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WCC'S STATEMENTS ON THE WAR IN UKRAINE

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Introduction

This article is based on a course from the Faculty of Theology at the University of Helsinki about “Church Cooperation and the Ecumenical Movement,” taught by Professor Risto Saarinen and Professor Katharina Kunter. We studied a video of the Business Plenary Session 6 and a statement related to the 11th General Assembly of the World Council of Churches (WCC).¹ The theme of the assembly was, “The Love of Christ Moves the World to Reconciliation and Unity.”² In the video and statement, the WCC takes a stance on the war in Ukraine. In this article, I have examined the video and statement considering the course material and historical perspectives. My intention is to identify possible strengths and weaknesses in the video and text. The historical context of the World Council of Churches precedes my critical analysis of the content, flow of the video, and report. Finally, I present my own perspective based on these findings.

Introduction and Historical Overview

The Second World War brought Christians committed to the ecumenical movement closer together than the First World War. This ultimately led to the establishment of the World Council of Churches (WCC) in 1948 as a response to the Second World War. Today, churches around the world struggle to find a position on the war in Ukraine. The World Council of Churches (WCC) underwent significant changes during the “long 60s” (from the late 1960s to the early 1980s) due to globalization, decolonization, and the Cold War. The WCC interacted with its local member churches and, indirectly, congregations and local communities. New transnational political and moral discussions formed as a result. The challenges faced by the WCC since its origins

¹ WCC 11th Assembly - Business Plenary 6 (2022). Loader: *World Council of Churches*.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=US8T3v35844> (Watched 11.5.2023)

² <https://www.oikoumene.org/about-the-wcc/organizational-structure/assembly>

include the growth of pluralism, secularization, and the loss of Christian tradition and piety in Europe and North America.³

It is necessary to consider the history of the World Council of Churches and its attitude towards war in previous years. According to a report created in 1948, churches testified to all of humanity that the world is in God's hands. War was said to be a result of ignoring God, but it was also stated that war is not necessary if humans turn to God in repentance and obey God's law.⁴ The report also emphasized the relationship between humans and God, basic human rights, equality, and the irrationality of modern warfare as it involves various highly destructive weapons, including atomic.⁵

From the 1960s to the early 1980s, the World Council of Churches (WCC) faced two challenges: 1) it had to confront pluralism, the growing influence of secularization and media, and the loss of Christian tradition and piety in Europe and partly in North America, and 2) the growing number of "Third World" churches led to a change in the WCC's self-image. New and independent Christian churches originating in African and Asian countries had joined the WCC since 1961. They demanded the same rights in the WCC as the old colonial churches, which were often still linked to Western missionary churches.⁶

The year 1968 was also a turning point for the WCC. The 4th General Assembly was held in Uppsala, Sweden, from July 4 to 19, 1968, under the theme "Behold, I make all things new." Intended keynote speaker, Martin Luther King, was assassinated in April before the Assembly could meet. The WCC launched a program to combat racism; Assembly condemned racism and also took a stand on political conflicts such as the Biafran War and the Vietnam War. The Assembly was also a turning point in that it was the first time it considered ecumenism from the perspective of the "Third World."⁷

In 1972, a new General Secretary, Philip Potter, was elected. Potter's presence was considered a symbol; namely, that equality of the Third World churches had been achieved. Finally, the year 1975 marked the end of the long 1960s. Firstly, there was a worldwide commitment to globalization in the Protestant world. A new boundary line emerged during this time: Protestants' ecumenical commitment to human rights should contribute to the dismantling of unjust social structures. There was a conscious refocusing of efforts toward a better and fairer world, no longer just on individual rights. Secondly, there

³ Kunter, 2023 and Kunter, 2018.

⁴ The Church and the International Disorder 1948, 88.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Kunter, 2023 and Kunter, 2018a.

⁷ Ibid..

was Christian dissident engagement for human and civil rights in communist Central and Eastern Europe.⁸ After this overview, it is worth examining the more recent discussion regarding the war in Ukraine and the statements that the WCC has made regarding the matter.

WCC's Statements on Ukraine in the Video and Final Report

The World Council of Churches (WCC) gathered in Karlsruhe, Germany, for its 11th Assembly to discuss various themes. One of the themes concerned the war in Ukraine. The topic is interesting and important, not the least because the leadership of the Russian Orthodox Church has offered religious justifications for the warfare to Vladimir Putin's administration.⁹

Generally, the given statement on behalf of the WCC is quite diplomatic. It highlights the destruction, casualties, and refugee crisis faced by Ukraine, while also raising possible cases of war crimes that have been highlighted in the media. Russia is referred to as the aggressor in the video.¹⁰ The video also emphasizes the love of Christ¹¹ and various biblical passages. The statement given by the WCC also calls for respect regarding the principles of international humanitarian law. It furthermore affirms the declaration of the Central Committee that war is contrary to the nature of God and the will of humanity.¹² According to the statement, war is also contrary to Christian and ecumenical basic principles, which is why the World Council of Churches rejects all misuse of religious language and authorizations to justify armed attacks and hatred through it.¹³ In its comments, the WCC has previously prevented the use of religious language as a basis for war. In their 1948 report, for example, they stated that it is important that churches do not allow military conflicts to use their spiritual and moral resources for ideology or for something they do not fully agree with. Instead, churches should teach the duty of love and prayer towards the enemy in promotion of peaceful change and pursuit of justice.¹⁴ Very similar ideas to the previous comments are also raised in the WCC's final text on the discussion, which mentions that the WCC has rejected the use of religious language and authority to justify armed attacks and hatred. At the same time, all parties are called upon to

⁸ Kunter, 2023 and Kunter, 2018a and 2018b.

⁹ Juusela, 2022.

¹⁰ WCC video minute 57:47.

¹¹ WCC video minute 57:04.

¹² WCC video minute 1:00.

¹³ WCC video minute 1:01.

¹⁴ The Church and the International Disorder 1948, 90.

withdraw and refrain from military action near the Zaporizhzhia nuclear power plant in Ukraine.¹⁵ Another very similar message was likewise conveyed in the WCC's original 1948 report, which stated that war is contrary to the teachings and example of Jesus Christ. According to the report, warfare in the current international life is a sin against God and a degradation of humanity. The use of modern weapons, such as atomic weapons, leads to extensive and uncontrolled destruction.¹⁶ In addition, the Refugee Convention established in 1951 is also mentioned and encouraged to be followed.¹⁷ The themes that have been raised have also been highlighted in recent statements from the World Council of Churches, emphasizing the role of God in promoting peace and justice in the world.¹⁸

Both the video and the final text emphasize the impact of war-induced displacement and its significance. The text highlights the importance of promoting equality, eliminating discrimination and inequality, and offering safe and accessible routes for people's mobility. Additionally, it is necessary to find solutions to the root causes of displacement; these roots include violent conflicts, climate crisis, extreme poverty, and lack of development, together.¹⁹ On the other hand, fighting against racism has been among WCC's objectives in the past. For instance, WCC's 1948 report declares that it opposes aggressive imperialism - political, economic, or cultural - through which a nation seeks to use other nations or people for its own purposes. At the same time, they protest against the exploitation of non-self-governing territories for selfish purposes, the obstruction of their progress towards self-government, and discrimination or segregation based on race or color.²⁰

It is also interesting to note the discussion that took place in the video presented by WCC immediately after the statement. Specifically, a member of the delegation of the Moscow Patriarchate, Archimandrite Filaret, criticized the WCC statement sharply with his own comment. He compared the document to the level of statements made by McDonald's or Starbucks. Filaret explained that the document does not adequately examine what is happening in Ukraine and does not produce at least one result.²¹ He also wondered why the statement expressed a desire to find peace while simultaneously offering

¹⁵ Statement on Ukraine, p. 2.

¹⁶ The Church and the International Disorder 1948, 89.

¹⁷ Wcc Video Minute 1:15.

¹⁸ Saarinen, 2008, 3.

¹⁹ Ukrainian statement, p. 3.

²⁰ The Church and the International Disorder 1948, 91.

²¹ WCC video minute 1:24–25.

criticism.²² However, his comment received immediate pushback. Firstly, it is understood that the document can still be improved upon; suggestions for improvement are welcome and can be submitted.²³ Right after that, Alexandra Kovalenko, who said she is from the Ukrainian Orthodox Church, took the floor.²⁴ She expressed sorrow that Filaret compared the bloodshed of Ukrainians to McDonald's and Starbucks public statements.²⁵

Earlier in the video, we also heard an opening discussion where Roman Sigov, a member of the Ukrainian Orthodox Church's observer delegation, spoke on behalf of Ukrainians. Sigov noted that the Ukrainians cannot be satisfied with the statement, and they would have wanted much clearer language that clearly indicated Russia's role as an aggressor and Ukraine's role as a victim.²⁶ Finnish churches also share this view, as they hoped for a stronger statement from the World Council of Churches with regard to Russian aggression upon Ukraine.²⁷ Sigov also pointed out that the Russian Orthodox Church not only participated in the drafting of the document but also had the largest number of representatives on the Central Committee and at the meeting. He also says he knows of at least fourteen Russian bishops who support the war. This is unacceptable.²⁸

There has been discussion of whether the Russian Orthodox Church should be expelled from the WCC in support of the war. This has not been considered a realistic idea. It is important, however, that churches and the WCC seek to influence the Russian Orthodox Church through their own actions and encourage it to stop supporting Russia's aggression.²⁹ WCC General Secretary Ioan Sauca, a Romanian Orthodox priest, announced at the opening press conference that the Central Committee had rejected critics' goal of expelling Russia from the WCC. He described the WCC as a free space for dialogue. According to Sauca, their gatherings are not based on their agreement with each other but rather because they have disagreement.³⁰

Personal Reflection

It is interesting in itself that the Russian Orthodox Church was ever been accepted as part of the World Council of Churches. Their goal, however, has been to fight

²² WCC video minute 1:26.

²³ WCC video minute 1:27.

²⁴ WCC video minute 1:28.

²⁵ WCC video minute 1:29.

²⁶ WCC video minute 1:17.

²⁷ Juusela, 2022.

²⁸ WCC video minute 1:18.

²⁹ Juusela, 2022.

³⁰ Jenkins, 2022.

against racism and defend human rights. If we consider the criteria by which the churches and communities of the WCC agree, it would be said that members unite under the belief in the following: that the Lord Jesus is God and Savior, as communicated by the Bible, and they are willing to fulfill their calling together in the honor of one God, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Upon this contingency are such churches and communities accepted as members of the ecumenical organization. With this understanding, we might accept the Russian Orthodox Church as a member of the WCC.³¹ Generally speaking, Russia brings to mind strong association with religiosity and, to some extent, fundamentalism. However, several critics have repeatedly expressed their hope for Russia to be removed from the World Council of Churches. As mentioned earlier, this attempt has been rejected, among other things, by citing that the goal of the meetings is not that all participants would agree on everything. I understand in practice what is meant here; but still, I find it somewhat dangerous that there would be people in leadership who believe that Russia's war of aggression would be justified. WCC specifically denies the use of religious language as part of justifying war in its statement, but Russia has done it abundantly.

Looking at the WCC website, I noticed that they urgently call for peace for the Ukrainian people on their website. As made clear earlier, they simultaneously state that the people of God and members of the ecumenical community are on both sides of the current confrontation. They emphasize that their God is the God of peace, not the God of war and bloodshed; while they recognize the confrontation prevailing even among members of the ecumenical community, they also hope for peace and the end of the war.³² In addition, the website tells that the WCC delegation visited Ukraine in August 2022. The aim of the visit was to get an overview of the current situation in Ukraine's religious field and to hold several official meetings with representatives of Ukrainian churches and others.³³ It is somewhat challenging for me to reflect on this whole issue. In a way, it is probably good that those who accept war are also part of the ecumenical community so that they can discuss the conflict and explain why God is rather the God of peace than the God of war and bloodshed. It would be great if such continuous dialogue and communication between different churches would help to ease possible tensions and promote peace and cooperation between different churches. As far as I understand, the WCC's membership is based on the voluntary participation of churches, so the WCC does not have the power to force or expel

³¹ Saarinen, 2023.

³² Sauca, 2022.

³³ World Council of Churches, 2023.

its members. In a way, I also understand the critics' point of view, but at the same time, the issue is not as simple as it may seem.

I believe it is very important for the WCC to take a definitive stance on the war. Firstly, it is good to keep in mind Putin's use of religious rhetoric and historical interpretation to defend his initiated war against Ukraine. He presents himself as a true defender of Christianity and emphasizes the significance of Ukraine as the birthplace of Russian Orthodoxy. Putin's and Moscow Patriarch Kirill's rhetoric also emphasizes traditional family values and a right-wing worldview. Resistance to other religions, including anti-Semitic and Islamophobic rhetoric, is used as justification for the attack. In the West, war and violence are no longer generally seen as Christian, but in the Russian Orthodox Church, the view is different.³⁴ Considering this, it is of utmost importance that the WCC specifically takes a stance on this issue and seeks to deny the use of religious rhetoric in justifying the war in its own statements.

³⁴ Niskanen, 2022.

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