

THE SOCIAL TEACHING OF
THE WORLD COUNCIL OF CHURCHES

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I. INTRODUCTION

In a previous age churches were by and large defenders of existing social institutions and customs, and religion constituted the core of traditional culture and the integrative value system of society. Today a large segment of Christendom seeks reform. Moreover in no other international non-Roman affiliation of churches has the impetus for social change been greater than in the World Council of Churches.

There is, it should be noted at the outset, no more controversial issue for the World Council of Churches, and for churches generally, than precisely their calling as churches in the social affairs of the day. Paul Bock, in his book on the social teaching of the WCC, In Search of a Responsible Society, explains why the Christian social ethic causes so much disagreement: "Many argue that the Christian faith is personal and that it has nothing to do with economics or politics. Others acknowledge that it has some bearing on social questions but disagree as to what that is. People also disagree as to whether the church as an institution should be taken seriously by individual Christians" (p. 17). The stands which the churches take on social issues win for them far more press coverage than do strictly theological or ecclesiastical pronouncements. These declarations also cause opposition both from civil authorities and from their own members.¹

The history of the ecumenical movement in the last half century is not understandable apart from the social teaching of the World Council of Churches. The roots of this teaching go back to the early positions taken in the Life and Work conferences at Stockholm in 1925 and at Oxford in 1937. Much of this early social concern was incorporated in the WCC when it was organized in 1948. Of more recent date, the influence of Life and Work made itself strongly felt in the 1966 Geneva Conference on Church and Society, especially upon the Uppsala Assembly.

Today the social thought of the WCC is reflected primarily in the several divisions of its Program Unit Justice and Service but also in the joint Committee on Society, Development and Peace (SODEPAX) of the Pontifical Commission Justice and Peace of the Holy See and the Unit Justice and Service of the World Council. We cannot give more than passing note to the fact that these two agencies are working jointly, such as in the Rocca di Papa Colloquium on the Social Thinking of the Churches (1977). Although there is cooperation between the Roman Catholics and the World Council, it will be well to consider the World Council by itself if for no other reason than that there is as yet no unanimity of approach or effect between the two.² Even though the WCC did not have historical resources to draw on such as the Roman Catholics did in the social encyclicals of the 19th Century, its contribution now is second to none in the arena of the world church.

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If the WCC was once behind the Catholics, it has definitely been in advance of evangelicals in formulating Christian social theory. Moreover World Council social thought has exerted considerable influence upon that of the evangelicals, perhaps more than the latter would like to admit.

The WCC has been in the vanguard of Christian social thought in more than one way. One of them is in the stress it has put upon socialism and prophetism. By prophetism I mean the activity of speaking out in criticism of government and society in the name of the Lord, or at least of the church. Only much later have evangelicals also assumed this 'prophetic' stance.

It is not our purpose to engage in an historical study of the social thought of the WCC in the usual sense. This has already been done both from the Roman Catholic and the ecumenical sides³ and a duplication of work does not appear to be called for at the present time. Nor is it our purpose to do a topical study, covering such areas as war, economic systems, race relations, international affairs, violence and revolution. Our purpose is rather to identify developments in the ecumenical movements in terms of certain key influential areas, and to evaluate these developments or trends in terms of the inner dynamics of the ecumenical movement itself. This will naturally involve a certain amount of historical detail and topical coverage but the focus will be on the dynamics of key developments or trends.

In making any kind of a survey and evaluation of the WCC one must bear in mind that the World Council is a composite, a mosaic that in large part reflects the heterogeneity of the churches that comprise its membership. This membership, in turn, reflects a large segment of non-Roman Christianity. There is in the pronouncements of the assemblies, understandably, 'something for everyone.' What Arne Sovik said about the Uppsala statement on "Renewal in Mission" could be said about WCC positions generally: "The statement is finally approved not because anyone is completely happy with it but because everyone can find something, sometimes a great deal, that is very good, and for the sake of this will tolerate what may not be quite so palatable, like a guest at a potluck supper" (Uppsala Report, p. 36).

A word of caution should also be said about the complexity of the organization of the WCC conferences and assemblies. One should distinguish in them between input and the statements which they produce. It would be as misleading to hold the churches of the WCC fully responsible for all that speakers say to the conferees, as it would be to exonerate the Council completely from the positions taken by speakers who are invited because of these positions. To gain a complete picture then one should take into account both the input and the deliverances, assess their relative weight, and note the discrepancies and similarities between them. One should also bear in mind that the assemblies to which the churches send official delegations more accurately reflect the mind of the churches and the position of the WCC than do the conferences of one or other commission which are one step farther removed from the churches. It is general practice to refer the proceedings of the conferences to the assemblies which draft their own reports and then approve them in substance before referring them to the churches for study and appropriate action. The deliverances of the assemblies are not binding upon the churches and have authority only by virtue of their inherent truth and wisdom.

One more word by way of introduction. This paper will not refer to two important areas of the social concern by the World Council, namely development and race relations. The question of development we hope to deal with elsewhere, for it deserves separate treatment. It is, in the opinion of some, the most important single area since 1960s. The issue of race relations has been considered, i. a., in a joint RES/WCC consultation in September 1975. The papers given at that consultation are published in the paperback, The Nature of the Church and the Role of Theology.⁴

II. THE WORD NEEDS THE DEED

The concern of the World Council for the social calling of the church, according to its own testimony, did not arise from a desire to devalue the proclamation of the Gospel given to the churches in favor of action programs. It was simply to make that proclamation credible. One of the clearest expressions of the felt need that the word needs the deed was made at the New Delhi Assembly in 1961. "Communication involves much more than speaking, and our message will have to be embodied in our life. We must be ready to be judged by the awful standard of the Christ Whom we preach. If we are affluent in the midst of poverty or indifferent amidst injustice or suffering, our speaking will avail less than our silence" (The New Delhi Report, p. 83). The assembly also said: "The scandal that renders the Gospel insignificant in the eyes of the unbelieving world and turns away genuine inquirers and potential converts is not the true scandal of the Gospel, Christ crucified, but rather the false scandals of our own practice and structures which prevent the message of the Gospel from challenging the world" (Idem., p. 89).

It was credibility for its message then that the Council sought. Christ demands obedience. The Gospel demands deeds. The closer one is drawn to Christ the more he is constrained to serve the world.

In speaking to the Geneva Conference on Church and Society (1966), W. Visser 't Hooft, then General Secretary, aptly expressed the intention of the World Council in the watchword: "Responsible men participating responsibly in a world society in which all accept responsibility for the common welfare." He called for a "radical critique of our social attitudes" (World Conference on Church and Society Official Report, p. 13). Two years later at Uppsala, Visser 't Hooft expanded on the same theme to say: "This assembly will largely be judged by its capacity to speak a helpful word on the question of the task of the church in the world" (Idem., p. 314). Again: "It must become clear that church members who deny in fact their responsibility for the needy in any part of the world are just as much guilty of heresy as those who deny this or that article of the faith" (Idem., p. 320). In short, the social calling of the church is "to incarnate the mandate which they have received from their Lord" (Idem).

Perhaps no more clearly than in its Program to Combat Racism (PCR) does the World Council show that in its view the word needs the deed. The Council saw racism to be such a glaring evil that it could not be satisfied with verbal condemnation. Nor could charitable deeds suffice to help the victims of racist policies. The Council had to find a way to exercise a multiple-strategy of action against social discrimination. It has even gone to the point of giving serious consideration to the support of violence to combat racism.

Nowhere more clearly than here does the divisiveness of social action of this kind come to the fore. From its beginning in 1969 to the present, the PCR has caused division in the WCC and among churches. In a recent instance it has occasioned a break between the Reformed Churches in the Netherlands and the Dutch Reformed Church in South Africa. When the former decided to give full support to the PCR, the latter forthwith declared the ties between the two churches to be broken.

There is, we may believe, nothing sinister in the emphasis of the World Council upon social issues. As Hans Ruedi Weber explained in 1971, "the biblical faith has committed many Christians to participate in the present struggle for justice and peace." "But," he adds, "it is precisely in this struggle that many are now in danger of losing their particular Christian faith" (Op. cit. p. 337).

This puts us squarely in the midst of the dynamics of the social calling of the church as the World Council has experienced it: the social calling is at one and the same time a necessary consequence of the Gospel mandate and a danger of no small dimension to the faith of church members.

One may say then that the World Council of Churches has seen as its task to be a forceful agent for social change to relieve oppression and to promote justice and peace in a revolutionary setting. It is, moreover, an age of great possibilities. Today man not only has the power to crack the genetic code, e.g., but man has also begun to do this and must live in the constant awareness of his new power (Idem. p. 188).

There are a number of fundamental issues which the social thought of the World Council brings to the fore. They are issues that are basic not only to one ecumenical body, and to all churches, but to all engaged in Christian social action. These issues we would explore with a view to what role they play in the WCC. We refer to questions such as:

1. What role should the church as institution assume in the issues that society faces? (societal structures)
2. Granted that the church should speak to social issues, what should be the nature of its pronouncements? And should it go beyond issuing statements to become directly involved in social action? (principles, axioms, specificity)

3. In performing its social calling, what attitude should the church take to the world? Is the process of secularization to be avoided or embraced? What are the basic structures of human experience? (world and life view)
4. What role does the ideal of a free personality play in the Council's social thought and action in securing a just and sustainable society? (freedom and justice)
5. How can the church promote the unity of mankind and take sides with the oppressed?
6. Finally, what hope may man cherish that the social actions of the church will attain a "just and sustainable society"? (human sin, despair and hope)

III. THE ROLE OF THE CHURCH IN SOCIAL AFFAIRS

There has been throughout its history a lack of clarity in World Council documents on the specific role of the church as a societal institution in the affairs of society. At the same time the Council has put much emphasis upon the churches' social responsibility. The 'that' of social action is emphasized at every turn; the 'what' remains a difficult entity to ascertain and even more to pursue. In the early pre-war conferences and at its organizing assembly, the World Council of Churches took the effort to defend the responsibility of individual Christians and the church for social problems. But by the time of Evanston (1954) this was largely taken for granted. In more recent assemblies it comes up for discussion only by way of protest from the Orthodox church.

One may perhaps best follow the 'contextual route' in analyzing the contrast between the strongly felt need that the church should involve itself in social affairs, and the lack of unanimity in the approach it should take. For it is in the 'context' of the WCC, particularly its European place of origin, where a considerable part of the answer lies.

The WCC is historically largely a North Atlantic movement. The majority of participants, especially the speakers at the Stockholm and Oxford conferences and the constituting Amsterdam assembly, were European or North American. Moreover the First Assembly took place shortly after World War II, in a city that had keenly felt the war's destructive force. Today its headquarters are still in an European city, but it is truly a global organization.

This development provided a strong impetus to the Lutherans to re-evaluate their traditional two-Kingdom theory⁵ and it allowed the ecumenical movement generally to change the mind of all those who had held that the concerns of the church are merely 'spiritual' and have nothing to do, except in an oblique way, with political and economic affairs.

If it was World War II that provided the immediate context of the WCC to address itself to social affairs, one has to go to World War I, however, to find the earlier roots. The World Alliance for Promoting International Friendship through the churches, funded by Andrew Carnegie in the early 20s, became the parent of the Life and Work movement at a time when it was sensed that the churches had to join forces on an international scale to promote peace and understanding.

Following World War I, after a period of optimism in the 20s came the devastating world depression of the 30s. It was a depression not only of the economy, but also of the human spirit. It became the seedbed in Europe for the emergence and growth of the Third Reich.

In this context the Amsterdam Assembly convened after the Second War to consider "Man's Disorder and God's Design." However, while the disorder was everywhere apparent and convinced the churches that there was an urgent need for them to be active socially, there was no universally accepted design to show the churches just how to proceed.

Not that the churches were wholly unprepared, for both in Stockholm (1925) and in Oxford (1937) the Life and Work movement (which joined with Faith and Order in 1948 to form the WCC) had sought to formulate guidelines for the social thought and action of the churches. Oxford even formulated the 'foundations' of ecumenical social thought.

One consideration seemed to drive both Stockholm and Oxford to urge the churches to engage in social action as a priority concern even before there was consensus on how it should be done: the social turmoil of the age. Stockholm expressed it this way:

The sins and sorrows, the struggles and losses of the Great War and since, have compelled the Christian churches to recognize, humbly and with shame, that "the world is too strong for a divided church." Leaving for the time our differences in Faith and Order, our aim has been to secure united practical action in Christian life and work. The conference itself is a conspicuous fact. But it is only a beginning (The Stockholm Conference 1925, GKA Bell, p. 712).

At the time of Stockholm (1925) the social thought was under strong Anglo-Saxon liberal theology influence. "Discussions centered on the applications of the principles of life, brotherhood, and justice to the social order. The church was to be a central spiritual community, asserting these principles and applying them to all realms of experience. The church was to convert men to social responsibility and thus imbue a Christian spirit into all of society, thereby humanizing society. It was a time of hopefulness, and many Christians believed that by working with secular institutions—reform movements, governments, labor unions, and the League of Nations—they could bring life on earth close to the Kingdom of God" (Bock, Op. cit., p. 35).

There was a spirit of penitence at Oxford (1937). This came to the fore, i.a., in the recognition that the growth of communism in the world was in part the fault of the church in its support of existing injustices. Oxford spoke of a "disastrous chasm...between those who were struggling for social justice but on non-religious or anti-religious grounds and those who stood for the Christian faith but did not seem to recognize existing injustices. This is one of the reasons why victorious communism persecutes the Christian churches..." (Idem. p. 41).

Oxford, at which the optimism of the 20s had been dampened by the world-wide depression of the 30s, made a significant attempt to deal with theological foundations. Here, under the influence of the Swiss theologians, Karl Barth and Emil Brunner, Reinhold Niebuhr of the United States, and J.H. Oldham of Scotland, the slogan was "let the church be the church." "The church's task was to be supra-national, supra-class, supra-racial. It was not to identify itself with any social system, but to carry out a prophetic critique of all of them." However, the Council did not draw the lines between the church as a social institution and the rest of society.

The Oxford report on the section on church and state opens by saying that its purpose "is not to set forth an abstract doctrine of the relation of church and state in sociological, legal or theological form, but to express the Christian's attitude toward the secularization of modern society and the growing power of the state phenomena which present problems to the intelligence of Christians and lay burdens upon their conscience" (Foundations of Ecumenical Social Thought, p. 21). It sought to determine the problems presented to Christians both in their individual and their corporate capacity.

Nevertheless Oxford did make an effort to delineate the distinct functions of church and state. "The concern of the state is to provide men with justice, order and security in a world of sin and change" (Idem. p. 25). "The primary task of the church to the state is to be the church to witness for God, to preach His Word, to confess the faith before men, to teach both young and old to observe the divine commandments, and to serve the nation and the state by proclaiming the will of God as the supreme standard to which all human wills must be subject and all human conduct must conform. These functions of worship, preaching, teaching and ministry the church cannot renounce whether the state consent or not" (Idem. p. 26).

The distinctive character of the church's activity is the free operation of grace and love. The distinctive character of the state's activity is the power of constraint, legal and physical. Therefore, some social activities belong to the church, and others to the state, but some may be performed by both and here is the source of tensions (Idem). This is as explicit as Oxford got to a theory of societal zones regarding state and church.

One suggestion was that the task of the church is, i.a., to create within the local community, the nation and the world "agencies of cooperative action" that will make it possible "to discharge effectively such tasks as

can be done in common" (Idem. p. 29). Had this suggestion been implemented, and had the church given effective impetus to this idea, there could have arisen in society associations of Christians to carry out jointly on a Christian basis and with Christian aims social tasks in various fields, such as education, economics, statecraft, and recreation. Why little came of this, except via the creation of specific church organizations we shall explain later.

Oxford put much stress on the laity of the church, those who must make decisions in the political and economic orders. To them the church, especially the clergy, had the task to give guidance in making these decisions. Thus the task of the church was to interpret the meaning of the faith for the economic order (Foundations, p. 53).

One of the traumas that came as a legacy of the war was the German church's role in the conflict. It was felt after the war that the church, both in Germany and elsewhere, had failed to sound a strong prophetic voice at a most crucial juncture in world history. The land of the 16th century Reformation had in the 20th century supported the Nazis who in their return to a sub-Christian Blut und Boden ideology sought to subjugate all Europe (and it was feared regions beyond!) to their control. True, there were the loyal confessing Christians, the Bekentnis Kirche, which had firmly protested the will to power, but to no avail. There were also the martyrs, such as Dietrich Bonhoeffer, who paid the supreme sacrifice for their opposition to Der Fuhrer. The blood of these people, while it could not stop the tragedy, did later cry from the ground to spur the post-war world church to reassess its social role, and to make the vow that if it lay in their power there would be no repeat performance as during World War II.

The church, the early Life and Work Conferences as well as Amsterdam said, should not identify itself with any existing political or economic order. As C.L. Patijn told the Amsterdam Assembly, "the church's task was not to become involved in national and international affairs directly, and should not aim at a theoretical solution to economic problems but should aim rather at a comprehensive pastoral insight into the existential needs of society" (The Church and the Disorder of Society, p. 166). Later there was a recognition that the church lacks the competence to deal with the gritty economic and political policies, but this incompetence would be offset by co-opting laymen expert in various fields. Obviously the church wanted to do more than pastoral work. It also obviously was not ready yet to commit itself to one or other political or social system.

It was recognized at Amsterdam (1948) that the social influence of the church must come primarily from its teaching and preaching of Christian truth in ways that illuminate the historical condition in which men live.

Amsterdam spoke of the people of God in the world in a way that reminds one of the deconfessionalizing trend in Europe after the war, what is often called the doorbraak (breakthrough): "The church must find its way to the

places where men really live. It must penetrate the alienated world from within, and make the minds of men familiar with the elementary realities of God, of sin and of purpose in life. This can be done partly through new ventures of self-identification by Christians with the life of that world, partly through Christians making the word of the Gospel heard in the places where decisions are made that affect the lives of men. It can be done fully only if, by the inspiration of the Holy Spirit the church recovers the spirit of prophecy to discern the signs of the times, to see the purpose of God working in the immense movements and revolutions of the present age, and again to speak to the nations, the word of God with authority" (Idem. p. 215).

The lack of certainty at Amsterdam on the issue, regarding the church and individual Christians, may be seen in the report on "The Church and the Disorder of Society," in the paragraph on the social function of the church. Here the document speaks of the church in its larger units (clearly the ecclesiastical institution) and local congregations and claims that the church should not be identified with any political party, and then warns against the formation of Christian political parties:

The social influence of the church must come primarily from its influence upon its members through constant teaching and preaching of Christian truth in ways that illuminate the historical conditions in which men live and the problems which they face. The church can be most effective in society as it inspires its members to ask in a new way what their Christian responsibility is whenever they vote or discharge the duties of public office, whenever they influence public opinion, whenever they make decisions as employers or as workers or in any other vocation to which they may be called (Idem. p. 196).

The options, except for a one-time consideration of Christian political parties, are either united social action by the church, or action outside the church as individual members. The unitive communal character of the Christian life does not extend organizationally beyond the church institution.

New Delhi did include in its report on Service a subsection called "Corporate Christian Service." It had in the previous paragraphs stated that one should totally dedicate his gifts to the glory of God in every sphere of life. It now added that the church must develop "strong organs of thinking and action at local, national and world levels to discover concrete needs and adequate ways to respond to them" (New Delhi Report, p. 113). However, it was the extension of the church into the areas of need, rather than the formation of Christian associations of a non-ecclesiastical nature that the assembly apparently had in mind.

The charge that the church is not competent, the World Council, as we noted, has sought to obviate by bringing in experts from various fields. This was particularly the case at the 1966 Geneva Conference on Church and Society. In a scathing critique of this conference, Paul Ramsey scores the Council as

well for the principle of selection it uses, as for the delusion that in two weeks it could hammer out policy statements on all kinds of far-reaching global problems.⁶ He contends that if the Council would actually carry out its recommendations it would have to become a shadow state department. To our knowledge no extensive rebuttal to Ramsey's charge has come from the World Council. Paul Bock deals with it incidentally but without coming to grips with the basic critique.

If—referring again to the contextual route—the early years of the World Council were largely oriented to the Western scene, this changed markedly when the International Missionary Movement in 1961 joined the WCC. For now the concerns were shifted in considerable part to those of the non-West, particularly the so-called Third World. In each subsequent assembly its impact increased until at Nairobi the Third World sent the majority of delegates.

We strongly suspect (it would be difficult to document) that the shift from the North Atlantic to a global perspective has had the effect of putting the question of the role of the church as institution 'on the back burner.' In the lands of younger churches that stage of societal development has often not been reached where one can meaningfully speak of any corporate manifestation of the people of God except in the worshipping and evangelizing institution. Moreover, here the consuming interests are of a different, less academic nature. They center on the political and economic liberation of the (often illiterate) masses. The only indigenous Christian voice is often that of the young church, which as in the case of the All African Council of Churches, publicly and fiercely takes political positions in the guerrilla fighting, e.g., in Rhodesia and Namibia.

In summary one may say that in the early decades the World Council gave attention to the role of the church and made the distinction that surfaced occasionally in later years between the church institution and individual Christians.

However this never became a constitutive working principle and so the WCC pronouncements often speak in an ambiguous way that leaves one guessing as to what the assembly had in mind, the church institution or the individual members of the body of Christ, or church and members without distinction.

What was clear, however, was that the church should give moral guidance as the conscience of society (as Visser 't Hooft said in Uppsala) to its members and to society at large. How the church sought to do this we shall consider next.

IV. PRINCIPLES, AXIOMS AND SPECIFICITY

Closely related to the task of the church as a societal institution is the nature of the pronouncements which the church organization issues on social matters. Should the church make declarations solely in the form of basic principles, such as the demands for love, justice, and peace and leave it at that? Or should it go beyond this to issue 'middle axioms,' that is, derived working principles such as the goals of a responsible society? Should it simply set forth the task of the church in broad terms on the basis of biblical teaching, leaving all political action to politicians? Or should it go another step and when necessary make declarations on specific political and economic policy, such as asking for disinvestment in South Africa? Do all these actions fall within the legitimate scope of an ecumenical body representing churches?

Concerning the basic principles and middle axioms there was no extensive dispute in WCC circles or in the Life and Work movement prior to 1948. All agreed that the church should concern itself with working principles derived from the biblical message. Concerning the issuing of specific policy proposals in the economic and political spheres, however, there was considerable dispute, both from within and without the ecumenical movement.

The Oxford conference did what the title of J.H. Oldham's report indicated: it lay "foundations for ecumenical social thought." The hand of Oldham was clearly apparent in the Oxford finished report, as well as in the constituting assembly in Amsterdam. It was he who proposed, e.g., the distinction between basic principles, middle axioms and specific proposals on policy. We should trace the development from Stockholm to Nairobi which may briefly be characterized as a development from principles and middle axioms to axioms and specific proposals for action.

Stockholm stated that the task of the church "is above all to state principles, and to assert the ideal, while leaving to individual consciences and communities the duty of applying them with charity, wisdom and courage." The stated purpose of the conference was "to secure united practical action in Christian Life and Work," and for that purpose the differences in Faith and Order would be put aside (since doctrine divides), but there was definitely no intention to set aside the principles of joint action (for service unites).

Oxford, which produced a well-reasoned report of lasting influence, sought to formulate some of the principles for social action, which, it claimed, remain always the same. Only their application varies according to circumstances (Foundations, p. 23). Oxford also asked the question concerning the basis of these principles: Are they grounded in natural law or in the Scripture?

In this debate Oldham threw his weight against grounding the principles in unchanging natural law. He pleaded instead for a dynamic response to the living Christ, not to a set of fixed norms and a moral code as the idea of natural law would imply. He advocated an "ethic of inspiration" rather than an "ethic of ends."⁷ The conference responded by declaring that the will of God as revealed in Christ is the ultimate standard of Christian conduct (p. 32).

Oxford spelled out this message in terms of human equality by stating that "any social arrangement which outrages the dignity of man by treating some men as ends and others as means, any institution which obscures the common humanity of man by emphasizing the external accidents of birth or wealth or social position is ipso facto anti-Christian" (p. 45). Oxford conceived of the church as an organized community with a specific function in the fields of economic activity and political life. That function was to present a Christian understanding of life:

The Christian message should deal with ends, in the sense of long-range goals, standards, and principles, in the light of which every concrete situation, and every proposal for improving it, must be tested... (It) should throw a searchlight on the actual facts of the existing situation, and in particular reveal the human consequences of present forms of economic behaviour... (It) should make clear the obstacles to economic justice in the human heart, and especially those that are present in the hearts of people within the church (p. 90).

Oxford also set out a number of middle axioms (halfway positions between the basic principles of love and justice and the specifics of policy) to evaluate an economic order: Does it provide equal opportunity? Does it practice non-discrimination? Does it care for the disabled and aged and treat labor fairly? Does it exercise stewardship of the earth's resources? As a working principle for the whole of society it submitted that "the relative and departmental standard for all social arrangements and institutions, all the economic structures and political systems, by which the life of man is ordered is the principle of justice" (p. 32).

At the Amsterdam Assembly after the war the influence of the pre-war Oxford Conference was clearly felt. In Amsterdam the slogan 'the responsible society' stood as a "symbol of the social arrangement maintaining in dynamic equilibrium freedom and order, liberty and justice while barring the road to tyranny and anarchy" (Edward Duff, The Social Thought of the World Council of Churches, p. 191). The idea of the responsible society is perhaps the central concept in the social teaching of the WCC from 1948 to the present day.

At Amsterdam the influence of Karl Barth was also felt. His position is stated in Against the Stream where he says that the church never thinks, speaks or acts 'on principle.' Rather it judges spiritually and by individual

cases. For that reason the church rejects every attempt to systematize political history and its own part in that history.⁸ Thus after Oldham had rejected the natural law approach, thereby eliminating finding a basis for united action in man's rational acquisition of the truth, Barth questioned whether Scripture gives principled direction for the church. If the ecumenical movement were to take the counsel of both, it would have to look elsewhere than reason or Scripture for guidelines or proceed without such guidelines.

Both Oldham and Barth had their effect, but not immediately. There was rather a gradual shift away from the "Christian understanding" of issues to evaluation of specific issues no longer grounded exclusively on Christian or biblical principles but made in the light of the specific circumstances or context. The result was a kind of activism.

Thus at Evanston D.T. Niles said, "It is a question wrongly put when it is asked: What is the Christian position which the church can offer to this or that problem? For the task of the church is not to offer Christian solutions to specific problems but to incarnate the Word in every human situation" (Evanston Assembly Reports, p. 24).

The movement toward specificity gained ground at Evanston where there was a lack of theological consensus as to the way one should proceed from theological premises to judgments about specific social issues. But as the introduction to the Evanston report on the "Responsible Society in a World Perspective" states, "It was agreed, however, that it was not necessary to revalue such theological differences in order to arrive at common judgment on the specific issues" (Evanston Speaks, pp. 42, 43). One may safely deduce that there were pervasive non-theological forces of thought operative, forces which could produce a consensus in an ecclesiastical gathering in spite of the theological disagreement.

References to the "Christian understanding" of social issues become fewer and fewer after Evanston. New Delhi noted how Romans 13 had too often been invoked in justification of de facto rules, and stated as the passage's true meaning that through government a necessary basic order is given to society (New Delhi Report, p.99).

It is necessary in this connection to observe the influence of the 1966 Geneva conference as it relates to principles and specifics. Geneva asked what responsible participation in political life is. It replied that there is no set of universally valid rules, no simple application of abstract principles. "Holy Scripture, Christian history, contemporary Christian experience and the insights of the social sciences and other secular disciplines do inform the situation, and in their light the Christian is called to be obedient to his understanding of God's will in his particular situation" (Official Report, p. 111). Thus there was not just one source of direction but several, without indication as to where the priority lies or which is normative over the other.

Two years later the Uppsala Assembly drafted a section of life style. At one point in the discussion consideration was given to the title, "Toward New Styles of Christian Living." Brigit Rodhe, who wrote a comment in the Official Report, explained: "Why wasn't the title of the Report 'Towards New Styles of Christian Living?' It was pointed out by the chairman that although the report tried to define the character of Christian life today, it is 'attentive to all human values whoever it is who defends them.' If there is a Christian style of living in the world today, it is an open style, lived by people who are ready to work on the various issues with various people of various faiths and convictions. To try to work out a principal separating guiding line between a Christian style of living and a human style would therefore be a great error" (Uppsala Report, p. 96). The Report itself bluntly states, "There is no single style of Christian life. Our style of living springs from more than what we consciously are or do. It consists of our beliefs, words, and actions as they become a part of the innermost being of our person, our group. Everybody acts out of a number of roles, often conflicting ones" (p. 93).

In the melange of guidelines proposed by Geneva, the norm that increasingly comes to the fore is that of contemporary Christian experience. Therefore, in the face of rapid change, the increasing need to readapt (Uppsala Report, p. 88). Authority is not simply given; it must be constantly earned (p. 89). The question now is not nearly so much what God has spoken in the Bible as "what God is doing in the world."

The World Council has found a 'theological' basis for this stress on actions aiming at social change in the ideas (1) of Christ as the Man for others, and (2) of the Church as the Church for others. These ideas helped in the transition from Scripture to experience as the source of authority. Christ is seen, as the man for others, as the one who, "through the eschatological dynamic of His proclamation has initiated the process of secularization and humanization in world history" (Peter Beyerhaus, Missions Which Way? 1971, p. 81). Thus the Uppsala Draft for Sections said that in Jesus Christ, God has set out on a mission to man. "His true humanity breaks down the categories into which men are divided... He bids us set out on his mission for the renewal of mankind" (p. 28).

In similar vein M.M. Thomas wrote, "The clear recognition that the leaven of the Gospel through the creation of the category of the humanum and through the basic revolutions of our time... in which modern man fights to realize new areas of human worth and to realize the promise of Christ for a comprehensive human life in these areas, has played a great role." "Uppsala 1968 und die gegenwärtige theologische Lage," Okumenische Rundschau (1969), pp. 383 f.

In The Church for Others (two reports on the Missionary Structure of the Congregation, 1968), it is affirmed that the God-Church-world relation must be changed to be: God-world-Church connection. "That is, God's primary relationship is to the world and it is the world and not the Church that is the focus of God's plan" (pp. 16, 17). In the place of an earlier ecclesiocentric idea, now the Church is given an 'ex-centric' place, as a segment of the world, finding its existence in being 'for the world.'

The trend from principled thinking to specific action demanded by the situation does not mean that in its most recent assemblies the WCC acts entirely without guidelines. To the contrary, these guidelines are even often openly stated. Thus Uppsala stated that no style of life is Christian that is indifferent to the suffering of other people (p. 90). The mandate of the church, Nairobi said, is still to witness to the truth which judges and to proclaim the good news that brings about freedom and salvation (Breaking Barriers, pp. 100, 101). "God wills a society in which all can exercise full human right" (Idem, p. 102). Again: "the use of indiscriminate weapons must be condemned as an affront to the Creator and a denial of the very purposes of the creation... Christians must also maintain that the use of nuclear weapons, or other forms of major violence, against centers of population is in no circumstances reconcilable with the demands of the Christian gospel" (New Delhi Report, p. 108). But it is crucial for the churches to move from making declarations about human right to working for the full implementation of those rights (Idem, p. 102, 103). Nairobi appended to each of the six reports a list of recommendations for action by the churches. While Christian experience affirms that no culture is closer to Jesus Christ than any other culture, the church must seek to influence society according to the aim that "nobody should increase his affluence until everybody has his essentials" (p. 128).

It is a long way from Stockholm to Nairobi. Stockholm said that the mission of the church is "above all to state principles and to assert the ideal, while leaving to individual consciences and communities the duty of applying them with charity, wisdom and courage" (In Search of a Responsible World Society, p. 33). Geneva was frank to admit that decisions (such as those regarding civil disobedience) can be made only for each specific situation by those who are within it (World Conference, p. 115). Nairobi was not content to leave the application to the individual conscience and communities, but sought for specific implementation by the churches.

There is more involved here than an ecclesiastical organization readapting its ecclesiastical work according to new insights, going from broad principles of church polity to specific implementation in church life. Also involved is the propriety of the church becoming a participant in the social, political and economic spheres in a non-ecclesiastical way. In other words there are here two kinds of movement: one from generalities to specifics, and another from one life zone to another.

Let it be granted that the church should concern itself with all social issues in a way that conforms to its true role, its competence and its proper tasks for which it assumes responsibility. But does this mean that the church should become a "shadow state department" calling for specific political stands in complex issues where its competence, its possession of all relevant facts, are questionable? Since it does not have to take and cannot assume the political responsibility for the consequences of one decision as over against the other, should it in the name of peace and justice and pretending to be the mouthpiece of Christian conscience presume to advocate such decisions?

We cannot go into this matter in any detail and leave it with the comment that the movement we have described in this part of the paper confronts us with the whole question of the identity of the church: What kind of a body is it? Where does it receive its marching orders? What are the limits of its authority, competence and tasks?

We are not particularly hopeful of significant progress in the ecumenical dialogue toward clarity in this matter, precisely because of the shift away from principled thinking to ad hoc decision making and implementation determined very largely by the situation. In the melange of the Geneva Conference and afterwards, it would appear that the 'principles' for action are in ever smaller degree reasoned conclusions from Scriptural data, but increasingly reflections of the consensus of churchmen and laymen which, on most social issues, are very similar to the views of non-ecclesiastics and non-Christians. In other words, the deliverances of the World Council on current issues are as often as not reflections of common public opinion, especially of the more progressive, liberal, humanistic segments of human society.

The Oxford conference warned both against identifying the kingdom of God with the existing structures (a la conservatism) and against making this identification in the interest of a new social order (a la liberalism). "Every tendency to identify the kingdom of God with a particular social structure or economic mechanism must result in moral confusion" (Foundations, p. 35). The World Council of Churches may more easily be faulted for not heeding the second warning than for not listening to the first.

Amsterdam singled out objectionable aspects of both Communism and laissez faire capitalism. In more recent years, however, especially in its call for a new international economic order, the mind of the World Council openly leans toward a kind of democratic socialism. There is a tendency here from impartiality to commitment.

V. SECULAR AND SACRED: BASIC STRUCTURES OF HUMAN EXPERIENCE

The Stockholm and Oxford conferences had warned against secularism. Uppsala and Nairobi took a positive attitude toward the world. Oxford also had warned against humanism; Uppsala, however, made "the human" into a criterion. This would indicate movement from a negative to a positive stance vis a vis the 'world.'

At the same time there is operative in this regard a frame of reference that has remained constant, namely that human experience, and the whole of created reality, is properly understood to be either secular (world) or sacred (church). Thus there is movement within basic structures by which human experience is categorized but not from these structures to another one. That would involve a change in life view.

There is to our knowledge no place in which the basic life view of the World Council of Churches is expounded. In all likelihood there would be no agreement on just what that life view is, for here too the WCC is a composite. We can therefore only proceed inductively from statements that are explainable only on the basis of a life view and thereby conclude to its operative influence. The procedure is not without risk, but it is necessary if we are to ascertain what the prevailing structures are and attain a good understanding of the Council. Let us then briefly trace this development within the constant frame of reference.

The Oxford conference saw great masses of men gripped by an irreligious secularism that was "fashioning a new kind of man, not only in indifference but in constant opposition to God." Oxford deplored also that "human life is falling to pieces because it has tried to organize itself into unity on a secularistic and humanistic basis without any reference to the divine will and power above and beyond itself" (Foundations, p. 12).

The same Oxford conference, while deploring the attempts at unity on a secular basis, gave a construction to the non-ecclesiastical area as being what André Dumas calls the 'secondarily christological sphere.' "That is to say, the world under the dominion of Jesus Christ comprises two circles, a cognitive, confessing circle which is that of the Church, and another, non-confessing but active circle, which is that of civil society. Society, like Church, lives under the lordship of Jesus Christ, and it is therefore a question of finding relations of analogy between the Church's confession and the function of civil society. And this involves a whole complex theology of this secondarily christological sphere which cannot be a Christian society, confessing the Christian faith. There is no Christian party, there is no social doctrine; the State must be secular and an analogy of what the Church knows to be the goal of Church and of society, that is to say, the Kingdom. Civil society therefore stands in a certain relation to the Kingdom as its goal, and this provides a certain number of very precise indications on what society should and should not be " (Church Alert No. 18, p. 10). Oxford, then, left the conferees without a way, apart from that of analogy to the Church, in which Christians can express the Lordship of Christ in society. Here the primacy was definitely on the Church, the sphere of Grace, but there was no inherent reason in the Church/civil society bifurcation why the primacy could not be given to civil society over that of the Church.

At Amsterdam, eleven years later and following the war, there was a noticeable change. Now it was said that the church must penetrate the world (human society) from within in order to make the minds of men familiar with the elementary realities of God, of sin and of purpose in life (The Church's Witness of God's Design, p. 215). Amsterdam also called for new ventures of self-identification of Christians with the life of the world. In short, the negative approach of Oxford was replaced with the positive approach of Amsterdam.

New Delhi applied the positive approach to the Christian's attitude toward the state. It allowed that secularism may be an essential element of culture

in nations which have many religious communities (New Delhi Report, p. 99). Individual Christians should share in secular service agencies in government work by turning what might be impersonal service into truly personal service through a consciousness of the saving presence of Christ (p. 112).

There is a vast difference in meaning, however, between Oxford's term 'secularism' and New Delhi's use of the word 'secular.' For Oxford, 'secularism' was an attitude, a basic life direction that was against God. For New Delhi 'secular' was an area of societal life set over against the ecclesiastical or spiritual, an area where the Christian should turn impersonal relationships into personal ones.

New Delhi considered the matter also in relation to the surge of scientific discovery and the effects of technology. It affirmed that Christ is Lord of the mind and from this deduced that there "cannot conceivably be any choice between science and religious faith. For science is essentially a method of discovering facts about nature and interpreting them within a conceptual pattern. The nature that scientists investigate is part of God's creation; the truth they discover is part of God's truth; the abilities they use are God-given" (p. 96). The assumption is that the investigation and interpretation that scientists do qua scientists is or can be objective. There is no allowance in the New Delhi position for the possibility that precisely in his science man is directed with the secularistic approach that Oxford so roundly condemned. One may not be far afield if he concludes that the controlling idea behind the New Delhi position is that science is an area of life (limited to be sure and its limits may not be exceeded) that is not in need of redemption, that here there is (not even by non-Christians) suppression of the truth (which does indeed come from God) such as Paul mentions in Romans 1:18, and that here there is no real conflict between one kind of science and another. Conflict comes, on this position, in the use to which science and technology are put.

The Geneva 1966 conference went a step beyond New Delhi and said that the church should joyfully engage itself with secular society in all its dimensions, secure in its faith (World Conference, p. 183). Christian discernment is a discipline achieved in continual dialogue with biblical resources, the mind of the church and the best insights of social scientific analysis (p. 201).

Thus if we assume that the insights of social scientific analysis, a la New Delhi, are achieved objectively, need no redemption, and have an autonomy of their own within their limits, then Geneva's description of Christian discernment amounts to a synthesis of scientific thought and biblical ideas. Once the synthesis is sanctioned, the only question is that of proportion and priority.

Geneva took a positive stance toward the process of secularization which it saw as a force to liberate man from the metaphysical presuppositions of religious ideology.⁹

Uppsala described the tension between the Christian and the secular community: "living in both... , one gets the impression that they were not created by the same God. To be in one seems to involve being pushed out of the other..." (Uppsala Report, p. 94).

Within the basic frame of the secular/sacred dichotomy there is a swing from one side to the other. Thus Uppsala swung far to the left pole of highly evaluating the secular areas and giving the lion's share of attention to social concerns. Nairobi, in contrast, swung a short distance away from the secular pole toward the sacred when it re-affirmed the priority of mission and evangelism, and sought for a biblical basis especially in the report on *Confessing Christ Today, What Unity Requires, and Human Development: Ambiguities of Power Technology, and Quality of Life.*

It would take us afield to explore here how this relates to the Council's study of the humanum initiated at Uppsala or what it means that the world (as David Jenkins, director of the Humanum Studies urged) should write the agenda for the church, or how the idea has gained ground that a new kind of unity must be sought, one that extends beyond the bounds of the Christian faith.¹⁰

Suffice it to say here that the social teaching of the World Council of Churches will remain obscure to us unless we see that whereas Oxford deplored that men were organizing their lives on a secularistic basis, now the Council is trying to organize its life in such a way that the secular area becomes an ever greater component of the secular/sacred dichotomized life. This shift to the secular may be seen, for instance, in the increased contributions of lay experts.¹¹ This shift accounts too for the increased emphasis that the Council puts upon the so-called horizontal, that is, upon human rights, development, structures of injustice, racial discrimination, and a new international economic order.

The line between a life view and specific proposals for social action are not always direct and distinct. But it would be folly not to keep in mind the functioning of the basic structures of human experience in seeking to understand the social thought and action of the World Council of Churches.

VI. FREEDOM AND JUSTICE

Throughout its history a humanistic personality ideal has given strong impetus to the World Council of Churches. According to this ideal justice and freedom must be put in the service of man. If one may speak at any point of inner motivation on the part of the WCC then the drive to enhance the life of man deserves high priority. This is not to say that the impetus to enhance man's freedom and wellbeing causes his worship and the service of God to fall into eclipse, but it does mean that the personality ideal influences this service and worship of God so strongly that man and the humanization of society often occupy center stage.

Here we do not find as clear a development from one stage to another, or from one position to another, as we did in the section on principles and practice and the secular to the sacred. Here the scale of values throughout the history of the World Council has been tipped in favor of the free human personality who deserves a just social order in order to attain to his full development and expression.

Here the enemy becomes heteronomy and static structures that impede human development. Any force/structure that arrests the flow of history or human (r)evolution is reactionary and non-Christian. The converse also tends to be seen as true, at least, more or less.

Most helpful in ascertaining the influence of this personality ideal is the report of the 1966 Geneva World Conference. It declared that all institutions are tentative and subject to revision for the sake of serving the good of man (p. 99). Thus all power of the state must be used for the benefit of man (pp. 97, 117). Man needs a responsible society in which there is a respect for persons. Likewise, the economy exists for man, not man for the economy. For this reason man may challenge systems according to the way in which they meet human needs (p. 58). In fact, people, (not the experts) retain the ultimate right of decision over their destinies (p. 100).

This freedom ideal has determined the positive evaluation by the conference of the process of secularization: "The secular society is not founded on a religious base that cannot be challenged, but rather religious institutions and ideas are one among many components of the social structure. This means freedom. In the secular society, man's choices are no longer obligatory and prescribed" (p. 158). Again, technology and urbanization are means to liberate mankind (pp. 144, 145).

In the matter of civil disobedience, Geneva set forth a scale of values that put human rights on top: "We recognize a scale of values: human rights, constitution and legislation. We understand that laws may be defied in defense of the constitution, and that the constitution may be defied in the defense of human rights" (p. 115).

The primacy of the ideal of the free personality explains why the WCC continues to combat racism with such passion, for racism flies in the teeth of the idea of the dignity of all mankind. Racism "destroys the human dignity of both the racist and the victim" (Breaking Barriers, p. 109). It is not an exaggeration to speak here of 'passion' for at no time has a WCC assembly threatened churches with the loss of membership as it did when it explained that racism jeopardizes a church's membership in the Council:

Because racism is irreconcilable with Christian faith the churches should continue to rebuke those churches which tolerate racism, and make it clear that racist churches cannot be recognized as members in good standing within the ecumenical fellowship (Uppsala Report, p. 91).

Finally, the personality ideal functions in the call the Council has given to a new international economic order. Uppsala said that the central issue in development is the criterion of the Human (Uppsala Report, p. 49). Nairobi said that the churches must favor an economy "as if people matter" (Breaking Barriers, p. 125). It was Prime Minister Michael Manley of Jamaica who made the plea at Nairobi for a socialist state that would afford the greatest measure of justice and freedom. In the post-Nairobi period the new international economic order has assumed greater emphasis.

Not everything the WCC does, however, fits neatly into the pattern of the primacy of the freedom ideal. If this were so, then the criticism of the Council, with its strong emphasis on social, economic, and political freedom, would often be directed against communist countries. As a matter of fact, the freedom ideal functions much more vigorously in denouncing infringements of civil rights in 'rightist' governments, such as Chile, Brazil, South Africa and Korea. At the same time criticism of infringements in 'leftist' countries is reluctant and low key. There is admittedly a strangeness here, for it means in effect that the criticism has been most outspoken in a number of non-totalitarian societies where liberty is curtailed in some but not all areas, and has been strangely silent or soft in its references to communist totalitarian societies where the infringement upon liberty touches every life zone, even that of the family and church. Here the influence of representatives from communists in the communist countries in the Council is obvious. Moreover at this point another motive, namely that of unity even at the price of consistency, exerts its influence.

The justification which the Council has given for this stress upon the free personality, for whose sake justice must be established, is found in what it calls God's total identification with a humanity suffering under sin and other destructive powers. Moreover in suffering for the cause of justice and for the Gospel, the church may participate in the vicarious suffering of Christ (Idem. p. 101).

To assess the role of the personality ideal in the Council one must say that it most decidedly has priority over any polarly opposite ideal, such as that of law and order. Just as permanent principles made room for ad hoc decisions (see section IV), so the idea of freedom has gained clear superiority over that of system, order, theories, or ideology.¹²

The primacy of the freedom ideal, in the deliverances of the Council seen in terms of the Gospel motif that man is the liberated servant of God, has resulted in a mixture, a kind of religious syncretism. Sometimes the Gospel wins, as when the section on Development at the Nairobi Assembly stressed the idea of man's stewardship over the creation, and sometimes the humanist freedom ideal of autonomous man gets the upper hand—as when man is said to determine his own destiny. To sort out the impact of the conflicting motives makes for intriguing and sometimes frustrating study.

VII. LIBERAL THEOLOGY AND THE THEOLOGY OF LIBERATION (solidarity and conflict)

The ecumenical movement of the 19th century was strongly influenced by evangelical forces in the West. Out of evangelical concern the International Missionary Movement pressed for unity in the church. However, during the period when the WCC was in process of formation a classical liberal theology strongly influenced the ecumenical movement, in particular the Life and Work conferences. Of more recent date the interest of the program Unit on Justice and Service has shifted to the theology of revolution and the theology of liberation.

It may be helpful to compare and contrast the role of liberal theology and that of the theology of liberation. There are a number of similarities that set both of them off from evangelical theology. There are also certain important differences between liberal and liberation theology, one of which we shall single out and comment on briefly. The similarities we will first note merely in passing.

Similarities Between Liberal Theology and Theology of Liberation

1. A strong social concern (contra other-worldly emphasis): peace, war on poverty, equality, racial and social justice.
2. A selective use of Scripture (contra Scriptura Toto): liberal theology stressing the ethical teaching of Jesus, and liberation theology stressing those positions that highlight oppression and liberation from it, the role of the poor, and the social critique of the Old Testament prophets.
3. A view of man (contra idea of human depravity) that in liberal theology made him innately good and ultimately perfectible and that in liberation theology attributes to the oppressed of society the ability to deliver themselves and society. Both tend to autosoterism.
4. Influenced by the Zeitgeist: liberal theology by the ideas of progress, brotherhood, unity, peace; liberation theology by class conflict, the Marxist analysis of society, and that western technology is at dead end.

There was perhaps an easier marriage between the WCC and liberal theology than between it and the theology of liberation. That is, the entire ecumenical movement eagerly espoused the idea of the unity of the church, which in the post-Uppsala period was expanded to include the unity of mankind. Both the WCC and the liberal theology that influenced it played down any idea of antithesis among mankind, and sought to overcome the conflict in the form of a greater synthesis. Not antithesis but solidarity was the watchword.

In the period following the Geneva Conference, a new emphasis appeared. Now the ideas of revolution and liberation gained currency and became increasingly dominant.

Andrè Dumas sums up the development to Geneva (1966) as follows: "It is at Geneva no longer the Kingdom of God as at Stockholm, no longer the orders of creation and conservation as at Oxford, no longer the exclusive design of God, as at Amsterdam, but the word revolution which more or less becomes the central word, which, of course, immediately prompted inquiry into the nature of these revolutions—social, technological, cultural. What attitude is one to adopt in the midst of a revolution? Should one be a maximalist or reformist, violent or non-violent, utopian or realist?" (Church Alert No. 17, p. 11).

These ideas are not easily reconcilable with the deeply ensconced earlier ideas of unity and solidarity. The council, which earlier said that the word needs the deed, now felt itself pressured to engage in the deeds of combatting racism, of alleviating poverty, of relieving oppression,—but at the expense of unity and of reviving the idea of the antithesis.

For in the social conflict the church is called to take sides and thereby the idea of the unity of mankind is placed in double jeopardy. If evangelicals, taking their lead from Scripture, have acknowledged an antithesis in mankind among those who serve God and those who serve him not (Mal. 3:18), the liberationists now posit an antithesis between the oppressor and the oppressed. Between these two sectors in society there can be no fellowship.

Ruben Alves put the challenge directly to the World Council at Rocca di Papa in 1977:

The idea that social reality is based on conflict, that certain groups exploit and oppress the powerless, is assimilated with difficulty by the churches. The Church sees herself as a spiritual entity which is above these divisions. She lives in the sphere of reconciliation, where we no longer have masters and slaves, whites and blacks, males and females, rich and poor. Whether she likes it or not, the fact remains, however, that the Church is also a political entity. She always is on the side of some. The "ideology of ecumenism," it should be added, is a serious obstacle to the political understanding of the Church...

Is the Church to be defined by her unity or by her commitment to the cause of the oppressed? If one opts for the latter alternative, she will have to accept the reality of conflict and the ideal of unity will become an eschatological horizon. If she opts for the former one, her concrete commitment to the cause of the poor will have to become of secondary importance. Can we bring oppressors and oppressed together within the same institution? (Church Alert, No. 18, pp. 12, 13).

The influence of the theology of revolution is seen in the tendencies which press in the direction of commitment and identification rather than solidarity. At an earlier stage it was assumed that an impartial stance was necessary to attain unity. Already in 1910 at the International Missionary Conference in Edinburgh it was decided to avoid controversy on matters of doctrine where there was no agreement. The cause of missions, it was said, could go on in spite of the existing doctrinal differences. Later, in 1948, the World Council refused to choose between capitalism and socialism, but sought to stress positively the idea of a responsible society.

A change in course came with the stress on the cross as suffering. "A strange thing has happened: people have begun with the resurrection, a theology of liberation, and continued with the cross, a theology of captivity and suffering" (Andrè Dumas, idem). The Exodus motif has been replaced (in part) by the Exile motif. But one thing is clear: it is not a passive suffering to which the cross as suffering calls people, but the active participatory suffering of involvement in the struggle for justice, even though it means entering a new Babylonian captivity in the capitalist international economic order at the hands of the transnational corporations.

Another indication of a change in course is that the previous disapproval of the just war concept has now been challenged by the approval of the just revolution. The discussion is now only underway, but the idea is winning increasing numbers of converts that our commitment to the oppressed demands that we express our solidarity with them, even at the cost of supporting violent revolution.

A third indication of a change in course may be noted in the idea of praxis underlying the Program to Combat Racism. In Oxford (1937) stress was still placed on the orders of society. In 1969 the launching of the Program marked the new approach, namely, that you can't renounce racism without committing yourself to active struggle against it, even to the extent of getting your hands dirty and bloody as you seek to change the structures of society.

If the ideas of liberation theology become regnant, the classical ideas of solidarity will have to be modified drastically. By the same token, if the idea of unity and solidarity overcome this new threat, then the WCC's ardor for liberation theology of the kind described will decidedly cool. There is no way at this stage to indicate what the outcome of this dilemma will be.

VIII. THE SCOPE OF THE MISSION OF THE CHURCH

We have considered the social teaching of the WCC from a number of sides, such as the word/deed correlation, the role of the church institution, the way in which the church addresses social issues, the secular/sacred

dichotomy, the basis for freedom and justice, and the choice between solidarity and conflict. Before we take a final look at the Council's prospect of success in terms of the prevailing ideas on the nature of man and hope for the future, we should look at one remaining topic, namely the scope of the church's mission.

'Mission' refers here to the entire task which the church is sent by God to do in the world. It is broader than the term 'missions' which generally conveys the idea of proclaiming the Good News by word of mouth.

There has been a movement in the WCC from missions to mission, from word-proclamation to service (especially by the laity) and on to the restructuring of human culture. We shall trace this briefly, noting statements from New Delhi (1961), Uppsala (1968) and Bangkok (1972/1973).

At New Delhi the International Missionary Council was incorporated into the WCC. As could be expected, the influence of the IMC was felt particularly in the New Delhi report on Witness. Here one reads that "the task of Christian witness is to point to him Jesus Christ as the true light, which is already shining...The work of evangelism is necessary in this and in every age in order that the blind eyes may be opened to the splendour of light" (The New Delhi Report, p. 72). The assembly affirmed that "although the strategies and techniques of evangelism must change from age to age, the Gospel which the church proclaims is still the changeless Gospel of God's saving love, in the redemption of the world by our Lord Jesus Christ, made known to us through the power of the Holy Spirit" (p. 78).

At New Delhi equal attention was given to service and unity alongside of witness, but the three comprised distinct sections of the report. New Delhi did however say that "the wholeness of the Gospel demands a corporate expression, since it concerns every aspect of our lives. Healing and the relief of distress, the attack upon social issues and reconciliation, as well as preaching, Christian fellowship and worship are all bound together in the message that is proclaimed" (p. 86). That a change was already underway could be detected in the challenge of the closing words, that the church must go forth boldly, like Abraham, "not afraid to leave behind the securities of its conventional structures, glad to dwell in the tent of perpetual adaptation, looking to the city whose builder and maker is God" (p. 90).

The Uppsala report "Renewal in Mission" breathed another spirit than New Delhi. It claimed to reject the either/or of personal conversion and social responsibility, and then promptly put far greater stress on the latter. The tenor of the report is in the opening sentence: "We belong to a humanity that cries passionately and articulately for a fully human life" (The Uppsala 68 Report, p. 27). It lacked, as John R. Stott stated, any compassion for the lost, like that of Christ over Jerusalem. Evangelicals accused Uppsala

of betraying the two billion without knowledge of Christ. One can find in it tendencies toward a kind of universalism, and dialogue is seen as a way in which Christ speaks. Witness can even be a silent one of living and suffering for Christ (p. 29).

The church is the church for others. It must accept as a high priority the calling to account of all existing centers of power such as government, business, and military establishment. It must accept these criteria for missionary priorities.

---do they place the church alongside the poor, the defenseless, the abused, the forgotten, the bored?

---do they allow Christians to enter the concerns of others to accept their issues and their structures as vehicles of involvement?

---are they the best situations for discerning with other men the signs of the times, and for moving with history towards the coming of the new humanity? (p. 32).

The congregation must develop new forms of service within the social structures for the sake of their fellow men (p. 34). We can, said Uppsala, never go it alone. "In a world where the whole of mankind is struggling to realize its common humanity, facing common despairs and sharing common hopes, the Christian Church must identify itself with the whole community in expressing its ministry of witness and service, and in a responsible stewardship of our total resources" (p. 36).

The Bangkok Conference on Mission and Evangelism (1972/73) carried farther the ideas of humanization and the total transfiguration of culture. Actually the report of the conference revealed that the WCC idea of missions was itself undergoing an extensive transfiguration and the opening line of the report mentioned the "quest for identity" (Bangkok Assembly 1973, p. 70). The quest was applicable to the church's mission task as well as to the Christian person. Reading through the sections "Culture and Identity" and "Salvation and Social Justice" one can hardly imagine that they come from the same movement that a scant 12 years earlier wrote the New Delhi report on "Witness." Now the emphasis was on identity, the dignity of man, the evil of racism, dialogue, black theology, contextual theology, social justice and the possibility of full personhood. It recommended as a part of mission to increase aid through the Program to Combat Racism. The social dimensions of salvation were seen to lie in the struggles for (1) economic justice, (2) human dignity, (3) solidarity against the alienation of person from person and (4) hope against despair in personal life (89).

In spite of the objections evangelicals have raised against Bangkok, namely that the proclamation of the Gospel almost went into eclipse, one should note the splendid statement of the wholeness of salvation: "The salvation which Christ brought, and in which we participate, offers a comprehensive

wholeness in this divided life. We understand salvation as newness of life—the unfolding of true humanity in the fulness of God (Col. 2:9). It is salvation of the soul and the body, of the individual and society, mankind and 'the groaning creation' (Rom. 8:19). As evil works both in personal life and in exploitative social structures which humiliate human-kind, so God's justice manifests itself both in the justification of the sinner and in social and political justice. As guilt is both individual and corporate so God's liberating power changes both persons and structures. We have to overcome the dichotomies in our thinking between soul and body, person and society, humankind and creation. Therefore we see the struggles for economic justice, political freedom and cultural renewal as elements in the total liberation of the world through the mission of God. This liberation is finally fulfilled when 'death is swallowed up in victory' (I Cor. 15:55). This comprehensive notion of salvation demands of the whole of the people of God a matching comprehensive approach to their participation in salvation" (pp. 88, 89).

The question we face in all this is whether we can agree that the task of the people of God is to transform human society in the name of Christ. If we do agree that this is the aim of Christian social action, then we are in close company with this trend in the World Council of Churches.

A second question then is whether we can engage in this task of restructuring society according to the norms of love and justice as proclaimed in the Gospel and at the same time keep proper focus on the heart of the Good News that God was in Christ reconciling the world to himself, not imputing to man the guilt of his sin (II Cor. 5:19). If we do this, then we shall have to keep a certain distance from the World Council of Churches. Here there must not be a drifting apart but a dynamic and lasting convergence.

IX. SINFULNESS OF MAN, DESPAIR AND HOPE

Having looked at what appear to be some of the basic underlying motivations and tensions in the social thought of the World Council of Churches, there remains to look at the basis for its hope that significant social reform will occur. This is the question whether the sinfulness of man does not thwart all man's efforts to restructure and redirect society. It is the question whether the optimism of, e.g., the 20s and the 60s and the early 70s does not result in a pervasive sense of despair. In other words, just how realistic is the World Council in its endeavor to effect social reform. Does it recognize the root causes?

In the early years the Council was under no delusions about the enormity of its task. It recognized that decisive for man's social relationship is his relation with God. Thus Amsterdam already affirmed that in our estrangement from God all our sin has its origin (The Universal Church in God's Design, p. 189).

In taking this stand the Council was only reiterating what the Oxford Conference had earlier warned about: "There is always the possibility that new institutions will reintroduce ancient evils in a new form or substitute new evils for those which have been abolished" (Foundations, p. 52).

At Nairobi, however, the emphasis was not upon human sin, but upon the structures of injustice. Even when the assembly described the root causes for denials of human right, it did not get beyond the unjust structures. To promote liberation in society, Nairobi said, the churches must move from making declarations about human rights to working for the full implementation of those rights (Breaking Barriers, p. 103). "The basic causes for these violations of human rights are to be found in the unjust social order..." (Idem., p. 106). Again in regard to racism, Nairobi declared: "Pervasive as individual attitudes and acts of racism may be, the major oppressive racism of our time is imbedded in institutional structures that reinforce and perpetuate themselves" (p. 111).

This shift from the sober 'realism' of Amsterdam and its recognition of the embeddedness of evil in man, to the claim of Nairobi that the root cause of denials of human rights lies in the unjust structures, is not encouraging. There is evident here a strong proclivity toward an idea of classic liberal theology, namely, the innate goodness of man. It is not that Nairobi denied man's sinfulness; it rather largely ignored it and that precisely in those areas in which the major part of the Council's effort is concentrated.

At crucial points the belief in the goodness of man comes to the fore, as in the refusal of the Council to require an accounting from the recipients of its grant from the Fund to Combat Racism that the money is used, as the Council requests, only for humanitarian ends. The (naive?) assumption is that the request of the Council from the liberation forces which resort to armed violence will surely be granted.

Nairobi might have taken a word of counsel from a Roman Catholic, Edward Duff, S.J., in The Social Thought of the World Council of Churches warned in 1956 against undue optimism: "The hope that man can shoulder the burdens of the world is an illusion that leads men through anxiety to despair; for God's sovereignty and man's sinfulness are permanent realities and out of good intentions evil as well as good arises to thwart personal endeavors and to plunge men into tyrannies and wars, civil chaos and social despair" (p. 146).

At Uppsala there was considerable optimism. This came most clearly to expression in the opening words of the report on World Economic and Social Development: "We live in a new world of exciting prospects. For the first time in history we can see the oneness of mankind as a reality. For the first time we know that all men could share in the proper use of the world's resources. The new technological possibilities turn what were dreams into realities" (Uppsala Report, p. 45). This optimism was tempered by the

post-Uppsala happenings (such as the end of 'socialism with a human face' in Czechoslovakia, and the take-over of the Junta in Chile) but it was not shaken enough to make the Council question whether it should take another long hard look at man himself, his inveterate drive to self seeking, and his incurable tendency to spoil everything that he touches. Here Nairobi might also have taken a page out of its own past. However, the activism of the Council does not allow it, in contrast with the encyclicals of Rome, e.g., to give careful, sustained attention to what past assemblies have said. For there is always the demand of the hour that must be met in immediate decisions, and the only recourse is to the ad hoc declaration.

The lesson Nairobi seems to have drawn from Uppsala was not that it should include in its humanum studies new and careful reflection of the fallen nature of man, but rather to proceed from declarations to implementation. In other words, there has been no conversion, but only the pursuit of the same goals along the same general route but with different means. It will be interesting to watch if and when the needed conversion occurs, namely, from locating man's quandary primarily in his surroundings (the structures) to man himself, the author of the structures. Until such a metanoia occurs, one must conclude, the Council is not fully realistic in its expectations that social reform will come from its social programs. It may expect to vacillate between hope and despair according to the changing tide of human affairs. Ultimately, however, the hope of the Council, like that of all the people of God, is that the victory is with God (Evanston Speaks, p. 47). As Van Til says, deep down every Christian is a Calvinist.

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NOTES

1. The controversies caused in American churches by their social activities are described by Jeffrey K. Hadden, The Gathering Storm in the Churches, Doubleday, New York, 1969, pp. 69 ff., and Dean M. Kelley, Why Conservative Churches are Growing, Harper and Row, New York, 1972, pp. 138 ff.
2. For a discussion on current thinking by Roman Catholics and the World Council see Church Alert No. 17 and No. 18. This is a quarterly publication of SO DE PAX, 130 Route de Ferney, 1211 Geneva 20 Switzerland.
3. Edward Duff, S.J., The Social Thought of the World Council of Churches, Association Press, New York, 1956, and Paul Bock, In Search of a Responsible World Society, Westminster Press, Philadelphia, 1974. See also the recent articles of André Dumas in Church Alert No. 17, "The Social Thought of the World Council of Churches from 1925-1966" and of Jan Milac Lochman in Church Alert No. 18, "Some Aspects of the Social Thinking of the World Council of Churches."
4. This booklet contains essays on the way theology functions in the World Council of Churches and the Churches of the Reformed Ecumenical Synod. It also looks at the WCC Program to Combat Racism and the theology that underlies it.
5. Edward Duff describes the Two Realm Lutheran view as held by Anders Nygren, for example, as follows: "For Nygren...this present world is under God's domination but He rules it by His Law; Christ's Kingdom, the realm of the Gospel, belongs to the Age that is to come. Social and political life, according to this Lutheran view, is controlled by God's creative and sustaining activity in the interval between the First and the Final Advent of Christ. They are ruled by the Creator's ordinances among which must be listed human laws and the authority of the State; the secular realm is not to be measured by the exalted demands of the Gospel; it has its day and, by God's permission and for His purposes, a relative autonomy until Christ's return brings in the New Age." (Op. cit. p. 111, 112)

In 1947 Prof. Rudolf Smend of Germany mentioned as an obstacle to his country's active interest in the work of the Commission of the Churches on International Affairs their heavy burden of theology: "For far too long German theology (especially of late Lutheranism which has been so much misunderstood) has refused to cooperate in working out a Christian ethic for public life, on the pretext that the Kingdom of God has nothing to do with the political orders of this world. Through this refusal German theology has left a free field open to all the demons of power-politics and created the foundations of that political helplessness and uncritical loyalty of the German people without which the Third Reich and its uncontested duration would have been unthinkable." (quoted by Duff Op. Cit., p. 142)

6. Who Speaks for the Church?, Abington Press, Nashville, 1967. Ramsey says that "there needs to be a responsible and discriminating analysis of the church's proper address to political questions..." (p. 27), but denies that the church should make decisions that belong to the realm of the state (31).
7. As Oldham described it, 'the ethic of inspiration' insists that the fundamental and characteristic Christian moral attitude is not obedience to fixed norms or to a moral code but a living response to a living person, a fellowship with God who is sovereignly free and whose will is sought for a present personal decision. The 'ethic of ends' is based on an idea of the proper ordering of society and its parts whose overall purposes and particular functions are discoverable by a rational examination of their nature and operations (Duff Op. Cit. pp. 93, 94).
8. Barth is known for advocating Das Gebot der Stunde, the command of the hour. At best the Christian can sally forth with his Christian convictions into the world in a sortie, never as a permanent beach-head.
9. Geneva even saw the secular society as an aid to the church: "In a secular society the Church can no longer seek to be the governing, dominating institution. This is not something to deplore, but something in which we may rejoice. The old Church now has a new chance to restore one of the essential marks of Christ's Church, namely to be a serving community in the world" (World Conference, pp. 182, 183).
10. Cf. my article in the Calvin Theological Journal, Vol. X, No. 1, Recent Trends in the Ecumenical Movement, pp. 34-41.
11. This must be seen in the context of the secularization of non-ecclesiastical life. Paul Ramsey observes that "There is in contrast to the experts of the Vatican Council an intractable difficulty in the way of advancing Protestant ecumenical ethics because of our exaltation of the lay expert, in an age when lay Christians have so largely ceased to exercise the universal ministry of the faithful, the priesthood of all believers to one another, in witnessing to one another concerning the meaning of Christ for our lives" (Who Speaks for the Church, p. 142).
12. This idea of the free personality may be consistent with the Marxist freedom-ideal: Those people are free who have no vested interest in the status quo and are not committed to preserving this present evil order. The Christian can become one of the dispossessed by identifying with the poor (reconciliation as identification—Sölle). This attitude has affinities with an ascetic stance. The truly free man leaves the other completely free to be himself and thus achieves his own freedom.
Since a socialist society is, at least in principle, committed to orienting its course by the most dispossessed members of society, mobilizing the whole to bring in the least, it becomes more difficult to critique. For its deepest ideals are very akin to those of this freedom ideal (cf. Klaus Bockmühl, Was Heisst Heute Mission? Brunnen-Verlag, Basel, 1974, p. 93).

