

The Good Ship *Oikoumene*

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The World Council of Churches was born in the cold war era. That's important for present understanding. At its beginning John Foster Dulles warned against Christian obeisance to the "dictatorship of the proletariat." And Josef L. Hromádka, the eminent Czech theologian, spoke of the future bliss of socialist "material trust, free responsibility and service." The WCC has been repeatedly accused—notably but not exclusively by Western conservatives—of damning the evils of the West while closing its eyes to injustices in Communist lands. At the same time, doctrinaire Marxists dismiss the Council as a product of the West and therefore unable to understand or act upon socialism's criticism of capitalism.

That the twenty-seven-year-old ecumenical organization is tired of this East-West barrage and wants deliverance is understandable. That it has found an escape route through the Third World door, as it apparently thinks, is doubtful. "East-West" language and ideological conflict are ecumenically out of favor in Geneva. They have been exchanged for Third World liberation, the struggle of the "have-nots" of the Southern Hemisphere against Northern technocracies of all varieties. Or so the schema goes.

From November 23 to December 10 in Nairobi, Kenya, only two or three degrees below the Equator, the World Council celebrates its new North-South axis. The Fifth Assembly, meeting under the banner "Jesus Christ Frees and Unites," promises to be the most mammoth exercise in liberation theology this decade. Seen as the logical next step to the discovery of "practical Christianity" at the Fourth Assembly in Uppsala seven years ago, Nairobi looks in advance like something put together in a conference call between Juan Luis Segundo, James Cone, and Paolo Freire. The 747 voting delegates from 271 Protestant and Orthodox churches, plus hundreds of advisors, observers,

and guests, including Roman Catholics and conservative evangelicals, will spend most of their time in six section groups. Four of the sections are specifically concerned with liberation and development. The other two, dealing with Christian unity and "confessing Christ," will, according to pre-Assembly study dossiers, work on the liberation theme.

Nairobi may take some surprising turns. Bible study outlines and the suggested questions for pondering while the Good Ship *Oikoumene* sails south allow for more flexibility than the formal agenda would seem to suggest. The Assembly, according to Philip A. Potter, the Council's general secretary, will test whether the parts of a divided Christianity can speak "to" rather than "at or past" one another. The West Indian Methodist added, in a New York press conference last summer, that only when ecumenism is mature enough



to state differences as well as agreements can the churches "deal at depth with the issues that trouble our world today." He hoped that Nairobi would spell out what really divides and really unites. His desire for diversity of expression was no doubt genuine and has been echoed elsewhere.

One World, the Council's monthly magazine, has stressed the importance of delegates bringing to Nairobi their reservations about present styles of Christian social action. The six dossiers of advance papers are potpourris of readings that invite response rather than traditional study documents offered for committee refinement. The Assembly would be a landmark in the ecumenical movement if it could debate the theme for three weeks and then come up with substantive political and theological disagreements. With due respect to Potter, that possibility seems slim indeed. The Council should not be surprised if at Nairobi's end it has not escaped the old East-West issues, but has, in fact, made itself more vulnerable to the charge of imbalance in criticizing the sins of the world's dominant political and economic ideologies, capitalism and communism.

The World Council since Uppsala has reflected less and less diversity in either its analysis of the world's problems or in its proposed solutions. The Council's pervasive philosophy is a "solidarity with the oppressed" liberation theology that recognizes no challengers. In the same article asserting the need for open and honest expressions about Christian social action at the Assembly *One World* also asserts (September, 1975): "The Church has no credibility as a self-appointed umpire sitting comfortably above the struggle. Only those intimately involved in costly discipleship have a right to question or speak a critical word if the occasion demands."

And it would seem that the World Council's Program to Combat Racism and its grants to liberation movements, its cash involvement in development, its challenges to multinational corporations, and its unending relief and refugee efforts would give the Council the right to raise a few questions about liberation struggles. Apparently not, and that is the stumbling block for Nairobi. Romanticism has replaced ecumenism's critical acumen. Oppressed Asians in the Philippines, blacks in apartheid South Africa, poor farmers in Chile, women in Milltown and suburban America, and all manner of other folk need liberation. But from what for what?

The Nairobi delegates could raise the questions that need to be asked of the liberation theology pulling the World Council into the sea of romanticism. They most likely will not. The lineup is against it. Of the 747 delegates, 155 are women, 75 are youths under thirty years of age, and 300, including women and youths, are laity. The remainder are presumably male clergy. By geographic region, Western Europe has 115 delegates; North America, 153; Africa, 116; Eastern

Europe 109; Asia, 106; Australasia and the Pacific, 45; the Middle East, 30; Latin America, 23; and the Caribbean, 11.

There are four main blocs: Western Protestant clergy and denominational officials; Third World people; Northern liberation enthusiasts, including many Eastern European Protestants, youth and women; and the Orthodox. Third World delegates do not hold a voting majority, but when it comes to liberation issues they can depend on Eastern European Protestants. And they can count on most of the Westerners, who out of guilt or perhaps disinterest rarely dispute the aspirations of the Southern Hemisphere as interpreted by invitees to World Council meetings.

Dissenting voices at Nairobi will come primarily from the Orthodox, who as a group have never liked the enormous emphasis on social action. They wonder why the World Council finds it easy to analyze economic systems but evades questions of Eucharistic witness. The Orthodox voice is not united, however. Representatives of the patriarchates in socialist countries say they want more attention given to theology, but they vigorously support any social action statement or program that criticizes the West. A small but increasingly vocal group of Orthodox in the West go only so far with their Eastern colleagues, then they demand a balance in the condemnation of social injustices under capitalism and communism.

Liberationists of romantic outlook will undoubtedly be in control at Nairobi, and one wishes they would raise questions about the World Council's new North-South schema. On the surface the design is plausible enough. The oppressed, exploited peoples of the Southern Hemisphere are rising up against the colonial and postcolonial policies of Northern superpowers, and it is the duty of the church universal to side with them. But what specific Third World struggles are endorsed? And what exactly is "North"?

Reading the six preparatory dossiers leaves the decided impression that all Third World struggles emerge from the culturally and indigenously pure. Scant mention is made of the fact that both developing nations and liberation movements in Africa, Asia, and Latin America are active participants in global battles that are no longer limited to the seats of capitalism and communism. It is too much to say that the Council in general and the pre-Nairobi papers in particular offer no criticism of violence and suppression of human liberties in the Third World. The absence of careful analysis of liberation's motives and means, however, is striking. Consider, for example, Rhodesia.

Rhodesia undoubtedly offers one of the world's most deplorable examples of white racism. The minority regime of Ian Smith appears to be virtually without conscience. Black liberation in Rhodesia should be a priority of all humane people. But how is Rhodesia to

be liberated? The Zimbabwe nationalist movement is not of one part. There are Rhodesian black guerrillas, there are exponents of phased negotiations with Smith, and there are those who know something must be done but cannot decide what. The World Council supports Zimbabwean liberation. Which liberation? Does the ecumenical movement give its endorsement to the guerrillas, or to the negotiators who might well be hoodwinked by Smith, or to those in the middle who cannot decide on a method and therefore seem to be ineffective? The Council never says. It only knows it supports liberation in Rhodesia.

And what is "North"? The ecumenical schema for liberation permits the assumption that all superpowers, both capitalistic and communistic, are responsible for the plight of the Southern oppressed. Yet the accusing finger of the pre-Nairobi papers consistently points only at the West. A paper released last July by twenty-five members of the Orthodox Theological Society in America said:

In these documents the evils of Western Christian, or post-Christian, societies are severely and relentlessly exposed and criticized. Although many of us question the accuracy and value of such unqualified condemnation of the West, we all agree that there are grounds for a thorough Christian critique of Western social, political and economic systems and practices. What we do not accept and must denounce, however, is the absence, in all the preparatory materials, of even the slightest criticism of the human repression perpetrated in the Marxist systems in Eastern Europe and elsewhere.

This can be dismissed as the one-sided sentiment of staunch anti-Communists opposed to détente on the grounds of their own historical experience. Except that what they say is true. The pre-Nairobi papers do "severely and relentlessly expose" the evils of the West. They are silent on injustices in the Soviet bloc and, as one might expect, treat China like a new collective messiah.

The World Council has always had difficulty balancing criticism of East and West. It is somewhat of a shame that it cannot escape the dilemma through the Third World door. None other than Paolo Freire, the Council's sometimes consultant on liberation education, wrote: "The concept of the Third World is...not geographic. It is not difficult to find the Third World in Europe." Likewise, the concepts of capitalism and communism, of democracy and socialism, are nongeographic. It is not difficult to find the First and Second Worlds in Africa. Can the Council explain how poverty in the Southern Hemisphere can be solved without dealing with the East-West competition for resources? Can it even describe the struggles of the Third World without reference to the

Northern-bred democratic and Marxist principles that inspire liberation leaders? Both questions will be avoided as long as possible because the Council finds it almost impossible to criticize socialist societies publicly or to appear to be investigating their flaws.

One reason for the double standard on the sins of East and West is fairly obvious and thoroughly pragmatic. The World Council can denounce the West without jeopardizing, beyond constituency backlash, the continuing participation of Western churches. Eastern Europe is another matter.

The last major airing of this problem within the Council itself was two years ago at a Geneva meeting of the Central committee, which makes policy between Assemblies. The debate was sparked by a draft report on Violence, Nonviolence, and the Struggle for Social Justice. As written by a church and society panel, the document named South Africa, Latin America, Northern Ireland, the Middle East, and the U.S. as examples of areas where violence is a problem for Christians.

Most everyone agreed that these five places are plagued by violence, but was the list inclusive enough? A proposal to add Eastern Europe and to describe the kind of violence perpetrated by "postrevolutionary" governments originated in a small group discussion. The amendment was defeated. Bishop Kaare Stoeylan of Oslo protested: "Is there no danger of violence in Eastern Europe?" The cry of double standard went up, lifted chiefly by Alex Boraine of South Africa. Boraine, an opposition member of South Africa's Parliament, said he had no objection to his country being cited as a place of violence, but would like to see a more honest list, if lists were to be made. As compensation to those who felt abused, the Central Committee finally decided to note formally that the list itself was imbalanced. Interestingly, the controversial section of the document on violence and nonviolence was deleted in the reprint made for the Nairobi dossiers.

Of course few if any World Council people believe that Eastern Europe has perfect societies. Silence on the oppressive policies of Soviet bloc states is not consent to the Communist system so much as it is a pragmatic effort to maintain a genuinely *World Council of Churches*, geographically speaking.

An American member of the Central Committee was asked after the 1973 Geneva meeting if the Council knows it has a double standard on East-West matters. "Certainly," she replied. "It has to. If it criticizes the Soviet Union, the Russians will go home, taking the Hungarians, Czechs, East Germans, and Rumanians with them."

In favor of pragmatic imbalance it is also argued that the Council was not established to convert the world to Western Christian thinking. Anyway, it is said, the 1948 Founding Assembly assayed both capitalism and communism and found both wanting. In the interest of keeping churches from socialist societies in the ecumenical movement, the World Council is not about to

agree with John Foster Dulles's statement at the First Assembly in Amsterdam that it is "possible to condemn as un-Christian societies which are organized in disregard of the Christian view of the nature of man." For one thing, it is said, Dulles assumed an ecumenical ability to determine both the Christian view of human nature and which societies are organized with respect to that view. The World Council now claims no competence in that field, except when it deals with Western societies.

In its actions the Council draws a distinction between what it may say to societies that claim to be Christian and those that openly reject the faith. Ecumenical officials find no inconsistency in their behavior. They conduct talks with Kremlin leaders on issues of importance to the World Council, but make no public disclosure about the talks, much less criticize the Soviets. The next day they condemn South African apartheid and refuse to hold secret talks with John Vorster. The difference is that South Africa claims to be exceedingly Christian while the Soviet Union makes no secret of its atheistic ideology. Why jeopardize Christians whose governments are already hostile to them?

The reasoning makes a certain amount of sense, but

it is not finally persuasive. One reason for close scrutiny of the socialist bloc may reside in the very fact of Eastern church participation in the Council. That is, both Protestant and Orthodox churches behind what used to be called the Iron Curtain affirm socialism, contending that the humanitarian goals of Christianity and Marxism have much in common. If that is true, should not the World Council help socialist societies realize the humanitarian goals which, by the socialist Christians' own insistence, all Christians share? Does not the realization of such goals require criticism? If the Council answers these questions negatively, as it now seems to, one must wonder if the World Council takes the Eastern churches seriously.

Thus the Council may be betraying itself as essentially Western after all. It clearly believes that the earth would be a better place if the West would shape up. It is almost suggested that once the flaws of North America and Western Europe are corrected the Kingdom will come. As an earlier generation believed salvation would come through the expansion of Western Christian civilization, so now it is implied salvation is contingent upon radically changing the Western world. It remains an emphatically Western vision, to which the rest of the world seems strangely incidental.