

World Council of Churches Under Fire

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It was a stormy year. Civil upheaval in China gave birth to the People's Republic of China. The Jews declared their independence on the soil of their promised land, and sealed it with military victory.

The move towards idealistic organizations for world unity that spawned the United Nations took a religious turn with the formation of the World Council of Churches in Amsterdam in 1948. They both grew surrounded by controversy, and now in their 25th year, face continuing opposition.

The World Council of Churches now comprises more than 250 Protestant and Orthodox denominations in 83 countries, including former mission bodies newly recognized as autonomous and, recently, one of the largest indigenous African Christian groups, the Kimbanguist Church.

According to its literature, the WCC is "a fellowship of churches which confess the Lord Jesus Christ as God and Savior according to the Scriptures and therefore seek to fulfill together their common calling to the glory of the one God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit."

Organization

In 1910 a world missionary conference held in Edinburgh, Scotland, brought an awareness of the need for a renewed and united Church. Three movements emerged from the vision of the Edinburgh conference: the International Missionary Council (1921) which brought together missionary societies for study and common action; the Life and Work Movement (1925) which explored responsibility for the social questions of peace and justice; and the Faith and Order Movement (1927) which tried to resolve divisions on doctrine and authority.

Three program units continue in the presently constituted WCC: Faith and Witness, Justice and Service, Education and Communication. The Faith and Witness program sponsors theological studies of issues dividing the church; keeps records of unity negotiations; and promotes ministerial training, training of writers, health care, discussions on ethical issues, and inter-faith dialogues.

The Justice and Service program sponsors refugee aid, medical care, aid to struggling churches, representations at international events, development aid, and anti-racism efforts.

The Education and Communication program coordinates renewal movements; supports education experiments, especially to the least privileged; and provide information services.

The policies of the WCC are set by delegates to the Assemblies, which convene every seven years. A Central Committee of 120 elected by the Assembly meets annually to make more detailed decisions. It also elects a smaller Executive Committee. A permanent staff of some 300 persons is based largely in Geneva, Switzerland.

A search for a range of opinions in current periodicals on the programs and policies of the WCC, showed the *Christian Century* to be the major defender of the WCC.

Dissatisfaction was voiced, notably in *Christianity Today*, the London *Economist*, and the *Moody Monthly*. A scathing denunciation appeared in the *Reader's Digest*, answered in a *Christian Century* editorial.

Major areas of objection to the WCC have included: a watered-down theology, concern with social issues to the exclusion of spiritual matters, too much influence by the Soviet Church delegation, a totalitarian approach to faith and order, and most recently, support of African terrorist movements.

Opposition to unity

Today, most fundamentalist and many evangelical bodies do not belong to the World Council of Churches. On the U.S. level, the National Council of Churches complements the WCC. Dissatisfied with NCC policies, American evangelicals founded the National Association of Evangelicals, but people have not found a worldwide movement for Christian unity that answers the objections to the WCC.

It seems that animosity toward the NCC and the WCC has resulted in opposition to Christian unity of any form by some conservative Christian groups, to the extent that the popular author and lecturer Hal Lindsey has convinced many people that a "One World Church" will appear to fulfill prophecies for the beast (after the rapture and during the seven years tribulation). Nonetheless, it is clear that Jesus desired

Christian unity. He prayed in John 17:20-21 that all who believe his disciples' words should become one.

It is now quite evident that since the World Council of Churches has alienated conservative Christians in the West, and does not represent the many Christians of the Underground Church in Communist countries suffering for their faith, that no such unity as prayed for by Jesus can come about without some changes.

Baptists launch attack

Baptists, whose Baptist World Alliance of nearly 33 million Christians comprises the largest Protestant body, launched their attack in 1949, with a book by Chester E. Tulga, D.D., from the Conservative Baptist Fellowship *The Case Against the World Council of Churches*. He summarized his objection in eight points:

1. The WCC fulfills prophecies that in the last days men will depart from the faith.
2. It has no guarantees that either membership or doctrine will be evangelical.
3. It is heading toward a super-church, despite its disclaimers.
4. It will set up agencies in every community in order to spread its doctrinal compromises.
5. It opposes Communism and capitalism alike and leads the religious front for world socialism.
6. It was born in an atmosphere of festivity and manipulation instead of humility and repentance.
7. It ushers in a period of "apostate non-Roman catholicism."
8. It is a departure from historical Protestantism and counts adherence to historic Christianity a secondary matter.

The conclusion of the matter is "Believers can have no fellowship with it."

Anti-racism program

In recent years the WCC debates were fueled with objections to the funding of groups of "racially oppressed peoples" approved, without a single dissenting vote, by the Central Committee meeting in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia in 1970. In 1966 a conference on Church and Society had decided upon a program of revolutionary change. Concluding that racism was the root of all evil, they chose anti-racism programs as a method of action.

The Executive Committee approved it as a policy directive in 1969, and the Central Committee allocated funds in 1970. When the decision was announced, complaints-outcries in fact from around the world scored the WCC for concealing its plans until final decisions were made.

The 1970 vote of approval set up a \$200,000 fund to aid 19 liberation movements, mostly in southern Africa, fighting to wrest power from the ruling white minorities. Of the 19, according to an article in the October 1971 *Reader's Digest*, 14 were known to be engaged in guerrilla activities.

Many of them were terrorists, and four of the most generously financed groups were avowedly Communist. Three of the four were receiving arms from the USSR. The terrorism of the four groups was directed not only at whites, but also at blacks who opposed them. Objections in the world press focused on the association of the name of Christ with the causes the revolutionary groups were promoting.

Aid to draft dodgers

Later the same year, the WCC launched a campaign to raise \$210,000 to support American draft dodgers in Canada and Sweden. Is it the Christian's purpose to incite civil disobedience, people asked? The WCC countered, "As Christians we are committed to working for the transformation of society. Today, a significant number of those who are dedicated to the service of Christ and their neighbor assume a more revolutionary position."

Although the WCC talked of revolution, it didn't spell out what it meant by the word, or just what kind of systems the church should help to tear down.

The WCC lead was followed by a \$10,000 gift in 1970 by the United Presbyterian Church of U.S.A. to the Angela Davis defense fund and a \$25,000 gift to the bail and defense fund of a Black Panther accused

of plotting public bombings. The Episcopalians gave \$40,000 to the "Alianza of New Mexico," an organization reputedly dedicated to guerrilla warfare, and in 1968 voted \$200,000 to black militant James Forman, whose movement is dedicated to building a socialist society, where the total means of production and distribution are in the hands of the state- led by black people. Clergy and laity of both denominations raised a storm of protest against these actions.

Soviet influence

The following month, *Reader's Digest*'s roving editor Clarence Hall continued the charges, this time that the Orthodox churches of the Soviet bloc control WCC policies. At the Third General Assembly meeting in New Delhi in 1961, the Russian, Rumanian, Bulgarian, and Polish Orthodox churches were granted full membership in the WCC, celebrated with great jubilation. After years of abusing the WCC as a "facade for Western imperialism," the Kremlin at last allowed its state-controlled churches to enter the WCC. These new churches claimed 70 million members, which was considered a highly inflated figure. This allowed them, however, extra membership on committees and a virtual veto power over policies not to their liking. The Cincinnati *Enquirer*, among other papers, warned that receiving these churches would only give "international Communism yet another platform from which to assail the free world." The WCC took little notice of the objections in the American press.

Never noted for supporting Western-style democracy, since 1961 the WCC has sided with the views of those whose nations are anything but free, according to Hall. John Roche, former chairman of the Americans for Democratic Action said, "Anti-Americanism has become the substitute for the Nicene Creed as the focus of Christian unity." Harold E. Fey, an editor of the liberal *Christian Century*, was quoted as saying that at the 1966 WCC conference he was "profoundly shocked" by the vicious anti-American talk there, and especially by the American delegates, who would not reply to charges. He said that while the other delegates followed their countries' policies, the American delegates tried to outdo their detractors.

Selective opposition to Tyranny

The WCC has also been accused of being "curiously selective" in the causes it has supported. The WCC called for a halt on boycotts of Castro's Cuba, but demanded boycotts of Rhodesia and South Africa. Virtually every free church body in the world condemned Russia's 1968 invasion of Czechoslovakia, except for the WCC.

In April 1970 the WCC gave \$25,000 to send medical supplies to the Vietcong in South Vietnam, out of "concern for all who suffer," but ignored a plea for aid from Sudanese Christians who were fighting for survival against a hostile government.

In spite of exhaustive documentation in their files of persecution of Christians in the Soviet Union, the WCC has refused to champion the cause of the underground Christians, presumably because they are outside of the state-approved churches.

At an Addis Ababa meeting on racism in Africa, one journalist persistently questioned what the WCC would do about anti-Semitism in the USSR or about political tyranny in general. The WCC leaders replied that protests were often made quietly in cases where publicity would be embarrassing. This would have credibility if any past discrete protests had come to light, or if the South African Christians had not been greatly embarrassed by the publicity of the grants to terrorist groups.

A recent tactic of the WCC has been the initiation of Marxist-Christian dialogues. The *Reader's Digest* concluded that it seemed that while no Marxists have evinced a change of mind, Marxist influence among Christian thinking had been considerable. J. D. Douglas, writing in the March 26, 1971 *Christianity Today*, speculated that "the WCC looks first at the extent of a country's or a church's representation in its councils, and the probable reaction before certain policies are protested."

Therefore, it is safe to clobber South Africa, Portugal, and Rhodesia. It is also safe to attack the U.S. and Great Britain, because they will not defend their policies. Douglas reported that the Synod of the Dutch Reformed Church of South Africa, although guilty of- an "odious doctrine," acidly stated how noticeable it was that "movements organized against Communism don't receive support from the WCC."

Christian Century rebuttal

Most fascinating was the *Christian Century* editorial of October 20, 1971, in reply to the *Reader's Digest* series. It devoted most of its single page article to smears at the *Reader's Digest* and charges that *Christian Century* editors Harold Fey and Martin Marty were misrepresented.

The only criticisms that the *Christian Century* editorial ventured to answer were the question of the \$200,000 grant under the Program to Combat Racism and the grants to assist draft dodgers, which, as

Hall himself had said, "have never promoted or encouraged exile itself." In answer to the first, the editorial chided Hall for exhuming dead issues and citing only white critics. It also said that the funds were used for medical, relief, and educational programs, not for guns, and that "some erstwhile critics of the grants now support them... most African churchmen support them." It would seem that the burden of proof should lie with the supporters of the programs, but the WCC was reported only to have accused Hall of making "unjustified" charges. Neither of them quoted any responsible Africans who supported the programs.

Africans oppose support of Revolutionaries

In a recent conversation with this writer, the Botswana Ambassador to the United States explained that because he had thought that the WCC stood for Christian principles, he was very disillusioned to discover that it funded violent revolutionary groups in South Africa in the name of Christ. He was at least one non-white critic.

Publications in recent months still raise this issue. In an article in *National Laymen's Digest*, it was reported that the WCC trusts the Communist guerrillas in Africa. The report stated that Rhodesia's Prime Minister Ian Smith, in a recent broadcast on the Salisbury radio station, charged that "money from the World Council of Churches" was behind guerrilla attacks in Rhodesia. The black secretary general of the WCC, Dr. Philip Potter, denied Smith's charge, although Potter admitted that the WCC never investigated what the African guerrillas actually did with the \$200,000 in gifts from the WCC. Potter stated "We know it wasn't used for arms." When asked what proof he had to back up his statement, Potter replied, "We know, because we trust them."

Representatives of South African churches in the WCC have protested against the financial grants made by the WCC to "certain liberation movements in southern Africa" which comprise "support of revolution." The South African delegation, headed by Dr. Alex Boraine, appeared before the WCC Central Committee in a recent Atlanta, Georgia meeting.

Pointing out that the delegation affirmed "solidarity with the World Church struggle against racism inside and outside South Africa," it had now come to express the concern of South African member churches about the decision of the WCC to support movements, operating in South Africa, whose declared aim is "to bring about social and political change through violence." The WCC alleged that the grants were part of its "antiracism activities for humanitarian purposes," but the protestors stated that at least some allocations have supported guerrilla action by revolutionary groups. (from *The Christian Beacon*) In a related article in the *Washington Post*, it was reported that Anglican bishop Alphaeus H. Zulu of South Africa, one of the six presidents of the WCC, had urged the organization to give money to local churches in South Africa instead of liberation groups. "The grants to the liberation groups have not helped the Christian witness because it wasn't the action of the local church," he said at a press conference in Washington during his visit to the United States.

Church's mission redefined

On another subject, Dr. Donald McGavran, dean emeritus of Fuller Seminary's School of World Mission and himself a 35-year veteran missionary for the Disciples of Christ, deplored what he termed the betrayal by the WCC of the two billion people who have never heard of Christ. In the June 23, 1972 issue of *Christianity Today* he quoted the WCC document *Renewal in Mission*, which was prepared for the Fourth Assembly of the WCC in Uppsala, Sweden in 1968. It equated reconciliation of man with God and revolutionary change of the social order; omitting plans for evangelism, it termed the church's mission as horizontal reconciliation of man with man. He also pointed out that a WCC book had a chapter entitled "Saved by Mao."

While acknowledging that WCC member denominations are still carrying out world evangelism and church planting, and that even the WCC leaders participate in Billy Graham's crusades and other evangelistic efforts, Dr. McGavran proclaimed a revolution in the theology of mission. Conventional words and phrases may still be used by church leaders, but they have been given a different meaning. Also even the present mission efforts have not been commensurate with the opportunities of our time.

McGavran's primary concern has been with preaching Jesus, calling men to repentance, baptism, and church membership, and then- as the salt of the earth-bringing about substantial changes in the social order. Salvation must, therefore, go from the individual level, to the family level, society level, national level, and world level -- in that order.

Salvation redefined. The eighth ecumenical World Mission Conference was convened in Bangkok, Thailand in 1972/73 to discuss "Salvation Today." Peter Beyerhaus, professor of missions at the University of Tübingen, West Germany, reported on the conference in the March 30, 1973 *Christianity Today*.

From the years of biblical study and research devoted especially to the conference theme, only one small booklet was made available to delegates.

According to Beyerhaus, the breakdown in preparation was due, first, to the lack of conviction within the WCC on the authority of the Bible for Christian faith; second, to the habit of interpreting everything within the framework of current political, social, cultural, religious, or psychological problems; and third, to an attempt to make Christianity more relevant to the Third World. Theological debate was never permitted at the conference.

At Bangkok, conversion was defined with a story of a Chinese intellectual whom the Cultural Revolution assigned to work in a pig stable. There he discovered his need to be "converted" and to accept simple farm workers as his real fellow human beings. Nothing was said on how to reintroduce the gospel of China, but only on what the Chinese Cultural Revolution meant to "salvation today."

The decisive results of the Bangkok conference, Beyerhaus concluded, were the emphases on "dialogue with men of living faiths," on "salvation through political confrontation," and on a "moratorium" for Western missions. "One might term it an effort at the self-liquidation of the Western missionary movement." He closed with a challenge to fellow evangelicals to "present the biblical alternatives by articulating our faith and by acting accordingly."

Archangel mentality

Jean Caffey Lyles, writing from Madison, Wisconsin in the May 16, 1973 *Christian Century*, reported on the U.S.

conference of the WCC, which met at Madison to discuss the church's role in responding to social change. "Long on talk and short on action and decision-making," the meeting gave rise to speculation that annual meetings may be cut, the New York WCC office closed, and closer relations to the National Council of Churches sought. The U. S. contribution to the WCC was down from 83 percent to 44 percent, and the Germans were taking up more of the budget responsibility, although usually with strings attached. At the meetings, Eugene Smith warned against the "archangel mentality" found in the "preoccupation with rank and protocol" in the council. The policy-making committees of the WCC, he noted, are made up of the ecclesiastical archangels, while its tasks are related to the little ones. He also urged a moratorium on sending of money and missionaries from the Western world (Maybe missionaries should come from the East to the West?) A Catholic spokesman, Thomas Stransky, explained the Roman Catholic reluctance to enter the WCC and take on new headaches. But his conclusion was, "There is no headache that exists in only one church, but a common Christian headache."

Vanguard of prophetic Action

A brief evaluation of the WCC at 25 years in the August 15-22, 1973 issue of *Christian Century* praised it for being in the vanguard of social reform, for bridging the gap between the Western and the Communist countries, and more recently, for bridging the gap between the Northern and Southern hemispheres around the issues of poverty and liberation. The article tied the slackening of support from the major denominations to the shift in power to autonomous mission bodies in the Third World. The article concluded with a hope that the WCC would not succumb to the present mood of religious retreat, but continue to be "in the vanguard of Christian prophetic action."

In England, the July 14, 1973 *Economist* crusaded against a "super church" trend led by Rev. Kenneth Slack, moderator of a new united denomination in England.

Churches, unlike politicians, cannot compromise on matters of faith. A new super church would not attract many new converts to its bland message, the article continued, for in the Communist countries (one of the few remaining recruiting grounds for religion), the intellectuals who want to escape materialism look for a full-blooded faith. Solzhenitsyn, who joined the Russian Orthodox church, was given as a case in point. "Many of the younger people of the countries of the East and West alike seem to go for sects such as the Jehovah's Witnesses or the Baptists, precisely because they offer a sharply outlined view of life and man."

A desperate search for relevance, the *Economist* continued, had already pushed the WCC into a one-sided commitment to revolutionary third world politics, leaving the churches with little more than the role of ancillary social agencies. Helping one's fellowman should be the concern of the Christian, but always with a strong spiritual orientation, which has been less and less evident in today's churches. "What many people want is real spiritual food, and they are not getting it."

Return of Christ

As the years go by, the WCC seems to be cutting its groove deeper and deeper into humanism and social

issues, but losing a spiritual foundation which is necessary to truly usher in God's kingdom on earth. The evangelicals have consistently campaigned against this trend, with little apparent success.

Where is the true message that God would give the world today, and what are His desires? How does He want to establish His kingdom? Many fundamentalists say that Jesus will return at the end of the world to destroy this earth and all its evil, and God and man will dwell together on a new heaven and new earth.

Many liberals believe that man, not God, must destroy evil and build the kingdom of heaven. Yet, can man do this without Christ's return to unite Christians around his word?