segment of American religion. There are thirty Protestant and Orthodox member communions, although no one pretends the Orthodox are more than tenuously involved. These incompatible, indeed contradictory, roles set up a tension that some describe as a creative ecumenical force. The result, however, is more accurately comparable to an uncertain mammal that persistently howls, then whimpers, producing a cacophony easier to ignore than interpret.

Whatever its faults, the Council continues to maintain significant programs in relief, refugee resettlement, civil and religious liberty, and other areas. And the Council could again be important to the quest for Christian unity were that quest to be resumed someday. But the Council is now retarding its development by trying to be at the same time both radically revisionist and representative of the American churches.

Judging by the numerous resolutions on American-Third World relations flowing from semiannual meetings of its Governing Board, the Council accepts a reading of history that equates the U.S. with colonialism, imperialism, and exploitation. Again

and again the Board urges President and Congress to support "liberation" and "self-determination" of peoples in Africa, Asia, and Latin America. Council officials would no doubt maintain that such appeals are aimed at recalling the nation to its best ideals, and many members of the Governing Board certainly understand the pronouncements in that light.

Yet resolutions and statements go much further than that. The impression is conveyed that America has so betrayed the ideals of liberty and justice that their revival is virtually hopeless. The Council postures itself as one of the very few voices of righteousness remaining. That voice is angry and strident; one suspects it might be disappointed if Uncle Sam and his minions did anything right. Little room is left for any American good intentions in fostering the "solidarity" and "interdependence" of peoples. For example, a resolution on Southern Africa adopted last October made no direct reference to Henry Kissinger's work to promote black rule in Rhodesia and Namibia, not even to observe that Washington had finally turned toward policy favored by the Council in that part of the world. Rather, the resolution asked the U.S. Government to make sure that no non-African diplomatic overtures "compromise in any way the efforts and goals of the forces of liberation." That is a most revealing statement in light of the fact that no *African* overtures had been able to persuade Ian Smith to discuss majority rule. The message: Under no circumstances is America to be trusted. The ideology lacks Gabriel Kolko's deliberateness (see *Main Currents in Modern American History*) but shares the same spirit.

The radical revisionist view of America's role in the world could be correct, the National Council might be right in advancing it. To do so seriously and consistently, however, is to make the agency marginal to most U.S. churches, including overwhelming majorities in its own member communions. A theory that casts America as global villain strikes 90 per cent of American Christians as odious or just plain silly. Of course there is honorable precedent for taking unpopular stands at the prophetic margins of religion and society. Should the National Council of Churches wish to attempt the salvation of America by accepting a marginal status and unflinchingly pursuing radical revisionism, it might be respected even by those who do not share that ideology.

Marginality, however, is not what the Council seeks. How can mainline become marginal? So the movement with a revisionist voice clings to the role of being representative of denominations peopled by patriotic churchgoers. Fearful of alienating constituents, the Council manages its double role by rarely following through on the implications of its radical pronouncements. "We learned long ago that the Council will issue a statement on anything we want, but don't expect much action," says a postliberal clergyman who worked for years with California Chicanos. "The resolutions conveniently get lost."

The contradictory roles of revisionist and representative result in a radicalism of bland conse-

quences (the howling and the whimpering). To illustrate: At its October meeting the Governing Board had before it a thunderingly anti-U.S. "Open Letter to North American Christians" from thirteen Latin Americans, eight of whom, all recognizable Protestants, were identified. Che Guevara would have applauded the letter's critique of "Yankee imperialism." The Board was asked by the Council's Division of Overseas Ministries to approve a reply. As anyone familiar with such proceedings would expect, a draft reply was on hand and duly adopted, putting the Council on record as confirming the letter as a statement of "the authentic and key issues" affecting relations not only between the U.S. and Latin America but the U.S. and "other parts" of the world as well.

By the text and tone of its response the Council endorsed the proposition that Latin American miseries are caused by U.S. Government and business. It accepted the letter's demand that U.S. churches transfer their "apostolic duty" from foreign mission fields to their own backyard. The Council may know the truth about Latin America, and it may know where God most wants missionaries. But truth of the analysis is not the issue here; the issue is that the Council's loud "Amen" rang hollow.

One might have reasonably anticipated that, after endorsing the letter, the assembled Christians would fall on their knees, beg God's forgiveness for what the U.S. is doing in the Southern Hemisphere, and then rise to vigorously plan for removing missionaries from Latin America and extricating church institutions from the evils of capitalism. None of that. While a lone delegate complained that proposed actions seemed weak compared to the vigorous letter, the Board was content in asking member denominations to communicate the epistle to constituents and urge parish study of it. Anyway, the hour was late. A presentation on U.S. colonialism in Puerto Rico was running overtime.

The most ironic part of the response to the Latin Americans was the expressed hope that congregations would "meditate" upon the contents of the letter *before* and after the November U.S. Presidential election. In fact no denomination has a publication or other means to communicate or mass distribute anything on such short notice. And in fact no denomination was going to make a special effort to get out a document guaranteed to offend almost all its members. And, in further fact, one assumes everyone on the Board was fully aware of these facts.

In short, a house of prophecy with budgets to raise and bureaucrats to feed is self-contradictory. If it is again to be credible, the National Council of Churches must reexamine what it means to be disenchanted with the American nation while, at the same time, wanting to represent the nation's central religious heritage.

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EXCURSUS II

Hans Blix on **Banning Some Nonnuclear Weapons**

Ever since World War II the major efforts in the disarmament sphere have been devoted to nuclear weapons. These weapons undoubtedly pose the greatest threat to humanity. Less attention has been paid to the conventional weapons. Yet these are the weapons that have been used in the postwar conflicts: napalm, antipersonnel fragmentation cluster bombs, new high velocity rifles, fuel air explosives, mines used for large area seeding, etc. International public opinion has reacted against some of these weapons, especially during the Indochina conflict. At the intergovernmental level they have been discussed since 1971 in the context of the efforts to update international humanitarian law applicable in armed conflicts (conferences in Geneva and discussions in the U.N. General Assembly). It would seem important that nongovernmental organizations take an interest in this work and make their influence felt. Such interest would now be particularly timely, for results now depend mainly on the political will of governments. Almost all relevant facts have been compiled.

The starting point for all these discussions is that weapons should not be so designed or used as to cause any "unnecessary suffering" (to quote the language of the Hague Convention) or to give indiscriminate effects. The dum dum bullet that flattened against the human body and tore its way through was banned for this reason. No one will contend that this ban or the ban on use of bacteriological and chemical weapons (1925) achieved more than a marginal humanitarian gain. But even marginal gains of this kind must be looked for, so long as we have not succeeded in the main aim of preventing the use of armed force.

Which are the dum dum bullets of today? Years of discussion have resulted in a number of reports and proposals from which the answers might be drawn. Attention may be drawn to the Report by the U.N. Secretary General on Napalm and Other Incendiary Weapons (1972), the Report by the International Committee of the Red Cross on Weapons That May Cause Unnecessary Suffering or Have Indiscriminate Effects (1973), the Reports on the ICRC Conferences of Government Experts in Luzerne (1974) and Lugano (1976), and to the proposals and debates in the Ad Hoc Committee on Conventional Weapons of the Geneva Diplomatic Conference on International Humanitarian Law, as well as to the debates of the First Committee of the General Assembly on the item "Napalm and Other Incendiary Weapons."

There can be no doubt that napalm and other incendiary weapons is the category of weapons