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THE CONSTRAINTS OF THE WORLD COUNCIL OF CHURCHES IN  
THE QUESTION OF THE RELATIONSHIP WITH CHURCHES  
FROM THE SOVIET UNION AND EASTERN EUROPE

by J. A. Hebly

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This essay deals with some of the problems which the participation of churches from the Soviet Union in the activities of the World Council of Churches (WCC) involves, problems which are more discussed in circles outside the ecumenical fellowship than in ecumenical meetings. This is understandable when one realizes that in these meetings participants from Eastern Europe are present.

It remains embarrassing for those who have a feeling for the predicament of representatives from churches in captivity and who favor dialogue and fraternal relations with the Orthodox to raise such issues in meetings where the illusion that all churches have equal possibilities is carefully maintained. More disquieting is the fact that in the ecumenical churches from our part of the world it is often suggested that the problems connected with the East-West relationship have taken up too large a share of ecumenical attention, and that nowadays there are more urgent questions for the world-ecumene as, for instance, the North-South relationship. Without denying the urgency of this problem, it is the intention of this essay to demonstrate that problems of the East-West relationship affect some central issues in the life of the Council and cannot be neglected, if the Council wishes its critical voice to be heard in the North-South dialogue. The churches will have to take up and discuss seriously the question of the form and content of their cooperation with churches living in political and ideological captivity. There is a

growing criticism of the present form of this cooperation, not only by those who object to any social and political engagement of churches or ecumenical organizations, but also in ecumenical circles themselves. The questions are more and more asked: Can the World Council of Churches continue to function as a common body of churches from East and West for witness and service in the way that has been tried in the last twenty years? Should the possibilities which such a council can have in the present circumstances be reappraised?

This essay wants to contribute to this discussion. It certainly does not plead for a rupture of relationships with the churches living in Marxist society. It wishes to reshape these relations in such a way that they become more effective for the inner life of these churches and the strengthening of their real mission and service in the life of their people, caught in a system which still seeks their elimination.

An Old Question Posed Anew: What Will be the Impact  
of the Russian Orthodox Church on the WCC?

When the Russian Orthodox Church joined the World Council of Churches in 1961<sup>1</sup> the member churches reacted positively. For centuries the Orthodox churches and the churches of the Reformation had lived side by side in indifference, mutual distrust, and ignorance. Contacts had been sought especially by Lutherans and Anglicans, but after the revolution the Russian church was isolated from all ecumenical developments. So after the Second World War there was a certain eagerness to draw the Russian Orthodox Church into the new Christian world fellowship.

The general feeling was one of joy and satisfaction that the Church of Russia, the martyr church of the 20th century, which by the grace of God and the endurance of the saints had survived oppression and persecution, was allowed to join the ecumenical movement. This was regarded by many as a sign of the steady amelioration of the church situation after the Stalinist period. There was a flowering of hope in the sixties--hope for political disengagement, the end of the cold war, new developments in the communist countries, and the beginning of a Marxist-Christian dialogue.

Gradually, however, more became known, mainly through the flow of Samizdat publications which reached the West in the course of the sixties. Only then the question began to be asked in wider circles about the implications of the entry of the Russian Orthodox Church for the work of the World Council of Churches. The leadership of the World Council in those days can certainly not be accused of naivete. They were conscious of the real situation and of the difficulties involved. Not the confessional but the possible political bearing of churches from the Soviet Union on the work of the World Council posed a problem for them.

Ecumenical Christians had constantly objected to the cold war mentality. Professor Cadier wrote after the first Nyborg Conference in 1959 (the Russian

church joined the Conference of European churches before it joined the WCC): "The meeting of the European churches in Nyborg was of great significance for us. Especially the participation of theologians of the Orthodox Church of Russia, and the opportunity it gave to enter into conversation with them, was greeted with joy as a long expected event. We thank God for the opportunity to take up contact with representatives of churches in Eastern Europe, for which there is otherwise very seldom opportunity."<sup>2</sup> But questions remained. As early as 1946 an observer of the ecumenical scene remarked: "Like the American churches, the continental churches which suffered under the Nazis were also eager to speak out on social and political evils of the day; yet the ticklish position of the churches in Russia since the Russian Revolution would make them extremely wary of joining in any statement which critically considered the policy of the Soviet government along with policies of other governments."<sup>3</sup> In the first official conversations between delegates of the Russian Orthodox Church and the World Council of Churches in Utrecht 1958, the question of the social and political witness of the church was one of the topics. The fifth session dealt with "The common concern of the Churches for religious liberty." To the question of Franklin Clark, "Whether the Church could speak to the government if the government violated peace, freedom, or justice," Metropolitan Nikolai replied that "in a country where church and state are completely separated, the conditions in which some of the principles of the Amsterdam statement have to be applied are different."<sup>4</sup> The separation of church and state, effected in 1917, had as its basis the complete absence of interference by the state in the church and the church in the state. The church did not make declarations against government policy or the anti-religious activities of the Communist Party. The Soviet Government was neutral, but the Party made propaganda.<sup>5</sup> W. A. Visser 't Hooft said that "the position of the churches in the USSR differed from those of churches in the West, and they could understand the situation, but the difficulties began when the Russian Church leaders criticized the governments of other countries." Metropolitan Nikolai replied, "if the Russian Church criticized governments in other countries it was because it was convinced that it was right."<sup>6</sup> This ended the discussion.

In 1962 Paul B. Anderson, an American adviser to the World Council in Soviet affairs, wrote a memorandum for the ecumenical leadership in which he addressed a number of important concerns: "In what ways may Communist principles, policies, and procedures seek current application to the specific areas of activity of each WCC unit?" "The granting of exit visas and other facilities to Russian Orthodox Church representatives implies recognition by the Soviet Government of the large potential influence of the WCC on world affairs; from this it follows that the Soviet Government may seek in various ways to penetrate and influence the policies and actions of the WCC to conform to Soviet policies."

Have these questions been taken seriously, or has the experience of the last 25 years shown that they were unfounded? Is there proof in the practice of the World Council that its social and political witness has become more diversified and remained unaffected by political forces which have had such a strong grip on part of its constituency? Has the moral authority of the World Council gained because it has proved to be really objective and unequivocal and not affected by the ideological struggle going on in the world?

This seems to be a legitimate question. It is hard to imagine that the participation of churches living in such specific circumstances, after a long period of severe persecutions, would not have affected their activities and hence the activities of the Council. As E. Schlink remarked in 1958, the World Council of Churches may find it advisable to show a greater reserve in making political pronouncements after the accession of the Russian churches. It would have been a real sacrifice on the part of the other churches to prefer the fellowship with these churches above their already established pattern of behavior.

It seems, however, that such a sacrifice has not been deemed possible or necessary. The continuing engagement of the WCC in social and political problems has made it impossible for the churches from the Soviet Union to participate without the active involvement of the political authorities of that country. The consequence has been that these churches have become more closely linked with the politics of their state and they have been more and more considered as useful organs of its foreign policy. It seems, too, that the other member churches have underestimated the influence which the Soviet delegates can exert on the Council's activities and choice of priorities. Because of the fact that no serious study of the position of the churches in the Soviet Union and other Eastern European countries has been undertaken by the World Council of Churches since the sixties, and that the study done in and by member churches has not been diffused through ecumenical channels, this question of the impact of Soviet churches upon the activities of the Council has remained outside the ecumenical discussion.

This author does not pretend to come to final conclusions, but wishes to raise fundamental questions which cannot be neglected because they are in the minds of many ecumenically oriented Christians. The theological dialogue on faith and order between Protestantism and Orthodoxy falls outside the scope of this essay, as does the discussion about the ecclesiological meaning which the Orthodox attach to this universal fellowship of churches. It may, however, be useful to point out that the Orthodox in general have more inner reservations towards an ecumenical fellowship of churches than many Protestants. They seem to be less existentially involved in the life of the fellowship than those in the Protestant churches who are ecumenically engaged. This reservation was clearly expressed by Metropolitan Nikodim in a scholarly address in Uppsala.

The Russian Orthodox Church was invited to join the World Council by the love of brethren who feel how baneful are the divisions between Christians and by the awareness of the importance of co-ordinating the efforts of all Christians in their witness and service to men. . . . It would, however, be more exact not to speak of the Russian Orthodox Church "joining" the World Council of Churches, still less "being admitted" to the World Council of Churches, but rather of an agreement between the leaders of the Russian Orthodox Church and those of the World Council of Churches for representatives of the Russian Orthodox Church to enter into permanent collaboration with representatives of other Churches belonging to an association called the World Council of Churches. The Assembly held at New Delhi in 1961 gave its consent to a collaboration of this kind.<sup>7</sup>

This view of the collaboration of church leaders makes it clear that in the life of the local parishes, ecumenical influence is very restricted. The Orthodox made strong objections in the Central Committee in Geneva, 1976, against a direct contact by the World Council with local parishes. Nothing which does not proceed from the hierarchy of the Church can be taken up in the life of the Church. The absolute embargo on all information from the West enables the church leadership to allow only that which they themselves judge useful to filter through.

But there are other factors in the position of Russian churches which prevent delegates from the Soviet Union from functioning in the ecumenical fellowship in a way comparable with that of participants from Western countries. These impediments can be summarized under three headings. First, there are psychological difficulties. The present generation of Soviet churchmen has been formed in a cultural climate where free discussion, personal initiative, and broad international orientation are not very prominent. An extreme form of Soviet patriotism, a climate closed to influences from abroad, a lack of information, and an all-pervasive ideological worldview characterize the educational system.

Second, there are legal difficulties for Soviet representatives functioning abroad. They cannot function as free representatives from their church, but are subjected to a legal code in which rather vague articles are formulated about slandering the Soviet Union and defaming the socialist system. These can be interpreted in such a way that any form of criticism or even keeping silent when critical views are expressed by others can be sufficient for legal prosecution. It is very difficult for any Western observer to measure the strain which this puts on Soviet representatives. It demands a form of system-conformism which is unimaginable to a Western Protestant and represses any form of spontaneity. The shadow of the state which keeps a watchful eye on its citizens, where they are, falls even on personal contacts. Sometimes in ecumenical circles there is an understanding of this predicament. After a fairly heated debate on repression and human rights violations, the Melbourne Conference on World Mission and Evangelism (1980) declared:

Some countries and people we dare not identify for the simple reason that such a specific public identification by the conference may endanger the position--even the lives--of many of our brothers and sisters, some of whom are participating in this conference. We therefore confess our inability to be as prophetic as we ought to be as that may, in some instances, entail imposing martyrdom on our fellow believers in those countries--something we dare not do from a safe distance.<sup>8</sup>

This is a way of indicating the limited possibilities to speak freely which some ecumenical delegates have. Those from the Soviet Union and some other Eastern European countries seem to be tacitly included. These countries are never mentioned when the issue of repression and violations of human rights is on the agenda, but one might say that the Melbourne Conference declares with this statement that some delegates can be considered as hostages of the ruling party of their homelands, to ensure that nothing is said or done which might be unacceptable to those who have them in their power. It is a disturbing fact which must have serious consequences for the work of an organization.

Third, we have to mention the ideological influence under which Soviet citizens are living and their obligation to conform to the official socio-political positions, even when representing their church in the ecumenical movement. The Soviet state has its own idea of what freedom means. It is only guaranteed by the Constitution when exercised "in conformity with the interests of the working people, and in order to strengthen the socialist system." Even those who claim not to be in agreement with the theoretical principles of Marxist-Leninism are under the obligation to cooperate in the building up of the socialist system and to serve its interests. Church representatives are not exempt from this obligation. To what extent this influences and determines their participation in the ecumenical movement needs to be analyzed.

#### Soviet Ideologists and the World Council of Churches

In his book Sovremennyj Ekumenizm,<sup>9</sup> the author, N. S. Gordienko, analyzes the ecumenical movement in order to be better equipped for the ideological struggle against religion and the neutralizing of ecumenical influences on Soviet people. According to his view the ecumenical movement has arisen in capitalist societies and is still very much influenced by bourgeois ideology. Alarmed by increasing secularization, churches try to overcome the crisis in their life and consolidate their strength by seeking unity. The link of the ecumene with imperialistic forces which want to profit from inter-church collaboration seems to him clear. The present protagonists of anti-communism regard ecumenical unity as a force which can slow down the process of revolutionary change in the world and oppose the spreading of the ideas of scientific socialism among the masses. The World Council of Churches claims to stand

above the classes and the parties, but behind it are the interests of the exploiting classes of bourgeois society. The churches defend ideologically the capitalist world, whose spiritual product they are. The author, however, notices some changes, due to the influence of the churches from socialist and developing countries. It has now become much more difficult to use ecumenism as an apology for capitalism and for the discrediting of socialism. But there still is, he says, a pro-imperialistic orientation and the neutrality is cast aside as soon as there is a sharpening of the class struggle, as became clear, for instance, in 1968, during the events in Prague.

By joining the ecumenical movement, Gordienko continues, the churches from the socialist countries wanted to fortify their position in their own societies and at the same time use the opportunity to make known the point of view of believing citizens from socialist countries about social-political and religious life. They wanted, moreover, to give objective information about the position of religion in socialist countries and unmask the bourgeois propaganda about persecution of the church in socialism. The actions of reactionary forces were condemned by representatives of the churches in the socialist countries, and the peace forces in the World Council of Churches were strengthened by their participation. These church representatives called the Western social concepts tendentious and unacceptable for citizens from socialist countries; they rejected bourgeois social ideals and affirmed against these their analysis of the process of social development. On the basis of the factual existence of two mutually exclusive socio-political systems, they indicated that in the front ranks of social progress stands not capitalism with its polarization of riches for a few and of poverty for the majority, with its exploitation of one human over another, with its exclusion of the workers from the government of society, with its crises and unemployment, colonialism, and racial discrimination, the influence of monopolies and the rule of militarism, but socialism that brings to humanity liberation from all these social evils, and provides for every human being optimal conditions for bodily and spiritual perfection. These representatives have even claimed that the ideas of people's property, general equality, and fraternity of all peoples have Christian origins, and that therefore the social ideals of communism are closer to Christianity than those of the bourgeois.

In the conception of Gordienko the World Council of Churches is fundamentally an instrument of Western political interest groups. The entry of churches from socialist countries is seen as a way to make heard the voice of the citizens from socialist countries and to bring the World Council on the side of the really progressive peace forces. Up till now, this has not been totally successful, because those theologians who speak with the voice of the exploiting classes still call the tune. The author deems the collaboration of Marxists and believers in the struggle against militarism, racism, and colonialism to be possible, but not a dialogue, in which they should mutually influence each other. The communists assume that Christianity offers no



solution for the problem of building up society and of liberation from injustice, and they continue to fight against the religious ideology, but with ideas. Collaboration implies, in his view, that the communists define the aims and content of this collaboration. He declines the idea that the World Council could take up a neutral position between communism and capitalism. To balance between these two systems has proved, he says, to be a fiction.

It is interesting to note that this atheistic author stresses the Protestant predominance in the World Council. According to him there is no equal representation for the Orthodox, and the staff has mainly remained Protestant, although the position of Orthodoxy is gradually improving. He seems to interpret "Protestant" as "Western." His final conclusion is that, in view of the sharpening of the class struggle in the capitalist world and the convincing demonstration of the perfection of socialism by the socialist countries, the most important mission of the ecumene in the eyes of the Western churches is to support the capitalist system and to discredit socialism and communism. The fulfillment of this task is being hampered by the presence of those who support the interests of the Christian working people. The predominant position of bourgeois Christian leaders--these will be Protestants according to the author--assures, however, a pro-imperialist orientation.

For Gordienko the World Council of Churches is, therefore, not a forum where the churches try to find by common counsel their own answer to social and political questions, where they try to develop their own vision and their own values. On the contrary, it is an arena where Western-capitalist and Eastern-communist ideas confront each other and collide. The duty of the representatives of the churches in the socialist countries is, according to this party ideologist, to fight what he regards as reactionary forces in the ecumene, to represent socialist positions, and to blunt anti-communist tendencies. They have not yet succeeded, however, in obtaining such an influence in the World Council that it adopts really progressive aims and principles. Western conceptions, presented as generally humanistic or Christian, still dominate.

The Handbook of Atheism<sup>10</sup> clearly states that religion in a class-society is always at the service of the ruling class, and that in our time the bond of religious organizations with bourgeois governments has become closer than ever. In a post-revolutionary society, on the contrary, the church has, because of the separation of church and state, been freed for its proper task, that is, the satisfaction of religious needs. The state does not interfere in the religious activities of the believers and their organizations, and these do not interfere in the affairs of the state and of society. Religion will finally totally disappear because it no longer has any real function.

It is clear that Marxist ideologists, who have a very narrow conception of the real task of the church and reject any interference of the church in the life of society, cannot make any allowance for a social or political mission of an international church body in respect to their society. In their conception there is no room at all for an independent international council of churches that could pretend to stand above the antagonistic social systems and to be able to speak about both of them from an objective Christian point of view. A World Council of Churches, in which churches from the bourgeois-capitalist society and from the Marxist-Leninist society collaborate and are trying to find an independent common Christian position on social-political problems, is an anomaly for Marxist ideologists. There is no common task for the churches living in a pre- and in a post-revolutionary society. The church in a pre-revolutionary society belongs to the super-structure of a class-society and is a reflection and instrument of (and occasionally a protest against) such an exploitative, suppressive society. Only the church in a post-revolutionary society is free for its real task, namely the satisfaction of the religious needs of those citizens who still want this.

It is unimaginable, in this view, that churches living in such totally contradictory conditions should have a common mission or could be able to formulate a non-partisan, objective opinion on the affairs of the world. It is even less imaginable that an international church council should raise a prophetic-critical voice against injustices in the socialist part of the world. Any criticism of socialism, where the society is built upon the basis of justice and develops in the direction of peace, can only be interpreted as anti-communist action by lackeys of oppressive capitalist governments.

From this ideological position, the participation of churches from socialist countries in an international church body can only be justified if these churches function there as defenders and protagonists of socialism and try to change it into an ally in the struggle for social revolution under the guidance of the motherland of socialism.

The book Christian Ecumenism by Y. V. Kryanev<sup>11</sup> does not essentially differ from that by Gordienko. He also speaks about the concept of "transcendence" of the church which he (rightly in the opinion of the author of this essay) calls characteristic of the World Council. With this concept the World Council claims that it can take an independent political position and cannot be regarded as merely a reflection of political interests. For a Marxist this pretention is untenable. Kryanev ascertains that a reorientation is taking place through the influence of churches from the developing and the socialist countries, but the former influences still prevail: "There are still endeavors to create an atmosphere of anti-communism and anti-sovietism. Reactionary church leaders from Western countries, incited by imperialistic circles, are continuously trying to play up the question of human rights with tendentious and falsified material." His conclusion is: "The dialectics of

the ideological struggle obliges us to an uncompromising criticism of the religious ideas of ecumenism, many of which are just a variant of bourgeois ideology. But at the same time it is necessary to support measures of the World Council of Churches and the actions of individual religious workers in the defense of detente and for peace, security of the nations, disarmament, and social progress."

On the question of how collaboration in programs of the World Council of Churches can be ideologically justified, an answer is given in an article in Pravda (Nov. 16, 1979), written by M. Mchedlov, professor of philosophy, under the title "Problems of Theory: Religion in the Present World." It is interesting to note that even some years after its appearance, the attention of a foreign visitor at the office of the Moscow Patriarchate was especially drawn to this article, as clarifying the policy of the government. This may be astonishing for us, but we should bear in mind that the reflections of the ideologists which we discuss here are not just interesting, noncommittal expressions of individual scholars, but the background and basis of the policy of the regime, to which the churches also have to conform themselves.

Mchedlov points out that the imperialists are using religion for their reactionary purposes in the defense of the capitalist system and the struggle against real socialism. But there are believing people and even part of the clergy who oppose this. There is a progressive trend which can be dressed up in religious forms because of certain traditional influences. The progressive character of social movements should be recognized even if traditionally believing masses bring into these movements their prejudices and weaknesses. The Marxist-Leninist parties and the socialist countries should not restrict their contacts to a narrow group of "chosen" revolutionaries, but cooperate with believers in the common struggle against imperialism, colonialism, and reaction. The communists organize, therefore, a many-sided cooperation with believing masses for defense of the people, for socialist progress, and for common action against monopolies and threats of war and fascism, as was set forth at the communist party congresses in Moscow (1969) and Berlin (1976). Mchedlov also raised the question how the participation of religious organizations in socially progressive movements can be combined with the fundamentally conservative social function of religion. The explanation he gave is that no religious doctrine is capable of eliminating the aspirations of working people towards the affirmation of their human dignity and the improvement of their conditions. The struggle for the economic and political interests of the masses is so important that religious motives relegate themselves to the second place, if they collide with them. Furthermore, the discontent of believers and their longing for liberation can, according to Marx's thesis, be dressed up in a wrong religious form under the influence of the traditions of the country and its religious development.

Marxist-Leninists deem a common activity of the workers, atheists and believers, in the service of the revolutionary renewal of the old world, to be both possible and necessary. The practice of the USSR, where for the first time in history a real freedom of conscience has, they believe, been realized, clearly demonstrates this. As the communists presume that social activity is closely related to the development of the social conscience of a person, they help to liberate the believers from age-old errors and to develop their dialectic-materialistic worldview. They do this by means of education and conviction. Communists do not act against believers, but for them, to eliminate in their consciousness illusory notions which hinder their all-round development and spiritual maturity. For Mchedlov the struggle against religion and the cooperation with believers can thus be combined.

The permission which the Soviet authorities have given to the churches to join the ecumenical movement must also be seen in the setting of the cooperation of a broad front of believers and non-believers in the struggle against reaction and for social progress and peace. This has had some results, "for the ecumenical bodies cannot ignore the feelings of the believers in socialist countries." Jantsenko writes in the Journal of Science and Religion, "As citizens of the USSR the representatives of the Russian Orthodox Church defend at all ecumenical programs the foreign policy of their state and urge an objective judgment of everything which is happening in the world."<sup>12</sup> But he must also notice that they are very often in the opposition.

The Handbook for students at institutes of higher learning states that the preponderance in the World Council of Churches of Western Christian leaders and organizations, who express the interests of the bourgeoisie and try to defend the principles of capitalism with the help of a united Christianity, give the ecumenical movement a pro-imperialistic character, and make it into an instrument of bourgeois politics.<sup>13</sup>

Thus the Soviet ideologists regard the ecumenical movement as a Western phenomenon, created to overcome the contemporary crisis in the Christian world and to make the churches a more useful instrument of bourgeois politics and of anti-communist propaganda. This being so, the socialist world can feel fully justified in using in its turn the possibilities which this movement provides for the furtherance of its own policies, interests, and propaganda. The Marxist ideologists presume that the churches from the socialist countries try to propagate the views of believing socialist citizens, evidently fully in accordance with the official views, to unmask the bourgeois propaganda about the persecution of the church in socialism, to propagate Marxist socialism as the solution of all social evils, to resist Western social ideas, and to bring the churches and the church members onto the side of the progressive forces for peace. They strongly oppose the idea that the World Council of Churches could develop independent social ideas and adopt an autonomous and neutral position in the social and political tensions which exist in the world.

Neutrality in the class struggle between socialism and capitalism is not feasible. It is, however, possible to support programs of the World Council if these can be useful for a progressive, anti-capitalistic policy. The participation of religious workers from socialist countries in such bodies and programs finds justification in the setting of the collaboration of communists with believers who adhere to progressive ideas. Soviet ideologists view the World Council of Churches as a suitable place to fight anti-Sovietism, to propagate Soviet views, and to unite believers in the struggle for a new communist world order. When they speak about a Western, Protestant dominance in the World Council and complain that the Orthodox from socialist countries do not have the position which they should take up, we should not interpret this as a sign of their concern for equal confessional representation. They rather mean that Marxist-socialist views and ideas do not yet play the dominant role which such ideologists would like to see.

#### A Hidden Agenda

As said before, the writings of Soviet ideologists are elaborations of certain themes under the direction of the party and can only contain the conceptions and guidelines which determine its official policy. The publications which we analyzed can therefore be regarded as official views which have a direct bearing on the ecumenical policy of the churches, through the channels of the Council for Religious Affairs which has the task to "help" the churches in their foreign contacts. The churches cannot develop their own understanding of the task and mission of international ecumenical bodies independently from the ruling ideology, at least as far as social and political issues are concerned. They cannot freely decide even the role of the churches amidst competitive social systems, their task in society, and the content of their prophetic preaching.

The actual behavior of the member churches from the Soviet Union in regard to social and political questions is determined by the Council for Religious Affairs. The Russian Orthodox professor, N. A. Zabolotski, member of the WCC staff, uses the Byzantine conception of "symphony" to characterize the relationship of church and state in the Soviet Union, "a 'symphony' which does not mean a 'compromise,' but arises rather from the sympathies, inclinations, and facts, from the whole existence of its members, who regard themselves as citizens of their Fatherland and behave in everything such as is typical for the members of Soviet society."<sup>14</sup>

It is doubtful whether this historic Orthodox understanding of the "symphony" between church and state can be meaningfully applied to the present situation taking account of the separation between church and state, the atheist character of the state, and the ideological concept according to which the ruling party anticipates the ultimate disappearance of religion. But there are deeper implications. We must assume that the attitude of the representatives of Soviet Churches in the World Council of Churches is determined

by a "hidden agenda" dictated by the authorities. On this agenda there are not only subjects such as considering critical voices as being anti-Soviet propaganda, presenting Soviet laws on religion as being completely acceptable, and the situation of the churches as being satisfactory. It is one of the main duties of the Council of Religious Affairs according to its 1961 statutes to ensure that the churches fulfill this task. This "hidden agenda" also contains those subjects which were mentioned in the publication of the ideologists. But these subjects are not theologically neutral but impinge directly upon the heart of the ecumenical movement. In his address delivered at the Uppsala Assembly and printed in the Ecumenical Review entitled "The Russian Orthodox Church and the Ecumenical Movement," Metropolitan Nikodim said:

In his report on "The Transcendence of God" given in Crete, Dr. Blake also said that the Churches belonging to the World Council of Churches must always be ready to transcend the influence of their environment, which might limit or alter their judgment. "The attempt to transcend all human limitations and the faith that God makes such transcendence possible is at the heart of the ecumenical movement" (Report of Central Committee, Crete, 1967, page 102, last sentence). Of course, everything must be spiritually discerned, especially the gifts of the Spirit of God (I Cor. 2.14). However, such an extreme spiritualization of the Church's thought, which endeavors to transcend all human limitation and to rise above all national and state interests, is not always in accordance with the will of God and with the true spirit of the Gospel, which reminds us to "render to Caesar the things that are Caesar's, and to God the things that are God's" (Matt. 22.21). It is better to follow the plain, but sound, advice of the Apostle: "Test everything; hold fast what is good" (I Thess. 5.21).<sup>15</sup>

We have seen that this same concept of "transcendence" was rather strongly attacked by Kryanev. Here Nikodim also opposed it, although he did not provide a strong theological basis for his argument. The much misused text from Matthew 22, which we hear so often quoted by Russian churchmen, can hardly be regarded as an adequate basis for his refusal to take seriously the concept. Neither does he make it clear when the endeavors to rise above national and state interests are in accordance with the will of God and when they are not. It is true, of course, that Orthodox theologians and churchmen, traditionally, have a rather national, even ethnic view of the church and that the autocephalic principle has not furthered the supra-national character of the church. But is it Orthodox shortcomings or ideological pressure which prevented Nikodim from understanding this concept of the transcendence of the church? There are Orthodox believers who do seem to have a better understanding of it.

In his letter to the Third Council of the Russian Orthodox Church Abroad in America, August 1971, Aleksander I. Solzhenitsyn asked: "How do we restore a Church that is not an offshoot of state administration, not subject to any

(even the best) government authority and not connected with any party? A Church in which the best projects of our unfulfilled reforms will flourish, directed as they will be towards the restoration of the purity and freshness of original Christianity?"<sup>16</sup> He referred in his letter to the age-old captivity of the Church to the powers that be. How can we restore the Church to its original independence? This question is essential not only for the Orthodox Churches in the Soviet Union or in exile but for all Churches. There is not a single Church which should not question itself as to whether it has succumbed to the temptation to serve two Lords and to daub the wall of human injustice with whitewash (Ezekiel 13.14), instead of being the salt of the earth. In his book The Renewal of the Church, W. A. Visser 't Hooft pleaded for the liberation of the Church which can and must live by the strength of the Word of God alone.

In the modern world with its fierce ideological strife, statesmen and politicians seek constantly to use the Church for ends which are essentially different from the one and only purpose for which the Church exists. Many Churches are imprisoned in ideological fronts and exploited for secular goals without realizing what they are doing. But there is, thank God, another side to this story. Whatever the Marxists may say, the Church is not merely a product of its sociological environment. The Church which has been invaded by foreign forces can be liberated. When the Church realizes again that it is the creation of the Holy Spirit, that it lives "by every word that proceeds from the mouth of God" (Matt. 4.4) and that "the Word of God is not fettered" (II Tim. 2.9) the great process of liberation sets in and the Church which had seemed to become a mere reflection of society or, as Karl Marx called it, nothing but the "spiritual aroma of the world," emerges in its true and original character. . . .<sup>17</sup>

Visser 't Hooft does not specifically allude to the Church in the USSR, but in the ecumenical fellowship we must also interrogate this particular Church on these points. In an article in Christianity and Crisis he also wrote:

We believe in the Lordship of Christ and in the right of the church to proclaim the implications of this belief for relationships in a social or political community. We cannot give up this central conviction without giving up the very substance of the ecumenical movement. In this matter we cannot compromise with the Moscow Patriarchate or with any other church or government which denies the right of the church to exercise its prophetic ministry. . . .<sup>18</sup>

The rise of the ecumenical movement is closely linked with the idea that the churches could free themselves from national and ideological links and

could find new possibilities for a prophetic witness. The Amsterdam Assembly declared in the report of Section IV:

Christianity cannot be equated with any of the economic and political systems. There are elements in all systems which we must condemn when they contravene the First Commandment, infringe basic human rights, and contain a potential threat to peace. . . . We utterly oppose totalitarianism . . . similarly we oppose aggressive imperialism. . . . The churches have a responsibility to educate men to rise above the limitations of their national outlook. . . . Christians must examine critically all actions of governments which increase tension or arouse misunderstanding. . . . The churches should also support every effort to deal on a universal basis with the many specific questions of international concern which face mankind today. . . . The World Council of Churches should not weary in the effort to state the Christian understanding of the will of God and to promote its application to national and international policy.<sup>19</sup>

Two basic principles had a prominent place in the ecumenical movement in regard to its mission in the sphere of international political life:

1. The first was that the Church, after having freed itself from its identification with political powers, can take up a "neutral" position. That does not mean to stay out of the problems of the world or not to deal with political questions, but to come to an independent judgment through the meeting and counsel of Christians and churches who live in different social and political systems. International conferences and discussions are of fundamental value, provided they do not deteriorate into forums for propaganda. In such contexts they can try to find together new ways in the light of the Kingdom of God; they can test and interrogate each other in the willingness to be themselves corrected by the others. Out of this common reflection and after taking common counsel, an engagement in their own situation can follow.

2. The second basic principle was that there exist norms which ought to be accepted by all and have an objective value. The WCC has always pleaded for the development of an international ethos (Uppsala) and elaboration of generally valid norms. The emphasis on human rights must be seen in that light. No social or political system should apply these arbitrarily or should put them aside. The norm is always what serves the human being. Social systems exist to serve people, not vice versa.

The ecumenical movement was from its inception a daring effort to lead the churches out of the slavery of national, political, and ideological captivity, a liberation movement away from the old links between throne and altar and away from conformism to society.



Both these principles are in sharp contrast to the views of Marxist ideologists as discussed above. These decline to accept the idea that an international church body can take an independent position between the two contrasting socio-political systems which dominate the world. The churches have to take the side of justice, that is, of socialism. They should become partisans of the oppressed in the international class struggle between oppressors and oppressed; they should support the progressive forces. They also reject the idea that there can exist objective norms to which all sides should conform. "Objective" is only that which is in accordance with the laws of historical development as known and applied by the communist party as the vanguard of the progressive forces. By allying oneself with these progressive forces one is acting objectively.

That which has been called "a central conviction" of the ecumenical movement in the first period is not only rejected by Marxist ideologists, but is also attacked by representatives of member churches from socialist countries. Nikodim questioned what has been called the transcendence of the church, and he could possibly find theological legitimation for this in the Orthodox tradition. But he was not the only one and he got support from unexpected quarters, namely a Reformed Church bishop, the Hungarian theologian Karoly Toth, the President of the Christian Peace Conference, who plays an important role in the ecumenical movement. In a lecture in Debrecen (1976) he defended the thesis that the church should ally itself with those forces which determine history and support justice and progress. He called it a temptation for Christians to try to find a specific Christian position in the great conflict between the old and the new. A policy of independence, he said, usually serves the mighty and the status quo. He denied also that the Christian faith can have a critical function. When Christians want to criticize both sides and say, "if capitalism is criticized, then socialism should be criticized, too," one must be very careful. If the Christian faith pretends to find fault in the old and in the new, then it puts them both on the same level, hinders the forces which can bring change, and conforms to the existing order. The struggle between capitalism and socialism (i.e., communism) is in his eyes a struggle between "the old" and "the new." He opts for the Marxist conception of historical determinism. Socialism is the realization of justice and the progress of humanity. The new era has come and the church should support communism. His point of view, which reflects that of many other East European theologians, can be summarized as follows:

1. The church should not pretend that it can take an independent stance. According to Marxist ideas, it is an instrument of the ruling classes, and it can only be liberated from this captivity under communism where the state does not need the church and does not use it to justify its actions.

2. One should not assume that on the basis of an international set of rules or human rights, or of objective or "evangelical" norms, alienating

tendencies in different social systems can be criticized. Marxists are right in saying that objectivity in this sense is not possible.

3. Relativizing ideological systems is incorrect, because this would imply that people are not making a decision in favor of the realization of justice.

4. There is an almost apocalyptic confrontation between the two blocs. Nobody can stay out. One ought to choose for the light and the new against the darkness and the old. A third way does not exist.

Here the churches are admonished to declare themselves in solidarity with the socialist bloc, because this leads to a better future. Socialism is justice, peace, liberty, progress, and the future, and one should say "yes" to it. A critical prophetic task by the World Council of Churches towards East and West alike is not feasible in Toth's conception. He is thus fully in accord with the ideas repeatedly expressed by the Hungarian member churches in the ecumenical discussion.

#### A Short Account of the Prophetic Task of the Church as Seen by the Hungarian Reformed Church

The Hungarian Reformed Churches realize that they have a prophetic task and are called to proclaim the Word of God in the actuality of a given historical context. But that is not an easy task. This prophetic mission has become a central problem, as stated in a publication of the Reformed Synod on the occasion of the fourth centennial of the Synod of Debrecen in 1967.

In the course of the great social revolution which our people has experienced in the last 20 years, our church has never rejected to fulfill the service of the good Samaritan and its prophetic ministry. The right biblical understanding of this prophetic service and its practical evangelical application has become a central problem of our church.<sup>20</sup>

The Hungarian churches have issued a number of publications about the theological questions connected with the prophetic service of the church and how they can fulfill it in the present circumstances. They issue study papers prepared by their Ecumenical Council for the main conferences of the World Council of Churches, where they deal with the Biblical foundations of the prophetic service and the interpretation presently given to it in Hungarian theological thinking. This was done most elaborately in a study paper for the Uppsala Assembly in 1968. The Biblical validity of a prophetic critical attitude of the church in respect to government and society is recognized, but the present reality of the socialist society in which the church is living gives this prophetic-critical mission a specific dimension. First, the church should not pretend to be the sole guardian of truth and to sit in the judgment seat. In the new social order the church itself stands under critique and must constantly expiate its own sins and failures of the past. It is

emphasized that the prophetic task means that the church proclaims the gospel, recognizes righteousness everywhere, and associates itself with those who serve the good and do righteousness.

The prophetic service is not negative-critical, as, according to this document, churches all over the world presume, but is meant to proclaim a new order which is in accordance with the will of God, to show the way of God in completely new situations, thus to avoid the danger of acting against God's will. We then read:

Here and abroad there were many of those who had expected from our churches a judgment upon the new society, a criticism under the pretext of the prophetic task. They underlined with special emphasis that the church has the right to qualify the changes in society on the basis of the eternal ethical norms of which it disposes and equally to draw the attention of the state to its failures. This claim contains two serious mistakes. Firstly because in its demand for criticism, it only refers to the example of the prophets of the Old Testament who sharply condemned the kings of Israel. We have already, in speaking about the New Testament, drawn attention to the fact that one should never consider the prophets of Israel on their own, apart from the fulfillment completed by Christ. Secondly because the prophets of the Old Testament were prophets of the same Covenant people, whose theocratic rulers they reminded of the laws of Yahweh--laws accepted by the kings of Israel themselves.

In our situation we do not deal with a theocratic ruler, but with a secular state, to which one cannot simply apply the norms of the prophetic word of the Old Testament, even though it is subject to the general laws of humanity. Furthermore, the call for a one-sided criticism is wrong, because the church then would have withdrawn itself from its responsibility for the new society and failed in its prophetic task.<sup>21</sup>

In another study document, it is stated that it is the prophetic task of the church to point to sin, injustice, exploitation, and inhuman behavior especially in "Christian" societies.<sup>22</sup> Furthermore, it should test which forces and movements are agreeable to God and which are not and where the will of God in regard to human relations and social justice is more fully obeyed. The church should point to injustice in Christian--i.e., capitalistic--societies and, as Toth already remarked, should not put capitalism and socialism on the same level. The prophetic task of the church in socialism is to give such an orientation to the believers that they recognize where the good, the will of God, is done and become willing to participate in the building up of a new society. The churches have to side with socialism, and "the Hungarian churches recognize that the way of the future leads to a socialist world-order, according to the laws of social development. They confess that they have found their place and their service in this socialist society. . . ." <sup>23</sup>

Accordingly, the Hungarian theologians seem to adopt as their starting point the premises that according to historical materialism, and "not so much on the basis of theological arguments" as Gordienke rightly remarked, Marxist socialism may be equated with the good, the future, justice, and, that this being so, the church has to choose for Marxist socialism. How could it do otherwise than choose for the good! It is evident that their attitude in the ecumenical fellowship of the World Council of Churches has been determined by this presupposition.

### The Hermeneutical Key

The main problem in the ecumenical discussion is not so much the language problem, as the understanding which lies behind the words and concepts used in the discussion. Basic to this essay is the suggestion that for a correct understanding of the contributions, for instance, from the Orthodox churches of the Soviet Union, it is not only necessary to know their specific traditional Orthodox theological background, to take account of a certain isolation from Western historical, spiritual, and cultural developments and to recognize their weak and threatened position in society. It is just as necessary to take into account the limitations of their freedom to develop their own social and political thought, and their obligation to conform to the official social and political concepts of the ruling communist party. This lack of freedom and this conformism--which is obligatory for those who act as spokesmen for the churches at home and abroad, even if some of them might not necessarily be personally in favor of the official concepts--are the hermeneutical key to understanding the position and contribution of these churchmen in the ecumenical discussion. Prof. J. Hromadka remarked at the Lund Conference (1952) that in the ecumenical discussion we must be aware of hidden motives behind our theological reasonings.

No matter how sincerely and confidently we assert that our problems are being viewed by us solely in the theological and biblical aspects, another motive force may be hidden in the depths of our spiritual life and our theological thought. Our efforts to understand the Word of God . . . may be changed in the most dangerous manner--unconsciously or almost consciously--by our apprehensions and our wishes in the social, political, and cultural spheres.<sup>24</sup>

With this warning in mind an article by Prof. N. A. Zabolotsky, entitled "Society of the Future: Justice, Participation, and Sustainability," is important.<sup>25</sup> There are few publications of the Russian Orthodox Church in the Soviet Union on social issues, apart from those which deal with the issues of peace, and Zabolotsky is one of the few theologians who specialize in this field. The article deals with "facts and phenomena" not only from a

"horizontal perspective" but "in the light of the vertical." "When we speak of horizontal service for justice, we must not forget the vertical aspect," and so we find in the text a number of theological passages, loosely connected with the rest, "which bring to the world view the penetrating spiritual reality of the Godhead, which can only be understood through faith and love." But these specific theological thoughts are "an obligation and the motive force only for Christians . . . [and] cannot and must not infringe upon freedom of thought and affairs of those outside the Church." These passages seem to be meant to demonstrate that Christians have their own motivations and "hear the summoning Voice of God and the voice of the conscience of men of good will inside the Church and outside of her and are obedient to them both." What "obedience to men of good will outside the church" really means is not explained. Usually these "men of good will" are identified with those who work for peace and justice along the lines of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union.

The article takes as its starting point the WCC Conference, "Faith, Science, and the Future" (Boston, 1979): "A stimulus to this conference was the pessimistic view of the West with regard to science and technology, where the uncontrollable use made of them in so-called 'liberal' societies could have harmful consequences. . . . In addition to this, the appeal of the socialist society, with its optimistic views of the future, constituted a fairly weighty argument in favor of holding the conference."

One of the underlying premises of Zabolotsky's article becomes clear at the beginning. There are two main social systems, the socialist and the Western, and in this last system all the evils of the world seem to be concentrated, while he only gives positive evaluations about socialist countries. Some examples: Exploitation and impoverishment, also of the Third World, are "the West's social problem" and these justify the class struggle in developed capitalist countries, the liberation movements, and the program of the World Council of Churches. Concrete action is required to promote freedom from oppression as well as "structural change in most societies today, where injustice is causing suffering." There is injustice with regard to the environment but evidently not in the Soviet Union "because the programs of the Soviet Union are incorporated into the Constitution and implemented in practice." The last two centuries have been characterized by declines in all fields of life, but "Socialist countries, particularly the Soviet Union, have tried to break out of this vicious circle. . . . In this complexity the countries of the Third World are trying to find their own way, looking both at the old order and at the new. Some of them have found the correct path to socialism." Then Zabolotsky calls on everyone "to participate in the construction of a new world--a world of justice and a fuller and more perfect life. Man is a laborer together with God (1 Cor. 3.9), which also means that he participates in the creation of this new world." The author is using in this article a

more prudent and more modest language in his praise of socialism and the Soviet Union than in his article quoted above.<sup>26</sup> But the intention is clear: socialism is the new order and laboring together with God means cooperating in the building up of socialism and in the class struggle in capitalism. There is no convergence of these dissimilar, contradictory ideological systems. The ecumenical discussion should not try to create such a convergence. There is no indication that there could be a task for a World Council of Churches in respect to the socialist system other than cooperating with it. Its critical task is restricted to the system "where injustice is causing suffering." There it has to promote concrete action for structural change to promote freedom from oppression, exploitation, and racial discrimination.

The key to the understanding of Zabolotsky's article, which is written in a way which often obscures the issues rather than clarifies them, must be sought in publications by Soviet ideologists, which were analyzed above.

### A New Methodology

It seems fair to draw the conclusion that influential participants from churches in Eastern Europe are convinced that it is their duty to use the influence they have not only to prevent the World Council of Churches from criticizing the socialist system, but also to make it a partisan of the progressive forces in the world, that is to say, to make it instrumental to the cause of Marxist socialism. This would not be a too tragic situation if it meant that in the international fellowship of churches a real dialogue could arise between Christians with different social and political ideas, who are free to come to a common opinion and are eventually free to change their ideas. These partners in dialogue, however, are not free but are either in a political or an ideological (and sometimes both) captivity. They are not members of a pluralistic society, where one is able to choose between different opinions, but part of a "monolith" (Zabolotsky),<sup>27</sup> where those who are allowed to go abroad and participate in international church bodies have to speak with the same voice as the ruling party. They are regarded as emissaries of a system that assumes it is in possession of the truth and the way to a future of justice and peace. They can of course use and develop their own Christian and theological motivations and arguments as long as the conclusions are in line with what is expected from them.

Many Christians have had high expectations of the World Council of Churches. They have regarded it as a way to come, through common study and dialogue, to a better and more profound insight into what the will of God is for our days; as a way, liberated from a narrow nationalism, to come to an understanding of the social and political ideas of others; and as a place to elaborate a new conception of a responsible society, more just, participatory, sustainable, and peaceful. But this implied, of course, that all participants would meet first of all as Christians on the basis of a common faith and would

be prepared to engage in mutual dialogue about the consequences which this faith has for their life in the world. A real dialogue, which is more than a mere exchange of opinions and convictions, implies openness to the possibility of change. With emissaries who have to propagate and defend their fixed set of ideas one can talk, but not dialogue. The WCC should be a way to seek renewal, justice, and reconciliation and to come to a common understanding of the practical implications of the Kingship of Christ. To criticize this or that socio-political system is not the main object, but rather to find a new social and political ethos and to realize it, an ethos which would transcend national, social, and ideological boundaries which hold churches and Christians captive. Many ecumenical Christians consider this "the central conviction of the ecumenical movement."

There has been a considerable change in ecumenical methodology since the seventies. Social action has been accentuated over against reflection about ecumenical Christian social ethics. In a lecture, held in Bern, Switzerland, December 1983, Paul Abrecht remarked that in the new ecumenical approach, "action means commitment to a cause, efforts to persuade the churches to support that cause, and involvement with people and groups struggling for it." The word solidarity has become very popular. Christians must achieve solidarity with those who struggle for liberation, peace, and justice, and not deliberate about the theoretical aspects of our common obedience. Some people are of the opinion that it is not the main task of the churches to formulate abstract ethical principles which should then be applied to concrete situations. But is it not necessary to come first to a common Christian understanding of what justice, peace, and liberation mean, and what the ways are to work for them? Is there not the danger that people use the same word but give totally different meanings to it? This is actually happening in concrete actions and situations. Can a Christian, without asking questions about underlying presuppositions, identify with any action for peace, even with those who identify peace with the establishment of Marxist socialism? For the churches in the GDR this is a burning issue, which leads them to seek the theological and ethical criteria to which any common action for peace should correspond. If this is not done, secular ideological categories will prevail.

In a World Council document, where the Hungarian Reformed Church comments on the report of a WCC commission, "Towards a church in solidarity with the poor," we even read that the church should take over ideological categories: "The theological basis of our churches can still be summed up as 'the theology of the Gospel,' although we are in agreement with the new concepts of theology: revolution, liberation, development, and peace, etc. However, we feel that when we try to liberate the poor, build the foundations of lasting peace, and promote social justice and people's participation, it is a revolutionary ideology, not theology, which can serve the people."<sup>28</sup>

A much more thorough semantic discussion needs to take place in the ecumenical movement about the meaning and content of words and concepts which are used. This becomes quite clear when reading such a passage.

But there are also other consequences of the change in ecumenical methodology which has issued from accentuating the need for action and for identification of the church with causes arising from concrete situations. A selectivity can result which is detrimental to the position of the World Council of Churches. If those who propagate the idea that injustice, oppression, exploitation, etc., exist only in one part of the world have a say in deciding what actions the church should solidarize with, it has proven to be quite easy to concentrate all activity on that part of the world. If, moreover, only the churches from one part of the world can take the initiative to act in situations of injustice and try to get the World Council involved in their action, this selectivity is strengthened.

Concretely, those who wish to solidarize with the cause of the aborigenes in Canada or Australia can easily try to get the World Council on their side with the consent of the churches involved in these causes. But who can bring officially the cause of Charta 77 in Czechoslovakia or that of the Crimean Tartars to the WCC and plead for solidarity with their action for greater justice?

This accent on social action is too convenient for those who are not able to participate freely in reflection on an ecumenical social ethos and who have to abstain from the working out of ecumenical Christian social concepts, when these transcend existing national, regional, and political boundaries, and are not in harmony with the secular ideology to which they are subjected.

#### Cause-selection

Some conclusions seem appropriate. A number of member churches in the World Council of Churches take the position,

a. that in their part of the world justice and peace have already been established or at least are being realized by the government and that the churches have no special task in or towards those countries. Prof. Zabolotsky speaks about the "normal" relations between church and society, as did Gordienko, which means that the Church can fulfill its specific task (liturgy, preaching, pastorate, theological education, and research) without engaging in specific social and political activities<sup>29</sup>;

b. that the churches should openly recognize that injustice has been overcome in socialist societies and collaborate with the progressive forces in the struggle for more justice in the rest of the world.

In his report on Nairobi, Bishop Mikhail wrote about the work of section II:

We must ascertain that speaking about negative phenomena in the world--unjust distribution of material goods, exploitation, poverty,



hunger, oppression, illiteracy--the document orientates itself almost exclusively towards the capitalist countries and partly towards the Third World. It leaves aside the rich experiences of the socialist countries, experiences which, as is well known, were acquired in the struggle against these evils until their radical removal. Accordingly, the descriptive part of the report and the recommendations suffer from the usual onesidedness and shortcomings.<sup>30</sup>

The Bishop seems to understand by onesidedness and shortcomings the fact that the evils of the capitalist world are mentioned without at the same time mentioning the abolition of these evils, in the socialist world. For a number of member churches the slogan of the World Council should not be "the world is my parish," but "the non-socialist world is my parish." This is not meant as a malicious attack on the world fellowship of churches, but as a statement of fact, inherent to any religious world organization in which Orthodox or Protestant churches from Eastern Europe are active members.

In July 1984, the Lutheran World Federation held its Assembly in Budapest, Hungary. Günther Krusche, a GDR theologian, remarked in an interview after the Conference, "Although this conference was held in a socialist country, it did not bring anything, which could have been important for this context."<sup>31</sup> Preceding the assembly a youth conference took place with 300 young church members from 49 countries, among them 48 from the GDR and 86 from East European churches. The central topic of discussion was the situation in Southern Africa and the unjust economic and social structures of oppression in the Third World. In "The Information Bulletin for Lutheran Minority Churches" (ed. Budapest 8/84) a participant from the GDR wrote about his impressions under the title, "Is Eastern Europe not a theme?" for the ecumene.

"I cannot introduce a new social system in South Africa or in India," said a Polish delegate. He would rather have discussed the situation of the young people in their own churches and have heard about the experiences of others with evangelism and bible study. But this was not discussed. Only a pastor from the GDR felt he must speak about "peace and justice in an East-West perspective. Otherwise Eastern Europe would have completely been left out of the discussion." In these words of a young East German Lutheran we have in a nutshell the present ecumenical situation. Eastern Europe is not a theme in the ecumene. Nobody can deny that advocacy for justice is an essential, integral part of the mission of the church and that the Christian faith demands action consistent with its commitment. It is equally true that the church cannot restrict itself to the intellectual formulations of general principles, but that it should give a living witness in solidarity and suffering. But what is true of the church in its social and historical context is not necessarily true of a world council of these churches. A continuous debate is going on in the ecumenical movement about the ecclesiological status of the WCC. It can, according to common opinion, not be equated with a

church. But usually no account is taken of this distinction between a church and a world council of churches when the task of the church in society is being discussed. We should not only take into account the ecclesiological differences between a church and a world council of churches. We must have at the same time an open eye for the variety of political and ideological situations of the member churches, which makes it impossible for a world council to act as a church for the world. It can and should discuss the role which the churches should play in the social sphere, but cannot play this role itself. In the present situation, a world council has only restricted possibilities, because as a council with a constituency which in part has no independent and autonomous position, it is not really free to decide to what cause it should commit itself. It is very true, as Patriarch Pimen remarked, that there is no single, universal all-Christian answer to the themes with which the ecumene is dealing, because of the differences in circumstances, cultures, and economic and political systems.<sup>32</sup>

But can a universal council in exceptional cases solidarize in such a way with some local churches that it takes their special concerns and priorities as its own concerns and priorities? And if it does, which factors play a role in deciding which priorities to take and which local or regional causes to identify itself with? Some causes have strong defendants and promoters in ecumenical bodies, while others cannot find sufficient support or are even vetoed by member churches. Some causes could have divisive consequences for the ecumenical organization, while others are expected to unify the life of the fellowship, which usually proves not to be the case.

A cause-selection is necessary and inevitable for a world organization which wishes to engage in concrete action. But if this selection, because of the attitude of a number of member churches based on ideological concepts which are incompatible with Christian principles, results in one part of the world always falling outside the scope of this world organization, a serious question arises. Is it a good policy for this world organization to engage in concrete action, or should it encourage the member churches to discern the challenges put before them and to engage in these causes on a local or regional level? It could also be envisaged that some local churches become engaged in the concerns of other local churches and covenant together for a common cause in which they feel a common responsibility. But a co-engagement in local causes of a universal body might in the present circumstances even be disadvantageous for these causes.

A universal council should therefore be reticent to identify itself entirely with concerns of churches in local (i.e., national or regional) situations. A universal fellowship of churches should stimulate the churches to fulfill their mission in their own situation and it should discuss the overall concepts and the theological-ethical guiding principles for the social

action of the churches. These should then be translated and adapted to the different circumstances, because the form and content of the social action of the churches may be quite different. It might also provide a platform where churches engaged in their local situation can exchange experiences and eventually seek the help of other local churches which are concerned with the same problems or feel committed to their cause.

It might be advisable for the World Council of Churches to change its pattern of behavior and to resist the pressure of those who wish that it express itself on all sorts of actual problems in which they themselves are engaged. The procedure at the Assembly of Vancouver (1983) in respect to the Afghanistan and Middle America resolutions has given rise to a number of commentaries. The most interesting came probably from an East German commentator in the journal Die Junge Kirche, where he says: "The voice of the World Council of Churches must be consistent [einheitlich], recognizable as one and the same voice of this worldwide Christianity, guided by the same principles. When that is not possible it would do better to keep silent."<sup>33</sup> This quotation seems to summarize concisely the thesis of this essay.

A tension exists in the ecumenical movement on the subject of its nature, function, and possibilities. Different views exist and collide. On the one hand there is the opinion that ecumenical councils are a consultation structure, where not only different confessional but also socio-political points of view are in discussion with each other. The participants have pledged to take each other seriously and to listen to each other, but also to be open for mutual criticism on the basis of commonly accepted norms and values. The ecumene as a consultation structure presupposes a specific spirituality and although not a product of Western democratic origin (see Acts 15), it certainly can flourish in that soil. A certain common understanding of aims and values is necessary if ever these consultations are to lead to action and not just remain an exchange of interesting opinions. These actions will usually be determined by a liberal-evolutionary way of thinking about the development of society. That this way of ecumenical cooperation cannot lead to actions, aimed at changes in social and political life and always tending to consolidate the status quo, is an unjust and unrealistic reproach. But other ideas have also come up, which are linked with a more radical revolutionary concept of society. Councils of churches are then seen as action structures, spearheads of church activities in social and political life. The background is not inclusiveness, but partisanship, a radical choice for justice, the new, the future. Problems of society are reduced to the antithesis between two mutually exclusive positions. This way of thinking seems to be influenced by the concept of the class struggle, which starts from the assumption that there are clearly recognizable contrasting positions and that a Christian should and could make a clear choice. These different conceptions seem not to have become the subject of a real dialogue.

The Price which the WCC has to Pay for  
Its Silence on Eastern Europe

In speaking about the first years of the World Council of Churches, W. A. Visser 't Hooft remarked that the young ecumenical movement had already a certain tradition in the area of social thought and action.<sup>34</sup> Important elements of this tradition were the common conviction that the churches should be concerned not only with the spiritual and moral life of individuals, but also with the problems of society, a quite substantial consensus about the content of the Christian social ethic, and a method by which the churches could make their own specific contribution to the life of society. One of the elements of this method was to arrive at a definition of the fundamental issues with which the churches should be concerned in order to render their witness to society. The problem which concerns us is how the identification of these fundamental issues is taking place.

Visser 't Hooft showed that delegates from Third World countries did raise urgent problems for study and discussion and that awareness of the astounding achievements in the field of science and technology (genetics, nuclear power, ecology) posed a series of problems with which the churches ought to be confronted.

When one views the large range of issues with which the WCC has occupied itself, it will be very difficult to prove that any of these has been brought into the ecumenical discussion by the Russian Orthodox Church, or, for that matter, by any church living in the communist commonwealth of nations. The Russian Orthodox Church--a conservative church in a conservative state--has not been able to develop a real involvement in the problems of society.<sup>35</sup> The short period before 1917 when this church did discuss a social program came to an abrupt end with the establishment of the Soviet regime, which marginalized the church, forbade any activity in the social field, and did not even allow the study and discussion of social questions. The church must confine itself to cultic matters only and therefore has not been able to create a cadre of specialists in the field of Christian social ethics.

The Western and Third World churches are responsible for the agenda of the WCC and whatever radical or other influences there might have been issue from their representatives. "The source of the protest against the West is the West."<sup>36</sup>

Latin American theologians have played a rather prominent role in this process of identifying the issues of concern for the ecumene. They have pleaded for a profound transformation of existing socio-economic structures and have accused the Western democracies of maintaining a system of increasing exploitation through their multi-national corporations. It must also be said that the ecumenical churches in the USA were ahead of most other churches in their criticism of American policy (e.g., in Vietnam and Central America).<sup>37</sup> The ideological flavor of a WCC study paper, strongly influenced by Latin

American theologians and received with some skepticism in Western circles, "Towards a Church in Solidarity with the Poor," was even criticized by the Russian theologian, N. A. Zabolotsky. He stated:

It should definitely be stated that liberation theology and its particular conclusion--the theology of revolution--have ideological implications. Social, economic, and political elements in this type of theology are in essence merely human reflections on world processes. . . . But in such cases, there will inevitably be a clash both in ideas and in action between similar ideologized theologies and other ideological structures.<sup>38</sup>

For a Russian Orthodox theologian there should be no confusion between theology and ideology. That is one of the guiding principles in his church but also in the party which dominates his country. The party takes the view that theology has to do with the supernatural but should not mingle in the affairs of the world and certainly not make a selection of those ideological concepts which could be helpful for the furtherance of Christian conceptions. The Communists like Christians who deal with social questions purely along ideological lines without bringing in theological categories which might lead to the detestable phenomenon of revisionism. The Orthodox Church from its side also does not favor social or political theology. In general those in the West who object to an involvement of the church in the problems of society and are protagonists of an otherworldly religiosity have strong allies in Orthodoxy.

But the membership of the Russian Orthodox Church and other Eastern European churches in the World Council of Churches has not been without influence upon the process of defining the issues with which the WCC should be concerned. This influence has been mainly negative. They are responsible not for what is on the agenda of the WCC, but for what is not on the agenda. Communism does not seem to them an issue worth discussing, and Eastern Europe therefore does not raise problems in the field of church and society. The WCC does not concern itself with the socialist world, neither with its social, economic, and political problems, nor with its problems in the field of human rights, nor with its ideology. In the program, "Dialogue with People of Living Faiths and Ideologies," which organized a consultation on "Churches among Ideologies" in 1981, the definition of ideology was formulated in such a way that the specific ideological aspect of the Soviet state could remain outside the discussion.

This might be explained by saying that the Third World and Western churches have such a dominant position in this organization that they have been able to make their concerns the only priorities. Furthermore, they have a tradition of international cooperation in the field of Life and Work which Orthodox churches do not have. Sometimes it has been suggested that it is

useless for the WCC to deal with problems of the Communist countries because their governments are not Christian. This is clearly a very poor argument not only because the WCC does in fact deal with problems in countries with non-Christian governments, as is demonstrated, for instance, in the case of the events in India in 1975, but also because it resembles the views of the Hungarian churches as mentioned above,<sup>39</sup> that the churches have no special mission in or towards socialist society.

This same point of view is expressed in the writings of the Soviet ideologists to which representatives of the churches have to conform. The influence of the delegates from churches in Eastern Europe has not been such, even according to Marxist observers, that they have been able to dictate the agenda of the World Council of Churches, but they certainly have exerted their influence to prevent subjects displeasing to the authorities at home from becoming the object of study or action in the WCC or gaining a prominent place on the agenda.

An astonishing confirmation of this thesis can be found in the special issue of the Ecumenical Review, dedicated to the work of "Church and Society."<sup>40</sup> This symposium of essays gives the impression that Eastern Europe does not exist. It is totally passed over. No contributions from Eastern European authors are found in this collection and it is a regrettable omission that no voice from the GDR is heard, where the Evangelical Churches--exceptional among Eastern European member churches--do deal with problems of their society and are trying to find new ways for their social witness.

The WCC does speak critically about the Western world and about Western social and political problems, but does not speak in the same way about the socialist world, or more precisely, it does not speak about it at all. This, however, is not just a regrettable omission. It can have serious consequences for the witness of the World Council.

If the World Council of Churches is convinced that its prophetic witness is an expression of faith in the Lordship of Christ over the world and that it has a duty to proclaim the implications of this belief for relationships in the social and political community then it should take up an independent position between the two contrasting socio-political systems which dominate the world. It should not identify itself with one of them, nor become a partisan of, or imprisoned in, ideological fronts, but clearly state its understanding of the will of God and promote its application to national and international policy. This may be too great a pretension and not realizable in the present world situation. It might even be advisable for the WCC to be more modest about its possibilities, as has been said above. But it is no good simply to forget about one part of the world and continue its witness only in the rest of the world. That does not work in the present world situation, roughly divided into two antagonistic blocs, while between these blocs a vehement propaganda war is going on. One should have a realistic view of the effects of one's words and actions.

For example, it is very unfortunate that the voice of the churches in the GDR is not taken more seriously in the ecumene when East-West problems are discussed. They are the only member churches in Eastern Europe which express an autonomous opinion on the way these problems should be dealt with. They constantly underline the fact that the churches have a task in their own situation, but that ecumenical cooperation should be consultative and not directed towards common action. Bishop Werner Krusche from Magdeburg (GDR), now retired, said in an address at the sixth Assembly of the Conference of European Churches:

The most difficult problem confronting the churches in the European situation is the fact that most of them live in two mutually opposed social systems. They can neither ignore this opposition nor identify themselves with it. "Hostile" churches would be a blatant denial of Christ's reconciling work which transcends all boundaries. Yet the churches cannot be content to regard themselves as a "third force." In this difficult situation they will need to keep the following points in mind in fulfilling their social diakonia.

They perform their service in and for their particular society. It is there that they do what is of service to man, by cooperating to ensure that he obtains justice. Since the situation is so different in each of the major social systems, the churches have to act independently at any given time. They will, therefore, respect one another's freedom without ever lapsing into mutual indifference. If the churches' service is to be responsible service, it must become both more constructive, and, at the same time, more critical. Critical pronouncements by churches on specific social phenomena and trends in their own social and political situations are easily suspected of being and even branded as externally inspired, particularly when people exploit them for propaganda purposes in another social and political situation and thus treat them as ammunition in the cold war. Are there ways of preventing the misuse of such statements for propaganda purposes?<sup>41</sup>

What concerns us here are the last sentences. Misuse is made of critical statements of the churches when these fit into the propaganda schemes of the "other side." Examples are not difficult to find. We might give one from a statement of the Hungarian churches.

The WCC has a special program on Transnational Corporations, which it regards as a Western phenomenon and which it strongly criticizes. A study group of the Reformed Church of Hungary spoke about this project in a paper which sings the praise of the Comecon and the Eastern European communist societies and which calls on the churches to collaborate with all progressive movements: "There is a much better alternative to the multinational interests of the capitalist world in the socialist Comecon and the peaceful transformation of economic structures. . . . Churches must work without paying

attention to sectarian or doctrinal differences with all progressive movements fighting for justice and peace. . . ."42

The Western world is the object of severe moral criticism by the churches, and there are many good reasons for that. But the silence of the World Council of Churches about the socialist world is interpreted as its moral justification by the propagandists of socialism. Critical dealings with the Western world and its relationship with the Third World by such an august body as the WCC are being exploited even by some member churches in their service to the socialist system. Thus the critical statements are turned away from their original motivation and placed within the political framework of the competition between socialism and capitalism to serve as arguments in favor of socialism.

These statements, then, risk being detached from their Biblical Christian basis and can easily "be suspected of being externally inspired." This tends to sharpen the reactions of the protagonists of the capitalist system, who are only too willing to see critical voices as instruments of propaganda, instead of expressions of the search for a new society and of a Christian ethos. "Are there ways of preventing the misuse of such critical statements for propaganda purposes?" asks Bishop Krusche, who has often had to pay the price for the misuse by a segment of the Western press of his independent and courageous statements. The churches' critical statements in the West about the West are also misused for propaganda purposes, but since nobody personally has to pay a price, people do not bother much about this. Unfortunately the price which the WCC has to pay is probably a loss of spiritual authority and influence in Western society.

It may not be possible to prevent this misuse for propaganda purposes altogether. But something can be done. In the first place, the World Council should denounce and rebuke the misuse of its statements for partisan political views. In the second place, as Krusche has said, "Since the situation is so different in each of the major social systems, the churches have to act independently." The churches should not pretend that they can speak with one voice and function in the same way in all social systems. The WCC has its own special function but "the churches have to perform their service in and for their particular society . . . without ever lapsing into mutual indifference." A regionalization of activities of the ecumenical movement might be the only possible way for the future.

The World Council should also more openly rebuke and oppose all those who try to treat it as if it were an ally of their own political positions. It should never allow itself to be made an exponent of any political system if it wishes not to lose its authority and its claim to be an autonomous body, whose witness is rooted in the gospel and whose service for people is based on the service of Jesus Christ.



Involvement in Social and Political Questions Results  
in Assimilation and System-Conformism

In May 1984, the second seminar of member churches from the Soviet Union of the Conference of European Churches took place in Tallinn. It was one of those meetings in which Soviet churches discuss their ecumenical policy. Sometimes not only the churches from the USSR are called together, but also the churches from the other socialist countries. This is a quite recent development and thus far little attention has been given to it. The remark of an anonymous East European theologian (he must have been from the GDR; otherwise, he could not have spoken so critically) published in a report of Faith and Order is undoubtedly referring to these meetings when it says:

Ecumenism in Eastern Europe is still fragile and inarticulate. Because the ecumenical profile of the region is not clear, there is little opportunity to "practice" regional ecumenism. . . . Moreover, the autonomy of the regional church bodies cannot be safeguarded against the various political pressures. In any case, the churches must be sure that ecumenism is not a trap set by the state to encourage them to neglect their internal, local mission for the sake of external, international contacts.<sup>43</sup>

Not everybody in the West seems to share the opinion of this East European ecumenist. The British General Secretary of the Conference of European Churches was present at the seminar in Tallinn and addressed the meeting. He assessed highly the significance of the seminar, at least according to the report in the Bulletin of the Moscow Patriarchate, underlining that the brotherly cooperation of the Christian Churches in the USSR on the national level was without precedent in other European countries and a good example for all the CEC member churches to follow.<sup>44</sup> One cannot be absolutely sure that the General Secretary has been quoted correctly in this bulletin, because he must be aware that quite a few national councils of churches exist in the rest of the world. But if so, this is a clear example of misinterpretation of recent, rather disturbing, ecumenical developments in Eastern Europe.

These started in Zagorsk in July 1974. Patriarch Pimen had invited leaders and representatives from the member churches of the World Council of Churches in the communist countries of Eastern Europe for a special meeting.<sup>45</sup> He said in his opening address, in a terminology which has a remarkable similarity to that of the State's Council for Religious Affairs, "The Christians from the socialist countries are not only united on the common basis of a religious worldview [sic! -H.] and a unanimous struggle for a common engagement in the ecumene and the work for peace, but their common political and social convictions also bind them together as citizens of closely united socialist countries." He called the work for peace a priority for the religious institutions.

This was said by the same Patriarch who after the Bangkok Conference on Mission and Evangelism (1973) reproached the WCC in a worthy and authentically orthodox way, citing a trend towards one-sided and detrimental understanding of salvation in the spirit of boundless "horizontalism," and a tendency to be ashamed to preach Christ Crucified and Resurrected.<sup>46</sup> In this speech in Zagorsk he put things in a very different way, but that is not surprising for those who realize that on this occasion he was undoubtedly speaking on behalf of the State Council for Religious Affairs. There always is this ambiguity in the attitude of the Russian Orthodox Church: on the one hand they reproach their Western partners for horizontalism and a one-sided leaning to social and worldly issues; on the other hand they constantly put peace (i.e., political) issues at the top of the agenda. This can only be explained by the ambiguity of their position in the ecumene: the church itself looks for brotherly support and expects from its participation a strengthening of its position, a spiritual enrichment, and a help in the building up of church life. But the regime has quite different expectations. It allows the church to take part in the ecumenical movement because this might be useful for its foreign policy and could embellish its image in the West and especially in Third World Countries.

The position of the Russian Orthodox Church, one of the most influential churches in the ecumenical movement, is, as far as political, social, and economic issues are concerned, not determined by the Christian convictions of the believers on the basis of broad discussion and study in church assemblies, but is determined by the Council for Religious Affairs. It seems that this was equally true for the meeting in Zagorsk. This meeting, the first of a regular series of similar consultations, was meant to form a bloc of churches from the socialist countries, to exert more influence in the ecumene, and to arrive at a common ecumenical policy.

This becomes quite clear from what was said about human rights. In the autumn of that year, 1974, the World Council of Churches organized its first consultation on human rights, and the Patriarch said, "We are convinced that Christians from socialist countries have much to say about this. As we experience the realization of fundamental human rights and freedoms in the socialist society, we can declare: the socialist conditions for human society fully guarantee the fundamental freedoms and rights of man; the socialist way of life creates the conditions necessary for a full development of the human personality."

The secretary of the Hungarian Ecumenical Council also read a lecture on human rights in which he said that the Christian and Marxist-Leninist conceptions of human rights coincide.

However, we cannot avoid mentioning our own problems, because nobody will believe that we have no problems. But we have to decide what

we can say about our problems and how we can say it. . . . We could perhaps mention that in the period of revolutionary change certain rights have been violated. In the West they speak much about this as if these violations still take place. A frank statement can make it clear how energetically and consistently our governments have been in restoring and maintaining legality. This would in any case only be advantageous for the good reputation of socialism.<sup>47</sup>

A rather doubtful way to approach a brotherly consultation of Christian churches! The intention to act in the ecumenical discussion as representatives of the social establishment is clear. But the suggestion of unanimity of the churches in communist Europe seems to be ill founded. The Romanians, for instance, were not present in the first years. Critical voices have been heard. The secretary of the Polish Ecumenical Council, Andrzej Wojtowicz, wrote in connection with a symposium in Prague (1979) that "it would be important to raise the question how the churches can bring the real problems of their country into the discussion and whether they have the necessary freedom to do so." Neither did a GDR participant favor this sort of East European meeting. "Although the encounter with the established Marxist-Leninist socialism has given us a number of common experiences, it has certainly not marked us to such extent, that our churches have developed a specific common line of conduct."

But Moscow seems to want to bind the churches together as part of its bloc policy. Helene Carrere d'Encausse has in her recent book Le Grand Frere--L'Union Sovietique et L'Europe Sovietisee (Paris, 1983) given a detailed description of the building up of an integrated Soviet commonwealth in Eastern Europe, a new socialist community, according to the model of the Soviet Union, with a common attitude towards the outside world. A chapter on the churches could easily have been added, but, unfortunately, for many sovietologists the churches are a forgotten chapter. Yet they too are part of this enforced integration process. The Evangelical Churches in the GDR, however, were and are most unwilling to be inserted into this form of socialist ecumene and look for support to the World Council of Churches. They let it be known that they only want to participate in these meetings if the Geneva secretariat would be invited to be present and to coordinate them. This was done from 1977 onwards, when the invitations were distributed via Geneva.

This was a problematic decision, but one can understand that it would have been just as problematic not to conform to the GDR request. It would have made the position of the GDR churches in the East bloc still more complicated. We should not blame the Geneva staff; they have to live with the pressure from the member churches from Eastern Europe. But why should the Vancouver Assembly, without any form of discussion, approve of a statement made in the important reference committee:

In the period, 1977-1983, significant improvement has been noted in relations with member churches in Eastern Europe and other regions.

The experience in Eastern Europe proved of great value in spiritual enrichment, greater awareness of church life and activity, and in a sense of mutual support. In the light of such achievements we are able to recognize the importance of regular, regional consultations, as well as of opportunities to share the experience of member churches living in different circumstances!"<sup>46</sup>

Was there no representative who could have asked why it was necessary to make a special mention of this dubious Eastern European initiative and thus to sanction it and to make it more difficult to abstain from it for those churches which do not want to be integrated in a bloc of churches dominated by the Moscow State Council for Religious Affairs? With the approval of the World church this council can now continue the domestication of the churches, their submission to worldly power, their integration in a regime hostile to the church, their utilization for propagandistic aims and purposes.

One of the consequences of the involvement of East European churches in the social and political aspects of ecumenical activities has been that the pressure from the side of the state authorities has been increased, a pressure which aims at a complete assimilation. In ecumenical circles it is often said with approval that a renewal is taking place in Orthodoxy, and that the church is awakening to a new responsibility in the social field. The term used for indicating this social responsibility is "the liturgy after the Liturgy," intending to indicate the Christian service in society. But is this liturgy after the Liturgy in the church really celebrated according to the same Divine order? Or does this liturgy in society follow precepts issued by other authorities? The assimilation, enforced upon the church by the regime, could probably be called a sort of marranzation. The name Marranos was given to Spanish Jews who were baptized by compulsion in the late Middle Ages. They often accepted Christianity only in outward appearance. Marranzation, then, is an enforced conformism to the current ritual in an ideologically uniform society. The Christians may join in the life of society if they keep completely silent about their own social convictions and principles. The result is an outward conformity and an inward emigration. This process may have been stimulated by engagement in international social activities, especially in peace activities, where theological argumentation and political praxis are, for the most part, loosely connected.

Those who have followed the development of the activities in the field of foreign relations of the Russian Orthodox Church have been able to get a clear picture of the fact that it is the Kremlin which decides the scope, the content, and the intensity of these relations and which uses the church for its own diplomatic and propagandistic ends. The regional consultations of East European churches were undoubtedly convened to unify the ecumenical policy of these churches. The Patriarch denied at the Zagorsk meeting, in

rather vehement terms, that it would be the intention to form a bloc of churches in the ecumenical movement. But other authoritative pronouncements clearly show that the ecumenical policy of the Moscow Patriarchate is based on the presumption that blocs exist and that the churches act as part of a bloc. The Patriarch himself remarked in an address to a Finnish audience in 1974, "It would be useful for the World Council of Churches to take note of the views of a large body of churches and numerous Christians, who have combined their efforts towards the building of peace within the framework of the Christian Peace Conference."<sup>50</sup> This was a diplomatic way of mentioning the existence in the WCC of a specific pressure group. Metropolitan Yuvenali presented a report at a Consultation of Orthodox Churches with representatives of the World Council in Sofia, May 1981, about "Prospects of Orthodox Contribution to the WCC Activities." He proposed a revision of the voting system, used in the WCC, to decide questions of a doctrinal character. What draws our attention here is one of his arguments. He said:

In considering and deciding questions of a political and social significance, that practical experience of the World Council of Churches has produced an unwritten rule and practice of observing the principle of equality in composing appropriate groups of equal numbers of representatives of the churches of the West, of the East, and of developing countries. Experience also proves that the World Council decisions in the political and social fields can only be effective if they are worked out and adopted on the principles of parity by all these three sides participating in the WCC activities.<sup>51</sup>

According to Yuvenali there are three blocs or sides, and each bloc is supposed to present a common opinion on social and political matters. We may notice the similarity of his conception to that of Soviet ideologists. The consultations of East European member churches thus serve the unification of the views and positions of these churches and their harmonization with those of the State Council for Religious Affairs. They contribute in this way not only to the formation of a bloc in the World Council of Churches according to political lines but also to a strengthening of the integration of the churches into the system.

It is interesting to notice that the request for a broader participation of Orthodox Churches in the ecumenical movement coincides with the request for a broader participation of the churches from socialist countries. On the one hand as Orthodox Churches, on the other hand as churches from socialist countries, the Russians demand a larger share of responsibility in the World Council of Churches. More attention should be given, according to a June 1982 Budapest Consultation of Churches in socialist countries, to the contribution which these churches can give to the life and activities of the Council.

Experience of the churches in socialist countries can be of some use and benefit to Christians in the Third World where society is in the process of rapid social and ideological change in the direction of socialist order. The Christian response to the model of socialist society [will be] closely related to the problem of social justice and human dignity, and will be of paramount interest for brothers and sisters in Western Europe, North America, and in developing countries. . . . The churches in socialist countries have a lot to say and do in the area of peace, where they have wide experience and fine achievements.<sup>32</sup>

It seems that, here, the intention has been formulated to make a better use of the World Council of Churches as a means to improve the image of socialism in the world and have a greater influence on the peace initiatives of the Council. Not much is made known of the deliberations in these meetings, but what is known confirms the impression that Eastern European church representatives wish to have more influence in ecumenical programs and activities. Pressure is exerted on them to achieve homogeneity of action in the ecumenical movement, fully in line with Soviet policy which seeks cohesion in Eastern European activities in the international sphere. It seems extremely difficult for a church in Eastern Europe not to conform to this pressure, as the Evangelical Churches in the GDR are discovering. Their freedom of action in regard to social and political problems has been limited by these consultations of Eastern European churches. They are pressured into conformity with the Moscow line and forced to act as mouthpieces of party politics. The statement of the Vancouver Assembly, quoted above, which seems to sanctify this process must be seriously deplored.

#### The Integrity of the Representatives

A problem which any ecumenist who publishes about the situation of the churches in Eastern Europe has to face is how to write about the political captivity of churches in Eastern Europe without challenging the integrity of the representatives of these churches.

In this cruel sea one can founder on either of two rocks. The one is the simplistic suspicion that every representative from the church in a communist country is a secret agent of the police. In general this is not correct, and ecumenically engaged Christians have always opposed this allegation, although they are conscious of the fact that in church delegations there will usually be a government official to supervise the conduct of the delegates. Just as every church organ in the Soviet Union from the national to the local level is supervised by the State Secretariat for Religious Affairs and nothing can happen without its consent, so evidently a church delegation does not escape the watchful eye of this state council, whose task it is "to work with the religious organizations in establishing international relations." The well-known Foerov report, issued by this state council, speaks about the differing

degrees of loyalty of the bishops towards the government and towards the church.<sup>53</sup> This can be confirmed by those who personally are engaged in ecumenical contacts with the Russian churches. Simplistic generalizations not only inflict injustice upon a number of faithful and loyal churchmen, but give rise to equally simplistic reactions of those who assume that there is nothing extraordinary and sinister in the state church relations of the Soviet Union.

The other rock on which one can founder is to project one's own personal freedom, natural in a Western-shaped democratic society, on representatives from the Soviet Union. This attitude seems to be typical, for example, of some press representatives.

An interesting commentary was written by Nicolas Lossky, professor at the Institute Saint Sergius and member of an Orthodox parish of the Moscow Patriarchate in France, after the visit of a Russian church delegation in France at the invitation of the French Roman Catholic bishops in November 1979. A visit like this could be regarded as an exemplary paradigm, a dialogue on purely church matters and an exchange of experiences between the churches about theological education.

Nevertheless the visit gave rise to some controversy because of press interviews in which members of the delegation were asked about recent arrests of Christians in their country. The answers were either evasive or strictly conforming to the official statements by the government.

But, to demand from Russian bishops to condemn an aspect of the policy of their country, is that not a case of choosing the wrong partner? . . . A very subtle means of compromising the church is to make its responsible spokesmen speak about difficult subjects (as the non-respecting of human rights) before the Western press. . . . If we Westerners make bishops speak about subjects on which they have "a lesson to recite," we expose them to shame in the eyes of the world, which is exactly what the persecuting Soviet power wants. And we, who denounce the infringements of the human rights, we make them involuntarily the accomplices of those who persecute.<sup>54</sup>

Those who do not take account of the specific position of Russian churchmen at home and abroad often achieve the opposite of what they intend. The same sort of discussion was started by Paul Mojzes in an American publication edited by an ecumenical association related to the National Council of Churches in the USA, which can hardly be suspected of being hostile to the ecumenical movement. He was disturbed by the fact that a Russian church delegation invited to the USA by a group called Bridges to Peace in October 1984 "did not tell the truth about conditions, particularly the religious conditions, in their country. Why? What makes them say things which are blatantly false?"<sup>55</sup> He then enumerates a number of possible explanations: they are cautious because anything which is published can get them, their loved ones, and their churches into trouble; their concept of religious liberty is different; they

may have fallen prey to the same propaganda manipulation to which the citizens of their country have been so massively subjected. "One may add to this interpretation that those clergy who are chosen to travel on such missions are beholden to the state authorities. Such travel is a rare privilege. They are carefully screened and briefed. . . . They also know that the disadvantages to themselves, and more importantly to their churches, if they step out of line, are simply not worth [their] taking such risks. . . . The reason for this behavior is terror."<sup>56</sup> Mojzes is of the opinion that this terror still exists in the Soviet Union, but is now selective.

Knowledge that this terror can be unleashed at any moment against any given person is a sufficient threat against all but the most brave. Among Soviet believers there are such people of courage. But the vast majority, including the leaders, chose a path of prudent compliance with the requests of those with the power to unleash the terror.<sup>57</sup>

He also remarks that both Western conservatives and liberals tend to be blind in one eye, failing to notice one part of Soviet reality. Conservatives fail to see the changes. Liberals fail to see the continuities. "The change is that terror is no longer general. That is an improvement. The continuity is that terror, now selective, is nevertheless still terror. Couple this terror with the overwhelming amount of government propaganda (few or no alternative viewpoints available) and one gets a fairly adequate theoretical interpretation for the behavior of many of the visiting clergy."<sup>58</sup>

It is good that these voices are to be heard in the ecumenical movement, especially when they come from those who are personally engaged in the ecumenical relationships with Eastern Europe.

We should strongly oppose those who on the basis of these realistic judgments plead for a rupture of contacts with church people from the Soviet Union. We should invite, receive, and visit them, but if we wish to help them, we should not have naive ideas about their predicament. In a small discussion group at an international meeting, one of the courageous Russian church representatives exclaimed, "For you it is easy to talk; you do not feel the hot breath of the atheists in your neck!" The Russian Orthodox Church is not a fallen but a captive church, and we should take this into account while converging with its representatives.

In an essay entitled "Between Loyalty and Martyrdom" published ten years ago, this author strongly attacked the concept of the "underground church," portrayed as the true church over against the "false leaders" of the officially legalized churches.<sup>59</sup> One cannot characterize the leadership of the church in this manner even if one realizes its extremely complicated position. In all matters circa sacra, that is, which do not directly concern the content of the faith and the liturgy, the church is subjected to the whims of a hostile



regime and has no independence. Its loyalty to the powers that be is constantly supervised and has to be made explicit at every occasion. Metropolitan Sergei, in 1943 chosen as patriarch, issued a declaration of loyalty to the Soviets in 1927 in which he explained, "We want to be Orthodox, and, at the same time, we want to accept the Soviet Union as our earthly fatherland and to be citizens of the Union not only for wrath, but also for conscience's sake (Romans 13.5). . . . Only world-estranged dreamers can imagine that so great a fellowship as the Orthodox Church can hide itself from the State and so exist in the State." Although much criticized in those days, this statement has opened the only possible way for the church in the Soviet Union, a very difficult and stony path indeed.

Such is, however, the situation, and we must try to exercise restraint in our judgment. Critical voices from the church community itself penetrate to us, especially since the sixties. This inner opposition is important, for it can protect the official church from going too far in harmony with the authorities. It even leads the authorities sometimes to small concessions because they do not want groups to arise outside the church on which they have no grip. There are bishops and priests who reach the point where they can no longer accept constant compromise and humiliation. But this is, at the same time, the point where loyalty turns into martyrdom, and the terror strikes. Who are we to challenge the brothers to become martyrs?

The Russian priest S. Zheludkov once wrote, "The official Church cannot be an isle of freedom in a completely uniformly organized society which is controlled from one single centre. The Russian Church is confronted by the dilemma: either to go underground, which in the existing system is unthinkable, or to conform in one way or other to the system and to make use in the meantime of such possibilities as are still left open to the Church. The Russian hierarchy has chosen the second possibility, because there was no other choice."

But since the entrance of the church representatives from the Soviet Union into the World Council of Churches our problems have become more complicated. It is not any longer sufficient to come to a well-balanced objective and nuanced view of the plight of a far-away church. We are faced with the question of how to cooperate with it. Some facts have then to be taken into account.

1. The specific ideas of the regime in regard to the task of the church and of its freedom. The former (till 1984) chairman of the State-Secretariat for Religious Affairs, Kuroyedov, paraphrased the freedom of the church in these words: "The church with us is free and independent in the fulfillment of its only function--to satisfy the religious needs of the believers."

2. The regime has discovered that the church might be a useful instrument in furthering the aims of Soviet foreign policy abroad. We can read in Nauka i Religiya, "The church workers from the Soviet Union and the fraternal

countries inform the religious public opinion in the West about the politics of the socialist countries, the status of the general ideas of their countries, especially of those of the believers, in questions of war and peace."<sup>60</sup> That there could be a difference of opinion between believers and others in the Soviet Union has, however, never been acknowledged by the authorities. The opinion of the believers is supposed to be identical with that of the ruling party.

3. Church representatives abroad have no more freedom than other citizens, either at home or abroad. Their contacts abroad are subject to the guidance and supervision of the state. Those who doubt this will have to prove their point against all experts on Soviet law and Soviet life. But even those who accept these facts can and should use all the possibilities of contacts with the churches from the Soviet Union which present themselves. The churches should not let themselves be hindered by any wall of division, but they have to realize that with "hostages" (N. Lossky) of a hostile regime, they cannot freely discuss all subjects. In all matters of faith and order we have a lot to discuss, and in this field the churches can express independent positions. It can be equally useful to come to an exchange of opinions and ideas on social and political questions. For Russians it is a good thing to have an open window to the rest of the world, however small this may be; it might help them to change their conceptions which are very one-sided and influenced by propaganda. It might even make them more critical about their situation. For Westerners it is equally useful to meet Soviet people, to get acquainted with their ways of life and thinking, and, which is often the case, to begin to like them. We should not be too anxious if our contacts have a certain propagandistic value for the regime and if churchmen traveling abroad can cause some misunderstandings about their real situation. People in the West are generally critical enough not to allow themselves to be misled, and it is not forbidden here to correct false or misleading information. It will also be useful to discuss whether we can come to common convictions as Christians, living in different social systems, about questions of life, the work of the churches, and general problems of humanity with which we are all concerned.

The study on faith, science, and technology presents a good example of such a general problem, which concerns us all and may not be too directly linked with the usual themes of propaganda. It then becomes clear, unfortunately, how restricted the possibilities of the Russian churches in fact are. They have in their present circumstances no discussions in their own church between believers and scientists and these sorts of studies represent for them a good way of getting acquainted with problems which directly concern Christian life and ethics, but on which they have not much to contribute because of their lack of experience.

But as was explained above, the cooperation of churches in the World Council of Churches embraces more than just the study of confessional questions and ethical problems. The member churches have not been willing to restrict their common activities in the WCC, in view of the special position and limited possibilities of the Russian Orthodox Church, to those only. On the contrary, social and political questions have received a prominence, and the urge to take action or make pronouncements on issues of direct political relevance has increased. Then, however, the captivity and lack of independence of these churches plus the fact that their representatives are screened and briefed, that they have a hidden agenda or have their lesson to recite, or however one may describe their position, begins to play a role. Then one has to pose the question of the aims and intentions of the regime in allowing the churches to participate in ecumenical activities, while they officially recognize only one function for the church, namely, the satisfaction of religious needs of believers. What are these representatives commissioned to do, and what impact do they have on the ecumene?

People may come to different conclusions, but the question itself seems to be fully justified and honest. It need not be inspired by mistrust of the integrity of church representatives. It finds its origin in an insight into their plight. Curiously this has not been openly and consistently discussed in ecumenical circles.

It is true that the churches from the Soviet Union can only maintain ecumenical contacts within the framework and the limits which are laid down by the government. They cannot publicly speak about the pressure under which they are living and operating. But are their partners conscious of what they are doing when they involve the representatives of these churches in all their activities? Are they not unintentionally contributing in this way to the marranzation of the church and its fuller assimilation in the policies of the regime?

In the coming years the collaboration of the churches from the Soviet Union and the communist countries in the World Council of Churches will reach a critical point when they will nominate more staff members. The pressure to do this clearly exists, but what will happen when, for instance, one-third of the staff would consist of people from the socialist part of the world, in accordance with the three "sides" or blocs of which the WCC is supposed to consist? The Evangelical Churches of the GDR would be able to provide the ecumenical organization with politically independent staff members. But other Eastern European churches do not take the initiative to recommend them. The State Councils on Religious Affairs in their countries do not favor it. The exceptional position of the GDR churches has not made them popular among leading church circles in Eastern Europe.

There are, of course, instances in the life of the World Council secretariat of fruitful collaboration with people from Eastern European countries. Some of them have even given the impression that they can rise above the

limitations on free expression and independent behavior to which their co-citizens are subjected. However, the experience of UNESCO should not be forgotten. A former British Assistant Director General, Richard Hoggart, wrote, "The Soviets do find it almost impossible to believe that a member of the Secretariat is not also a member of his national civil service, or at least a dutiful mouthpiece and reporter."<sup>61</sup> It certainly goes also for church representatives, that those recommended and commissioned for jobs in the WCC must be acceptable to the State Council on Religious Affairs and that in questions which are not purely confessional, they cannot be regarded as politically independent people. For the best of them, if ever these get as far as being chosen for such a sensitive post in the international sphere, it will not be an enviable position. All those who have responsible positions in the Russian Orthodox Church are experiencing the dilemma of conflicting loyalties and of compromising between the exigencies of the church which they serve and the church-hostile state to which they are subjected. To a still greater extent this would apply to a church servant in an international body. Is it reasonable to bring someone into this situation, or should we envisage a reconstruction of the international ecumenical body, in which we collaborate with the Russians and other East Europeans, in such a way that only those questions appear on the agenda where the churches can speak with their own voice and that their political authorities lose their direct impact?

There are reasons to doubt the willingness of member churches of the WCC to consider this. There is, notwithstanding the many superficial contacts, a tremendous lack of real insight into the situation of the Russian and other churches, and little information is made available by ecumenical bodies. (What information there is, is often treated as suspect.) Much will have to be done before the Christian precept of "suffering with those who suffer" will lead to a readiness to change the pattern of ecumenical cooperation in the World Council of Churches in such a way that it can really serve the life and witness of the churches in captivity.

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