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IS THE EAST-WEST POLITICAL BIPOLARITY THE FOUNDATION OF THE ECUMENICAL MOVEMENT? THE COLD WAR AS A META-NARRATIVE OF THE WORLD COUNCIL OF CHURCHES

By Katharina Kunter

Dr. habil. Katharina Kunter studied history and Protestant theology at the Universities of Heidelberg and Gießen in Germany. Her dissertation focused on the Churches in the Helsinki Process in 1968-1978 and her Habilitation thesis was about the Churches in West- and East-Germany and the conciliar process in the 1980s and 1990s. She lives in Frankfurt am Main.

Some years ago, the Protestant theologian, Laurens Hogebrink, from the Netherlands, who once served as head of the Department for Europe of the Dutch Reformed Churches, noted in a self-critical personal reflection:

(...) It is undisputed today that in the 40 years of the Cold War the ecclesiastical life of Eastern Europe was largely hindered by the communist regimes, in the former Soviet Union even 70 years long. Less is seen how much the worldwide ecumenism was hindered. The awareness that the ecumenism after the "turnaround" in Europe in 1989 was actually about to start again, was barely present at that time.¹

Hogebrink, one of the few Protestant ecumenists who not only developed an early sense of the political changes in Central and Eastern Europe since the 1980s, but also had numerous official and unofficial ecclesiastical contacts in Central and Eastern Europe, had raised a difficult ecumenical topic here. His criticism was that the churches of Central and Eastern Europe and their representatives had been instrumentalized by socialist party politics, and therefore had little free space to act independently in ecumenical relations. He also pointed out that the political conflict between the East and West and the involvement in the bipolarities of the Cold War also limited the effectiveness of ecumenical institutions and

¹ Laurens Hogebrink, "Ökumene und Kalter Krieg: Ein Erfahrungsbericht" [Ecumenism and Cold War: A Review], in Joachim Garstecki (ed.), *Die Ökumene und der Widerstand gegen Diktaturen. Nationalsozialismus und Kommunismus als Herausforderung an die Kirchen*, [The Ecumene and the Opposition against Dictatorships, National Socialism, and Communism as a Challenge for the Churches]. (Stuttgart: Kohlhammer, 2007), 190.

organizations, as well as any bilateral cooperation between churches in the West and in the East.

1. Trends of Historiographical Discussions and Current State of Research ²

However, Hogebrink's insight did not become an ecumenical consensus until 30 years after the end of the Cold War in Europe. This particularly applies for the ecclesiastical-ecumenical historiography. Up to today, there is a partially broken relationship to this period, along with the problem that discussions in churches often fail to acknowledge academic research literature. Nevertheless, there are also churches that have researched and discussed their past very carefully or are currently involved in research projects. Just recently, two large volumes have been published that originally came from an ecumenical-ecclesiastical context, but have now become two impressive academic compendia: one is about North American Churches and the Cold War³ and the other is about the Swedish Churches in the Cold War.⁴ Hopefully these two volumes will broaden the current discussion about churches in the Cold War and will gradually contribute to a more coherent and nuanced picture. This would also mean that the considerable German language literature published in this field during the last 30 years, for instance, should be integrated more into English-speaking literature; otherwise, two different scientific cultures will continue to develop, and will result in two different strands of discussion.

For example, while there is now in German a historic, cross-denominational account on churches in Communism⁵ for English readers, the only overview is that of Owen

² The following considerations are based on my (mostly German written) previous research on the Churches and the Cold War as well as on the Ecumenical movement in the Cold War. Detailed references will be given in the footnotes. A slightly changed version of this article appeared recently in Swedish in the book edited by Lennart Sjöström, *Innan Murarna Föll. Svenska kyrkan under kalla kriget* [Before Walls Fell: the Swedish Church during the Cold War], (Skellefteå: Artos, 2019), 49-64.

³ Paul Mojzes (ed.), *North American Churches and the Cold War*, (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2018).

⁴ Lennart Sjöström (Ed.), *Innan Murarna Föll. Svenska kyrkan under kalla kriget*, (Skellefteå: Artos, 2019).

⁵ Thomas Bremer, Nadezhda Beljakova, and Katharina Kunter, *“Es gibt keinen Gott!” Kirchen und Kommunismus. Eine Konfliktgeschichte* [“There is no god!” Churches and communism. A conflict story], (München: Herder, 2016).

Chadwick's "The Christian Church in the Cold War" of 1992, which was not based on any archival studies, but still presents an impressively broad, non-denominational portrait of Christianity in the East-West conflict in the second half of the 20th century.⁶

The widest controversy surrounding the role of the World Council of Churches in the 1990s was also triggered by a German language book, a three-part study by Gerhard Besier, Armin Boyens, and Gerhard Lindemann, in 1999. It appeared under the title "National Protestantism and Ecumenical Movement: Church Action in the Cold War 1945-1990."⁷ Notwithstanding various critical objections made by various parties, this work was not a broad historical overview study, but completed contributions to the Evangelical Church in Germany and the World Council of Churches since 1948, on the subject of Protestantism, communism and ecumenism in the US, and the relationship between the Christian Peace Conference and the World Council of Churches.

By the end of the 1990s, there was a short boom in international research on the role of churches and ecumenism in the Cold War. In Germany, the role of the church in the German Democratic Republic (GDR), as well as the mutual German-German church relations in the Federal Republic and in the GDR were explored. In this context, the role of ecumenism was also of interest. Also worthy of mention was a multi-year international project that focused on Protestantism in Eastern Europe in the different periods of communist rule, and in this context, repeatedly grappled with the influence and ambivalent role of ecumenism.⁸

⁶ Owen Chadwick, *The Christian Church in the Cold War*, (London: Penguin, 1992).

⁷ Gerhard Besier, Armin Boyens und Gerhard Lindemann, *Nationaler Protestantismus und ökumenische Bewegung. Kirchliches Handeln im Kalten Krieg 1945-1990* [National Protestantism and ecumenical movement. Church action in the Cold War 1945-1990], (Berlin: Duncker & Humblot, 1999). For the former discussions see the summarizing report of Thomas Bremer „Die ökumenische Bewegung während des Kalten Krieges—Eine Rückschau“ [The Ecumenical Movement during the Cold War--A Review], in: *Theologische Revue* 99 (2003), 177-190.

⁸ See Peter Maser and Jens Holger Schjørring (eds.), *Zwischen den Mühlsteinen. Protestantische Kirchen in der Phase der Errichtung der kommunistischen Herrschaft im östlichen Europa* [Between the millstones. Protestant churches in the phase of establishing communist rule in Eastern Europe], (Erlangen: Lutherverlag, 2002); Jens Holger Schjørring and Hartmut Lehmann (eds.), *Im Räderwerk des real existierenden Sozialismus. Kirchen in Ostmittel- und Osteuropa von Stalin bis Gorbatschow* [In the wheels of real existing socialism. Churches in East Central and Eastern Europe from Stalin to Gorbachev], (Göttingen: Wallstein, 2003); Peter Maser and Jens Holger Schjørring (eds.), *Wie die Träumenden? Kirchen in der Phase des Zusammenbruchs der kommunistischen Herrschaft im östlichen Europa* [Like the dreamers? Churches in the phase of collapse of

Additionally, the Theological Faculty in Helsinki ran various projects and individual studies on ecumenism and churches during the Cold War.⁹ Naturally, the special research focus here was on the foreign relations as well as the church and theological exchange processes and perceptions of the Finnish Lutheran Church, and the churches in the communist dominion. In the late 1990s in English-speaking countries, like Great Britain and United States, some studies were published on the context of religion and the Cold War. Many of them referred to the first years of the Cold War and explored how American or English foreign policy tried to instrumentalize churches for expanding their political influence concerning western values in Europe.¹⁰

However, apart from these international projects of the 1990s, individual church history studies have dominated the field or individual historians have taken on the topic.¹¹ There are, for example, some studies about the peace campaign in the 1970s and 1980s, about

communist rule in Eastern Europe], (Erlangen: Lutherverlag, 2003); Katharina Kunter and Jens Holger Schjørring (eds.), *Die Kirchen und das Erbe des Kommunismus. Die Zeit nach 1989 – Zäsur, Vergangenheitsbewältigung und Neubeginn. Fallstudien aus Mittel- und Osteuropa und Bestandaufnahme aus der Ökumene* [The churches and the legacy of communism. The period after 1989--a break, the coming to terms with the past and a new beginning. Case studies from Central and Eastern Europe and the ecumenical movement], (Erlangen: Lutherverlag, 2007).

⁹ See Antti Taipo Laine, *Ecumenical Attack against Racism: The Anti-Racist Programme of the World Council of Churches, 1968-1974*, (Turku: Luther-Agricola-Society, 2015); Matti Peipponen, *Ecumenical Action in World Politics. The Creation of the Commission of Churches on International Affairs (CCIA), 1949-1949*, (Luther-Agricola-Society: Jyväskylä, 2012); Juha Merilainen, "‘Whose Dollars, his Religion.’ The WCC, the LWF, and the Reconstruction of European Protestantism in the Early Cold War years, 1945-1948" in: *Communio viatorum*, LIV (2012): 14-24; J. Merilainen, "Die finnischen Orthodoxen ‘zu Diensten der Regierung der Vereinigten Staaten’: Patriarch Athenagoras als Botschafter des Westens 1949" in: *Kirchliche Zeitgeschichte* 23 (2010): 290-303; see also the volume of articles "Christliche Beiträge zur Europäischen Integration–Die politische Rolle der Kirchen" in *Kirchliche Zeitgeschichte* 19 (2006); die Zusammenfassung von Hugh McLeod, Risto Saarinen and Aila Lauha, *North European Churches. From Cold War to Globalisation*, (Tampere: Finnish Church Research Institute, 2006).

¹⁰ For anticommunism as a concept see for example, Norbert Frei and Dominik Rigoll (eds.), *Der Antikommunismus in seiner Epoche. Weltanschauung und Politik in Deutschland, Europa und den USA*, (Göttingen: Wallstein, 2015).

¹¹ See e.g. Hedwig Richter, „Der Protestantismus und das linksrevolutionäre Pathos. Der Ökumenische Rat der Kirchen in Genf im Ost-West-Konflikt in den 1960er und 1970er Jahren“ [Protestantism and left-wing revolutionary pathos. The World Council of Churches in Geneva in the East-West conflict in the 1960s and 1970s], in: *Geschichte und Gesellschaft* 36 (2011): 408-436; Diane Kirby (ed.), *Religion and the Cold War*, (Basingstoke, UK: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003); Martin Greschat, "Ökumenisches Handeln der Kirchen in den Zeiten des Kalten Krieges" [Ecumenical action of the churches during the Cold War], in: *Ökumenische Rundschau* 29 (2000), 7-25.

Pax Christi, about the Anti-Apartheid struggle, and the contribution of churches.¹² The human rights issue in churches was also a topic which found increasing interest among historians. However, the structure, mission, and complex action and discourse levels of the churches and ecumenical organizations are obviously less well understood externally.

With these thoughts in mind, the following remarks provide an overview of the role of churches during the Cold War. Very often, the role of churches will be represented by developments and discussions within the WCC, which can be understood as a sort of role model, because it provided the "bell" for similar developments in the Western and Northern European countries. Three topics were prioritized. First was the dilemma of an ecumenism between the East and West in the early phase of the Cold War during the late 1940s and 1950s, which accompanied the founding of the World Council of Churches in 1948. Second, was the position of the World Council of Churches in the period of detente after the late 1960s. And third, was the issue of political instrumentalization of the World Council of Churches during the Cold War period.

2. The Cold War as a Meta-Story

For them all, the Cold War formed a kind of meta-history, because its implicit antagonism between the West and East, between two different political systems and its various phases also shaped the great debates, controversies, and directional decisions of the churches.¹³ This became clear at the founding meeting of the WCC in August 1948 in Amsterdam. Here, in Section 3, titled "The Disorder of the World," the two keynote speakers,

¹² Siehe z.B. Daniel Gerster, *Friedensdialoge im Kalten Krieg. Eine Geschichte der Katholiken in der Bundesrepublik Deutschland, 1957-1984*, (Frankfurt/New York: Campus, 2012); Sebastian Tripp, *Fromm und politisch. Christliche Anti-Apartheids-Gruppen und die Transformation des westdeutschen Protestantismus*, (Göttingen: Wallstein, 2015).

¹³ For more details see Katharina Kunter, "Christianity, Human Rights, and Socio-Ethical Reorientations," in: Jens Holger Schjørring, Norman A. Hjelm, and Kevin Ward (eds.), *History of Global Christianity*, Vol. 3, 20th Century, (Leiden: Brill, 2018), 127-146; Katharina Kunter, "Global Reach and Global Agenda: The World Council of Churches," in: Stanley D. Brunn (ed.), *The Changing World Religion Map: Sacred Places, Identities, Practices and Politics*, (New York: Springer 2015), 2909-2923 (Chapter 153).

American foreign policy expert, John Forster Dulles, and Czech theologian, Josef Hromádka, embodied the new bipolarity of the world: both represented two diametrically opposed concepts with whom the churches and ecumenism should take in the face of increasing tensions between the East and West.¹⁴ Dulles campaigned for free society and individual human rights and warned the ecumenical movement of communism and its inherent totalitarianism. Hromádka, on the other hand saw the bourgeois, capitalist West as a major cause of nationalism and fascism of the 1930s and the subsequent catastrophe of World War II, and placed all renewal hopes on the new social movements from the East, namely socialism and communism. Which path should the ecumenical movement take? This was also the crucial question for national churches in Western Europe. Following the example of the Swiss theologian Karl Barth, the World Council of Churches in Amsterdam pleaded for a "Third Way," independent of the two superpowers USA and USSR and formulated it as thus:

(...) The Christian church should reject the ideology of both, communism and laissez-faire capitalism, and seek to rid the people of the false idea that these two were the only alternative. Both have made promises that they cannot redeem. (...) It is the responsibility of Christians to seek new creative solutions that will not allow justice and freedom to destroy each other.¹⁵

Whether, indeed, such a "third way" could exist in a bipolar world, remained a fundamental, open question for the World Council of Churches—and for all other "free" churches. In particular, the debates in the World Council of Churches on Human Rights and Religious Freedom in Central and Eastern Europe and peacekeeping in Europe showed that these issues could not be discussed and shaped independently of the concrete political contexts of their church representatives.

¹⁴ Ökumenischer Rat der Kirchen (ed.), *Die Unordnung der Welt und Gottes Heilsplan*, (Tübingen/Stuttgart: Kreuzverlag, 1948).

¹⁵ Ökumenischer Rat der Kirchen (ed.), *Amsterdamer Dokumente. Berichte und Reden auf der Weltkirchenkonferenz in Amsterdam 1948*, (Bethel, 1949), 55f.

3. The Era of Détente

The political climate in Eastern and Western Europe changed with the death of Stalin, the leader of the Soviet state and party in 1953. The long, cruel period of Stalinist persecution and repression came to an end; Stalin's successors, Nikita Sergeyevich Khrushchev and Leonid Brezhnev, promised a new political orientation. The idea of a "peaceful coexistence" between the West and East, and the relaxation and détente became the new foreign policy premise of socialist foreign policy.¹⁶ Its core element was the adoption of the status quo in Europe, so the two superpowers, the USSR and the US, should accept the reality of a divided Europe. At the political level, this has been determined by the multilateral European Security Conferences, attended by 35 states, including the US and Canada. They began in 1973 and later became known as "Conferences on Security and Cooperation in Europe (CSCE)". It concluded with the Helsinki Final Act of 1975 and opened a new, intra-European dynamic.

Against this background, the churches in Europe and ecumenism had to realign themselves. The Helsinki process opened up new opportunities for East-West encounters, which were slow, but in many ways, simpler and less complicated.¹⁷ For the first time in the post-war period, almost all Eastern European churches were able to send delegates to ecumenical meetings abroad. This brought a boost to the international conference ecumenism and at the same time, enabled a stronger professionalization of representative ecumenism. The political slogan, initially introduced by the Soviet Union, about the "peaceful coexistence" of two hostile systems now marked countless meetings, assemblies, and ecumenical conferences. The East-West conflict became the linchpin of new joint activities. Here, church officials, most of whom on the Eastern side were also very loyal to the state, often discussed at a very abstract level about various theological challenges, like secularization or world peace. Controversial issues, like the concrete human rights violations or the everyday reprisals for

¹⁶ See more detailed Katharina Kunter, *Die Kirchen im KSZE-Prozess 1968-1978* [Churches in the Helsinki-Process], (Stuttgart: Kohlhammer, 2000); K. Kunter, "Between Active Opposition and Silent Diplomacy: Churches and Christians in the Helsinki Process," in: *Humanitas*, Vol. 8/2 (2007): 101-119.

¹⁷ See examples and case studies in *ibid.*

Christians in the socialist dictatorships, were usually excluded at this level. However, since the 1970s, it has been accepted that the anticommunist perspective, which was still dominant in most of the Western and ecclesiastical circles in the 1950s and early 1960s, had been gradually abandoned. The concrete reprisals and restrictions suffered by Christians in Eastern Europe fell out of sight in the West. At the same time, détente has brought a perspective of partnership and mutual learning. Those involved in East-West relations on the Protestant side generally took the dialogue very seriously as a concept of peace.¹⁸

Fear of being abused and exploited by the secular political forces of both systems under the pretext of détente motivated the members of the Commission of the Churches on International Affairs (CCI), the department of the United Nations World Council of Churches for External Church Policy, by locating and addressing the European human rights theme of the Conference on Security and Cooperation in a global context. An example of this strategy is the WCC consultation "Human Rights and Christian Responsibility," held in 1973 in St. Pölten, Austria, which set out a catalog of six basic human rights. This approach, widely adopted in ecumenical circles, explicitly sought to go beyond the Western liberal and individual understanding of human rights.¹⁹ The significance of this policy and the simultaneous impact of the Helsinki Final Act were finally expressed at the Fifth Assembly of the World Council of Churches in Nairobi in December 1975. After two preachers from the Russian Orthodox Church, Gleb Yakunin and Lev Regelson, had written to the World Council of Churches in an open letter condemning the violation of religious freedom in the Soviet Union expressed in a public statement from the WCC, the conflict erupted.²⁰ The official church representatives of the Russian Orthodox Church felt attacked and stressed that they

¹⁸ See e.g. Heiko Overmeyer, *Frieden im Spannungsfeld zwischen Theologie und Politik. Die Friedensthematik in den bilateralen Gesprächen von Arnoldshain und Sagorsk*, (Frankfurt a.M.: Lembeck 2005).

¹⁹ See CCIA (ed.), *Human Rights and Christian Responsibility*, (Geneva: WCC Publications, 1975).

²⁰ See Katharina Kunter, "Die Schlussakte von Helsinki und die Diskussion im ÖRK um die Verletzung der Religionsfreiheit in Ost- und Mitteleuropa 1975-1977" [The Final Act of Helsinki and the WCC Discussion on Violations of Religious Freedom in Eastern and Central Europe 1975-1977], in: *Ökumenische Rundschau* 49 (2000): 43-51.

would not support such an opinion and threatened to leave the World Council of Churches. On the other hand, the World Council of Churches faced high pressure from Western media. Especially in the conservative ecclesiastical and political spectrum of Western Europe, the reluctance of the World Council of Churches to condemn human rights violations in the USSR claimed that it tacitly favored or tolerated socialist and communist policies. Although the World Council of Churches was campaigning against racism and apartheid in South Africa,²¹ the allegation was that it remained silent about the human rights violations in the East.

There was no uniform answer to this question, and as it is in a bipolar world, opinions were polarized, too. There was both a more confrontational approach (Glaube in 2. Welt, Keston College, some individuals) and a more dialogically-oriented approach (Leopoldo Nilus and Dwain Epps, two leaders in the CCIA). In the opinion of the latter, it was more important to strengthen the official position of the Russian Orthodox Church, because otherwise the church community could be quickly destroyed, causing more harm than good to those affected.²² Moreover, the CCIA wanted to consider religious freedom only in the context of all human rights and its global implications, and in no case as a separate or primary concern, which could also be accused of Eurocentrism by Third World countries.²³

After the two consultations on the role of the Church in the CSCE process in Montreux in 1976/77, the future foreign policy line of the WCC gradually emerged: public criticism and confrontation with the Russian Orthodox Church and the other churches from

²¹ See the recently published study of Tal Zalmanovich, “‘What is needed is an ecumenical act of solidarity:’ the World Council of Churches, the 1969 Notting Hill Consultation on Racism, and the anti-apartheid struggle,” in: *Safundi. Journal of South African and American Studies*, Vol. 20 (2019); <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/17533171.2019.1558622>

²² See e.g. the letters of Leopoldo Nilus of 13 Feb., 1976 and 7 July, 1976 in: *Archive CCIA/Helsinki-Colloquium-July 1976/Correspondence and Archive of the Commission of Churches for International Affairs* (Geneve)/Helsinki Colloquium Montreux, 24.-28 July, 1976.

²³ In a memorandum Dwain Epps emphasized on 28 May, 1975: “(...) It is indeed incredible how little attention people are giving in Europe, and if I may say so especially in Eastern Europe, to some of the broader world-wide dimensions of the current steps towards Security and Cooperation in Europe. The Third World does not take this as a gift given to them by generous Northerners” (in: *Archiv der CCIA/Helsinki-Colloquium Background Materials pre 1976*). Compare further Ninan Koshy, *Religious Freedom in a Changing World*, (Geneva, 1992).

socialist countries was rejected. This has further hardened the existing fronts. Rather, the churches in Central and Eastern European countries should be given the opportunity to demonstrate their ecumenical capacity for dialogue. The wording of an ecumenical human rights policy of the World Council of Churches based on the universality of the human rights idea had failed. Instead, people spoke in Geneva about how necessary the "globalization" of ecumenical human rights engagement was, emphasizing the interdependence of individual and social human rights.²⁴

4. Limited Scope of Action and Global Dimensions

The developments described here raise the question about how much real space ecumenical actors did have. Not to be forgotten is that the socialist or communist regimes in Central and Eastern Europe were Marxist-Leninist dictatorships, which means every part of society was controlled. In the meantime, much more clearly than in the 1990s, it can be shown how much church representatives from socialist member churches followed political instructions on the ecumenical stage and regarded the platform of the World Council of Churches as a forum for profiling socialist foreign policy. Only very rarely, were they able to act without ecumenical supervision and guidance at the ecumenical meetings or to make ecumenical contacts. This particularly applies to the representatives of the Orthodox churches from the former communist countries. Only recently, Patriarch Filaret, the head of the Ukrainian Orthodox Church, declared that all the hierarchs of the Russian Orthodox Church had worked with the KGB.²⁵ Something similar was shown by Momchil Metodiev in his research of the Bulgarian Orthodox Church based on extensive archival study.²⁶

²⁴ More detailed and with references Katharina Kunter, "Christianity, Human Rights, and Socio-Ethical Reorientations," in: Schjörring, Hjelm, and Ward (eds.), *History of Global Christianity*, 127-146.

²⁵ See e.g. interview: <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-ukraine-church/once-an-outcast-ukrainian-patriarch-ready-to-lead-church-split-from-russia-idUSKCN1M82CR>

²⁶ Momchil Metodiev, *Between Faith and Compromise. The Orthodox Church and the Communist State in Bulgaria*, (Sofia: Ciela Publishers, 2010); see also Lucian N. Leustean (ed), *Eastern Christianity and the Cold War 1945-1991*, (New York: Routledge, 2010).

However, the close integration of Eastern churches with the state and intelligence agencies alone is not enough to explain the Eastern European policy of the World Council of Churches and its public silence on the Soviet Union's human rights policy since the 1960s. In fact, did not Western intellectual left-wing intellectual circles simply embark on a fashionable "socialism" and closed their eyes—either naïvely or ideologically motivated—to the repressive living conditions of Christianity in Central and Eastern Europe? The thesis presented by the German historian Hedwig Richter that this fading out is the result of a new legitimization myth of "revolution" and "change" established in the wake of the crisis, is convincing only to a limited extent. Richter takes the secularization of Western societies as the starting point of her argumentation.²⁷ However, the voices that were striving for democratic socialism, for a revolutionary task of the church, and proclaiming liberation theology and the "Option for the Poor" came from countries of the global South, which did not know about the development of Western secularization. To the contrary, the protagonists of the "Third World" did not know about the crisis of church and religion, causing a loss of legitimacy, and therefore needed to search for a new narrative, as Richter was arguing.

This insight raises questions as to how far the Cold War has historically been captured in historical ecumenical historiography. Most of the work, quite legitimate, emphasizes above all, the dichotomy between the West and East from a European perspective. Nonetheless, there are also ideas that make it difficult to classify the history of the churches into the fundamentals of international history. This includes, for example, the image that since the 1960s, the East-West conflict in the ecumenical agenda has been replaced by the North-South conflict, or the view that the Cold War was merely a Northern conflict. Shifting emphasis to the churches of the South and to the issue of development inevitably lead to the loss relevance in ecumenism. But this explanation also falls short.

²⁷ See Katharina Kunter and Annegreth Schilling (eds.), *Globalisierung der Kirchen. Der Ökumenische Rat der Kirchen und die Entdeckung der "Dritten Welt" in den 1960er und 1970er Jahren* [Globalization of the churches. The World Council of Churches and the discovery of the "Third World" in the 1960s and 1970s] (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2014) (with English summary and English language contributions).

The Cold War has been a catalyst for almost all wars and warlike conflicts in the Third World (such as the Korean War, wars in Indo-China, Vietnam, Angola, Congo, the Suez conflict, etc.) as well as in Latin America. Among other factors, such as decolonization, the emergence of national movements, historically caused ethnic tensions or local power rivalries, and the concept and image of a "Third World" that could establish itself neutrally and independently of the First and Second Worlds, was directly rooted in the ideological system of competition between the Soviet Union and the USA. Similar to the development in the UN, wherein since the 1960s, the movement of the non-aligned was attracting increasing attention, ecclesiastical representatives from the "Third World" in Africa, Asia or Latin America formed a politically neutral, but anti-colonial platform within the World Council of Churches. And this happened while in their home countries in Asia or Africa, Americans or Soviets were equally struggling for political, economic, and military influence. Thus, during the long 1960s, new alliances emerged between ecclesiastical representatives of the so-called First, Second and Third World, and with them, new theological and political emphases, not primarily oriented towards Europe, in regard to such issues as the understanding of justice or socialism. On one hand, since the 1970s, this has led to the replacement of traditional anti-communist arguments in the World Council of Churches. On the other hand, at the same time, the ecumenical debates about socialism or communism were correspondingly "de-Europeanized" or "de-westernized."²⁸

5. Theological Paradigm Shift in the World Council of Churches

At its inaugural meeting in Amsterdam in 1948, the World Council of Churches adopted the guiding principle of the "responsible society." In this way, it defined an essential goal for the ecumenical movement that its members should work for a democratic, just, and social society based on the individual responsibility of the individual Christian. However, this

²⁸ Ibid.

concept has been increasingly challenged since the 1960s. A turning point was marked by the World Conference on Church and Society in Geneva in 1966, which was chaired by the World Council of Churches.

Representatives of Third World churches criticized the stability and orderly concept of a "responsible society" as a "Western" concept. They stated that due to the dramatic social and political changes in the decolonization processes, ecumenism must seek new ways in which the churches could participate in the revolutionary changes taking place in their countries.²⁹ For example, issues such as development, humanization, human rights, racism, liberation, and solidarity with the poor have become the new agenda of the World Council of Churches. The 1968 plenary session in Uppsala set the course for anchoring these issues in the programmatic work and structure of the WCC. With the growing number of "Third World" representatives, the debates of the East-West block confrontation began to dissipate in the 1970s and have now been discussed globally on an ecumenical scale. The World Council of Churches adopted new forms of action, e.g., the relief efforts in the so-called Biafra conflict, the program to combat racism or the literacy programs led by Paulo Freire. Another focal point of this ecumenical politicization process, for example, was the establishment of a church development service; at the World Mission Conference in Bangkok in 1972-73, neo-colonialism of Western Christianity was severely attacked.

The programmatic work of the World Council of Churches and ecumenical theology had undergone a profound transformation process in the 1960s and 1970s. Unlike the initial phase of the ecumenical movement of the 1920s, when the two ecumenical movements, Faith and Order, and Life and Work (the Practical Christian Movement) each stood for separate realms of theology and Christian social commitment, now the churches came to a mixture of these two areas in the Ecumenical Council.

²⁹ Ibid.

This led to conflicts: was one "neglecting" the actual basis of life of the church, the divine relationship, which is the 'vertical,' over the 'horizontal' dimensions of ecclesiastical world responsibility?³⁰ This debate was held at the Faith and Order Conference in Leuven in 1971 represented by the Russian Orthodox theologian, John Meyendorff and the Latin American Reformed theologian, José Míguez Bonino. The criticism of Meyendorff's lecture by Míguez Bonino was unmistakable: do not retreat into theologizing; only by putting oneself in the conflicts of the world could the churches be united—and thereby also unite humanity. This presupposes a theology "from below," i.e., a theology from the perspective of the cross. In the period that followed, ecumenical theology underwent a paradigm shift that was increasingly oriented towards a church of the poor and Latin American liberation theology. This meant the sometimes radically forced farewell to the hitherto dominant Anglo-Saxon-liberal interpretation of human rights in the World Council of Churches. It has been replaced by discussions and debates on the second generation of human rights, social human rights and, in its context, social justice. This reorientation was mainly due to three factors: a) the parallel discussions and discourses in the various UN agencies (the World Council of Churches had its offices in Geneva in close proximity to the Geneva-based UN sub-organizations; there are numerous institutional and personal collaborations), b) the increasing representation of churches of the so-called "Third World" and the vehemently expressed primacy of "social justice" associated with decolonization, and c) the rise of committed (and quite partially state-compliant) GDR and Eastern Bloc representatives, who made themselves strong in the political discussion for the social human rights and thereby met with much sympathy.

³⁰ See more detailed Odair Pedroso Mateus, "José Míguez Bonino and the Struggle for Global Christian Unity in the 1970s," in: Kunter and /Schilling (eds), *Globalisierung*, 237-254.

Conclusion

The developments briefly outlined here confirm the initially stated thesis that the Cold War can be considered a meta-narrative of the World Council of Churches. Political bipolarity was a staple that gave ecumenism an existential meaning, with its possibilities of it beginning between the East and West, and ending in a new bipolarity between North and South. The Christian conviction that political borders are not the end of the Christian community, on the one hand, gave meaning and enabled ecumenical fellowship and friendship. But at the same time, it was also preventing and paralyzing dynamic processes. The preservation of the status quo, and the promoting of "peace" in Europe was given more prominence by the World Council of Churches than support for the destabilizing Christian dissidents or Christian freedom and civil rights movements in Central and Eastern Europe.

Thereby, as we can conclude from the above analysis, it is oversimplified to base these decisions on a dominant, left-leaning anticommunism in the ecumenical movement. In such a political security system, which accepted bipolarity as the frame and norm, forced the life and engagement of the churches and ecumene to be incorporated into the ideological framework of the conflict between systems. Only in a few instances could this trend be interrupted. Therefore, it is not an accident that people, like the Netherlands' Laurens Hogebrink or the Institute of Faith in the Second World (*Institut Glauben in der 2. Welt*) in Switzerland belong to those who were able to more sharply discern and argue independently because they came from countries that stood less prominently in the target zone of the Cold War. As the political antagonism of the engagement of the World Council of Church became reduced, there has been a concurrent increase of the culture of debate and the international relevance of the WCC. De-colonization, which took place in the 1950s, brought about a louder voice of the representatives of the churches of the "Third World" which helped clarify the global dimensions of the Cold War. It showed at the same time, that there could be no neutral or

bloc-free voices in a bipolar world. Hence a “Third Way” was impossible for the ecumenical movement.