I am the only Jew ever invited by the World Council of Churches to an Assembly. With that invitation I attended the latest Assembly, which was held in Nairobi at the end of 1975. For three long weeks I listened, talked to hundreds of delegates, was interviewed on television, lobbied shily and cautiously for my people, and ate only vegetables and fruit. I found some Christians who had risked their very lives for Jews and open anti-Semites in priestly garb, learned churchmen and ignorant bigots. The Third World was the Assembly’s scene and furnished many of its principal actors, but the script could have been as well produced in New Haven or Chicago. There were passionate (and demagogic) speeches aplenty, but the voting was always moderate and the Assembly usually acquiescent. I myself was surrounded by friends and supporters, but I felt very much alone.

The WCC is a Christian church, and not merely churches. There is a movement, and not merely delegations from around the world. There is a leadership: the General Secretary but not all the presidents, the Indian Metropolitan but not the Archbishop of Canterbury, many Dutchmen but few Americans. There is a common faith, but one which must not be spelled out precisely or it would exclude too many Protestants, or liberally, lest it drive away the Orthodox. The latter keep one eye peeled on Rome, and the large and brilliant group of Catholic observers are fraternal, but also warily silent. In addition to me, one Sikh, one Muslim, one Hindu, one Buddhist were also invited as honored guests.

And indeed I was honored. I sat next to Margaret Mead, the legendary Pastor Niemöller, and the Indian Ambassador (High Commissioner) to Guyana. I was welcomed, feted, dined, and cherished, but the rules of their game forbade not only my voting but also my speaking except by invitation. Our invitations even to attend the Assembly were controversial, and many delegates ignored us or visibly evidenced the wish we had not come. Introducing us to the plenum just before the first vote to continue dialogue with “persons of living faith” (né non-Christians) may itself have led to a backlash negative vote, which deeply dismayed the very leadership that had sponsored our invitations. I do not know if guests will ever be invited again. One should not make too much of the fact, but I was identified with a yellow badge. The kindness and wisdom of Dean Krieger Stendahl of Harvard, the chairman of the Commission on Relations with the Jews, and of Franz von Hammerstein, its heroic director, were constant; but there was some coolness elsewhere, and much embarrassment too.

Many delegates spoke to me in Hebrew: ministers from Cameroon and Ethiopia, even Metropolitan Nikodim of Leningrad, leader of the large, stolid Russian delegation. Many now live or had lived in Israel, but the only delegation from there called itself not “Israel” but “Jerusalem,” so as not to commit itself on the status of that city or on personal and political loyalty. The canny Armenian Archbishop of Jerusalem delicately negotiated between Egyptian hard-liners on the one hand and his own needs and those of his community on the other. But the major distinction in reacting to the Jewish question was between those who had personally witnessed the Holocaust and those who had not. The Dutch, Germans, and some Americans watched all Jewish issues with deep concern; the Australians, most Africans, and the young were bored at best, hostile sometimes.

Arabs and Communists were seeking harsher denunciation than the Third World in general would support. Some Asians felt there was just too much talk about Judaism and the Middle East, but here and there a powerful black or Indian friend was also heard. More Americans and Scandinavians than I would have guessed chose a safe “neutrality,” sometimes masking unease. When Robert McAfee Brown mentioned Auschwitz (the only time), a German respondent regretted that the word was better known than Kindergarten (he is wrong; many non-Europeans did not really know what was being discussed), and an Egyptian Copt re-

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Anglican Archbishop Festus Olang of Kenya (center) opens the Fifth Assembly in Nairobi. He is flanked by a young Masai woman holding a Bible and Dr. M.M. Thomas of India, retiring chairman of the WCC's Central Committee, while Dr. Philip Potter, WCC General Secretary, stands behind him. (RNS)

plied with charges of concentration camps in Israel, as if Auschwitz has its equivalent there, or anywhere. And then he said: "After all, Jesus was not really of the Jews."

Here began a most fascinating and crucial division of opinion. A black American bishop told me that I had no right to remark on Jesus' personal history, since I have explicitly rejected him as my Savior. A woman from Holland insisted that, after all, Jesus was a stranger also to his own people. Some Africans called for a Black Jesus, especially Canon Burgess Carr, the most impressive voice in all Nairobi. Many Europeans blushed at the sheer provincialism of a Jewish Lord. "Jesus Christ frees and unites" was the Assembly topic, but an historical Jesus was not what they meant at all. The Norwegian Archbishop, who later led the fight against dialogue with other faiths, recalled that only the First Assembly (Amsterdam, 1948) talked principally about God. Since then it is only a churhly Christ who can, apparently, unite His Church. And such a Savior must not be too narrow, too Jewish, or too remote.

Mission, conversion, became the major goal of the Assembly. To bring the whole world to Christ seemed often to overshadow the desire to feed the world or to join with others in redressing its injustices. The Assembly voted on Angola, Latin America, disarmament, and poverty (but not, of course, on minorities in China or Syria, and only obliquely on the USSR), yet its heart remained narrowly "Christian." The Church has needs that no mere politics is likely to challenge or replace. Fine if it can speak for the oppressed too, but it is essential that it keep its own priorities clear. The Mission of the Church remains missions after all. Saving souls is an older and more popular goal than making revolutions. Dialogue runs a poor third. Christianity should talk to Jews and others only when and if it remembers whom it must always talk about. Extra ecclesiam nihil salus was alive and well in Nairobi in December, 1975.

The Assembly statement on the Middle East was a model of mealymouthed compromise, but perhaps the best that could have been expected from a group where every view was heard except that of the Jews. The policy statement called for Israeli withdrawal from the territories occupied in 1967, the right of all states, including Israel, to live in peace within secure boundaries, and for Palestinian self-determination. It expressed hopes that Arab states (and the PLO) will now be willing to seek agreement with Israel on these principles. No one can cavil at these suggestions, I hope, but neither can anyone rejoice as if it were a breakthrough to higher political ground. A common American view that the World Council is in the hands of flaming radicals is simply not true; it is firmly controlled by a very bourgeois, left-liberal mentality, which is neither inimical to, nor very concerned about, the Jews. Mostly one feels the leaders do hope for peace in the Middle East, if only not to be bothered any longer by potentially disruptive issues. The real enemy of the WCC is neither Israel nor the Arab states, but disunity itself.

Its statement on Jerusalem was almost entirely concerned with the protection of (especially non-Roman Catholic) church property and traditional denominational prerogatives. A superb example of pro domo special pleading, the statement nevertheless does not espouse any dangerous utopian scheme for Jerusalem that would be unwelcome to Jews. It expresses hopes that Arab states (and the PLO) will now be willing to seek agreement with Israel on these principles. No one can cavil at these suggestions, I hope, but neither can anyone rejoice as if it were a breakthrough to higher political ground. A common American view that the World Council is in the hands of flaming radicals is simply not true; it is firmly controlled by a very bourgeois, left-liberal mentality, which is neither inimical to, nor very concerned about, the Jews. Mostly one feels the leaders do hope for peace in the Middle East, if only not to be bothered any longer by potentially disruptive issues. The real enemy of the WCC is neither Israel nor the Arab states, but disunity itself.
to find Jews rather easier to confront. There was no unanimity at the Assembly about whether Judaism is indeed closer to Christianity than Hinduism or secular Humanism, and there was persistent unwillingness to single us (or me) out in any way. Yet, while that does violence to history, it may ultimately help to de-mythologize the Jewish question, and thus be safer for us in the end.

The style of this twenty-day marathon was very different from many Jewish meetings. Christian patience, as well as a masochistic willingness to sit through nine hours a day of talking, seems to me incredible. When a morning was finally given to women, seven of them spoke successively, and all were applauded. Business sessions often debated twenty closely typed pages of proposals. Even the evenings were full of committee meetings and homework. The WCC style is kerygmatic, proclamatory. I believe I heard five hundred Christian sermons in three weeks. But something was left out too. There were only a few hours given to study of the Bible, and none for any other text. This Jew missed the close attention to traditional sources our own faith demands. One felt almost that the World Council was sometimes improvising Christianity, speaking ecumenese instead of Hebrew, Greek, or Latin.

No trendy issue was left unvoted (racism, sexism, et al.), but none was much illumined by historical or revelational light. This came about partly because some powerful theological minds were absent (I think of Ellul, Cobb, and Pannenberg), and some who were present were hardly noticed (Moltmann, for example). Those in charge were Christian statesmen, no mean breed, but their focus is tactical and not scholarly, much less devotional. General Secretary Potter himself sometimes seemed to transcend the merely contemporary by his personal courage and almost biblical wrath. But most of the deliberative sessions were technically professional, bureaucratic, and punishingly efficient. Occasionally delegates said so. The longest applause greeted a young scholar from Oxford who listed the delegates among the world’s oppressed. Indeed, many times we were worn down by interminable speechifying, only to be swept through debate on complicated issues in record time. But that was not precisely manipulation. It was rather a question of what I might call neo-Christian style. One met it at Vatican II and at clergy associations around the world. If Christians no longer study sacred texts, what can they do but proclaim?

And Christendom also remains firmly clerical. Not only the Roman Catholics, the Orthodox, the Anglicans, but even American and West European churches were represented in Nairobi by many bishops and clerics. The garb from Ethiopia and Hungary was stunning, but the effect of so many priests and metropolitans, who dominated the proceedings, was daunting to more than one Australian or Californian layman. Has the church of Jesus, a lay Am-Haaretz who had harsh words for clerical pomp, been delivered into the hands of a Sadducean hierarchy?

I was invited to go to Egypt after the Assembly with a WCC delegation, and gladly accepted. But the Orthodox Coptic bishop in charge of the visit explained to me in Nairobi that, of course, I would have to have a private tour, since they would not welcome an interfaith group. He was warmly hopeful I would understand, and I do—all too well! There remain great gaps between Christians and Jews, some of which seem to be widening. There are still huge Christian potentialities for mistrust and bigotry. But the World Council of Churches is more a wall of defense, I believe, than the battleground of our final destruction. There are in the WCC Christian statesmen and leaders who seek our weal; they dominate the Council, at least so far. But I am glad that, in the end, we put our trust, not in their staying power, but in the one Lord who judges them as well as us.