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Ukraine of the World Council of Churches 2022**

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ANALYSIS OF THE CONTRIBUTIONS TO THE STATEMENT ON THE WAR IN UKRAINE AT THE 11th ASSEMBLY OF THE WORLD COUNCIL OF CHURCHES

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Abstract

This essay is structured around a review and analysis of the statement "War in Ukraine, Peace and Justice in the European Region"¹ discussed at the 11th General Assembly of the World Council of Churches in Karlsruhe, Germany in 2022 in Business Session 6.² The material for the essay includes both the written statement and the related discussion that took place at the discussion on the topic. The intention is to draw on both the statement and the discussion to highlight strong and useful points, but also to bring to the surface the weaker or somewhat flawed arguments that have emerged on the subject.

Introduction

The overarching theme of the assembly has been Christ's love as a transformer of the world in a more united and reconciliatory direction, with the aim of awakening participants to a real sense of fellowship and concern for the less fortunate.³ The divisive and emotive dialogue seemed to be a very subjective experience for many of those present--it is, after all, a very sensitive subject. This essay follows the debate in chronological order, while drawing on the arguments presented in the statement. It also draws on the general ecumenical and World Council of Churches' debate on the history and development of the churches. This analysis provides an overall picture of the extent to which the representatives of Christian churches in different countries feel that the theme of the meeting and the statement has been realized, and whether the agenda "War is not God's will," which the World Council of Churches advocated from the outset, is also being realized in current debates.

¹ Video of Plenary Business Session 6 at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=US8T3v35844>, quoted in the following as WCC 11th Assembly – Business Plenary 6.

² <https://www.oikoumene.org/sites/default/files/2022-10/ADOPTED-PIC01.1rev-War%20in-Ukraine-Peace-and-Justice-in-the-European-Region.pdf>, quoted in the following as WCC doc. No. PIC 01.1 rev, 1, 2022.

³ WCC doc. No. PIC 01.1 rev, 1, 2022.

Views of Church Representatives

The discussion about the draft statement on the war in Ukraine started with a contribution from the Church of Norway, who made a very important point: that the statement does not contain a sufficiently large distinction between the Russian administration and the citizens, coming across as if the war of aggression started by Russia was also the will of the Russian citizens.⁴ Recent news and media coverage has made it clear that Russians are very divided on the war in Ukraine, if they have any chance at all to learn enough about the real reasons for the war.

In the video, the representative of the Church of Norway also stresses that, even though the fighting itself is taking place in another country, Russian citizens are also suffering a great deal because of the decisions taken by the government of that country.⁵ This is reflected, for example, in the abuse and discrimination on the basis of nationality suffered by Russian citizens around the world. This comment is valid and the argument would be a very important addition to the statement. In this war, as in other wars and crises around the world, it would also be important to distinguish the role of innocent citizens of the “aggressor” side, as they are often stigmatized on the basis of unjust decisions by that state.

A similar line was taken by a representative of the Czech Evangelical Church. In general, he appreciated the document, but wished to highlight in particular the citizens of Russia and Belarus who are persecuted for their anti-war views. He considers these peacemakers of special importance for hope and reconciliation.⁶ The legitimacy of this view is important, because to criticise one's own citizenship and oppose one's own country is a very courageous and selfless act. The later final written statement also calls for the humane treatment and protection of civilians and prisoners of war.⁷ However, this should also be clarified for both sides, meaning that this document should include a statement of the struggle on the "other" side (Russian civilians and citizens) as it includes a statement of Ukrainians.

The Orthodox Church in Ukraine began its contribution to the discussion by thanking the Assembly for the gift of joining with those present in condemning the ongoing war.⁸ This view was also underlined in the early stages of the written opinion, where the Committee clearly states its condemnation of the illegal and unjustified war.⁹ However, the Ukrainian

⁴ WCC 11th Assembly – Business Plenary 6, 1:17:11

⁵ WCC 11th Assembly – Business Plenary 6, 1:17:30

⁶ WCC 11th Assembly – Business Plenary 6, 1:20:22-1:21:19

⁷ WCC doc. No. PIC 01.1 rev, 2022, 1

⁸ WCC 11th Assembly – Business Plenary 6, 1:20:22

⁹ WCC doc. No. PIC 01.1 rev, 2022, 1

speaker expressed very clearly his pain that the statement treats both the aggressor and the victim in the same way.¹⁰ My personal observation was very similar. Even at the outset, I was a little confused as to whether this was a statement on the war in Ukraine or a general overview of the churches' perception of the war. As such, I can well understand the frustration that the statement does little to position itself specifically in support of the Ukrainians.

The representative of the Orthodox Church in Ukraine did not think it is justified that a document addressing the war in Ukraine is, on the one hand, very neutral towards the aggressor's position and, on the other hand, weakens the voice of the Ukrainians. The statement was also influenced by the involvement of representatives of the Russian Orthodox Church, which is reflected among those present at the meeting, as some of them have expressed their support for Russia in the war, and have also blatantly and publicly expressed their contempt for Ukrainians.¹¹ It seems absurd that a speech at the Assembly can be made by people of high standing who have behaved in a manner quite contrary to what the theme of the meeting or Christianity in general requires, and yet they have the opportunity to play such a major role in this meeting and in this statement.

The representative of the Protestant Church in the Netherlands raised the rhetorical idea of the roots of the war, namely the confrontation between East and West--the clash of two cultures, two systems of values and citizenship. In this context, it is important that, in addition to engaging in an intensive debate, the representatives at the conference should highlight the fact that all are united in refusing to see each other as enemies.¹² The statement presented at the meeting also stresses the importance of intensive ecumenical dialogue in order to reach a common understanding and develop a common vision.¹³ The East-West polemic is evident in the ecclesiastical context from early history. Even if the main cause of the war is not a conflict between the churches, it is worth noting the dilemma of such a long-standing confrontation and how its long history affects this situation as well. The written statement also underlines the view that religion should not be used to justify war at all.¹⁴ While it is difficult to completely eradicate the role of religion from human conflict in the world, it is striking how blatantly religiosity plays a strong role in the war between Russia and Ukraine.¹⁵ Yet the division and

¹⁰ WCC 11th Assembly – Business Plenary 6, 1:18:05-1:18:10

¹¹ WCC 11th Assembly – Business Plenary 6, 1:19:05

¹² WCC 11th Assembly – Business Plenary 6, 1:21:46

¹³ WCC doc. No. PIC 01.1 rev, 2022, 2

¹⁴ WCC doc. No. PIC 01.1 rev, 2022, 2

¹⁵ Niskanen 2022, Teologisen tiedekunnan artikkeli uutiskirjeessä.

conflicts between the churches in Europe have already been visible since, for example, the Cold War, so we are not entirely new to the issue today.¹⁶

Perhaps the most extraordinary part of the debate was the speech by a representative of the Russian Orthodox Church, who began with a rather passive-aggressive and defiant comment that it is impossible for them to respond to all the accusations against them in just one minute.¹⁷ After this speech, it came to my attention that the one-minute timetable was not adhered to in general, but especially during this speech. My own view is that the speeches up until this were not so much about direct accusations, but rather about relevant points relating to the dominance and influence of the Russian Orthodox Church, both in the war and at the meeting and in the drafting of the statement. If there is anything to be blamed in the speeches at this meeting, it is revealed in the speech of this Church's representative. Criticism by the Russian Orthodox Church has mainly focused on the fact that the statement is more a general view about wars than a statement on behalf of the victims of the war. The representative of the ROC did not share the view of the statement being too general and seems to feel that the statement has not been at all divisive.¹⁸ One of the ROC representatives compared the statement in an incorrect and disparaging way with fast food brands. Furthermore, the representative pointed out that the statement does not highlight other parties involved in the war besides Russia, and believes their position to reflect a double standard.¹⁹ This argument is valid in itself, albeit rather weak. Not many people assume that there are other parties directly involved in the war besides the two sides. However, since this war is quite complicated, it does affect the wider world. The situation may worsen with time until it "explodes." This war has already been preceded by years of discussion, debate and hostile interaction between the various parties. At this stage, however, it would be better to focus on the essentials, i.e. the current situation and the related activities and discussions. Personally, I feel that the statement could have highlighted the plight of the Ukrainians and suffering caused by the war, and could have called for concrete support for those who suffer, instead of looking for individual culprits in the brutal war that is currently taking place.

The representative of the Russian Orthodox Church wisely stated that blame is ultimately tantamount to nothing.²⁰ Referring to this speech, its underlying purpose does not seem to be to give general gentle advice, but rather to avoid and discourage a radical stand

¹⁶ Kunter 2023, lecture: "Ecumenical Movement Postwar and Cold War"

¹⁷ WCC 11th Assembly – Business Plenary 6, 1:23:34

¹⁸ WCC 11th Assembly – Business Plenary 6, 1:23:47

¹⁹ WCC 11th Assembly – Business Plenary 6, 1:24:25-1:25:30

²⁰ WCC 11th Assembly – Business Plenary 6, 1:26:29

against Russia. The Russian representative's overall view of the statement remains very vague, yet it seemed very different from what other previous representatives have said.

Next, a young woman from the Ukrainian Church Council spoke out. She questioned the meaning of Jesus' proclamation of Christians being as the salt of the earth if the churches are not willing to raise their voices when violence and injustice flourish. The written statement stressed the view that this war is contrary to both the nature and will of God, as well as to Christian and ecumenical principles.²¹ This view has been a recurrent theme since 1948, when the World Council of Churches was founded and its first meeting was celebrated.²² The young Ukrainian representative took a particular stand on the role of the Russian Orthodox Church and was outraged that an earlier speech at the meeting compared the suffering Ukrainian people to fast food brands.²³ This very short statement reached the heart of the matter: the Christian churches should, above all, be united. The speaker also aptly pointed out that the contemptuous comments heard above are not at all acceptable on an occasion such as this. It was significant that this speech was also applauded by those present at the meeting.

Finally, there was a speech by a representative who had been involved in the drafting of the proposal and who regretted some of the emotive details of the discussion. He explained the shortcomings of the proposed statement by saying that it had not been easy to draw up, and that he was open to changes.²⁴ It is generally clear that the churches are finding it difficult to find their place at the center of the war in Ukraine.²⁵ Divergent views also make it challenging to form a united front, which is why this statement also caused a great deal of emotional upheaval.

Comments on the Statement Outside the Debate

In addition to the comments made during the debate, the statement had also addressed other important issues. Important comments were raised on several occasions in relation to the use of nuclear power, the potential destruction of which, on a large scale and over many generations, should be seriously considered. Also at the heart of the attacks on Ukraine is the Chernobyl nuclear power plant, whose environment and population are particularly at risk from

²¹ WCC doc. No. PIC 01.1 rev, 2022, 2

²² Kunter 2023, lecture: "Ecumenical Movement Postwar and Cold War

²³ WCC 11th Assembly – Business Plenary 6, 1:28:20-1:29:09

²⁴ WCC 11th Assembly – Business Plenary 6, 1:31:30-1:32:26

²⁵ Kunter 2023, lecture: "Ecumenical Movement Postwar and Cold War"

possible attacks. The statement successfully highlights the fact that there is already at least a conscious preparation for the extensive and long-lasting damage that this war will cause.²⁶

Immigration and security issues played a major role for almost the entire length of the statement. Europe's attitude at present, according to the World Council of Churches, does not fully represent the Christian doctrine of love of neighbour and hospitality. The importance of helping refugees is stressed, for example, by the fact that Jesus also spent his whole life fleeing from those who wanted him dead. Immigration is not an alien theme to the Bible nor to Christianity either, but in fact a very central one. The Committee therefore stresses the importance of treating strangers with unconditional love, regardless of their ethnicity, religion or any other similar external factor. The churches also strive to combat racism, which became a common theme at the latest in the late 1960s in Uppsala, where this theme was further explored.²⁷ In addition, Christian communities are urged to focus all their efforts on supporting safe migration policies, so that the transition from one country to another, for example from a war zone, is safe and dignified for every person. Christian volunteering should focus on this kind of work. The statement also rightly draws attention to the fact that it is the poor and disadvantaged who suffer most from the war, as it takes up so much of the state's financial resources that they cannot afford to concentrate them any longer in the same way, for example on health care. The statement concludes: there are never any winners in war.²⁸

Conclusions

The World Council of Churches' assurances of its loving and critical role in the area of aid and security are rather unsatisfactory in the statement,²⁹ because, at least based on the discussions, there was not much concrete evidence of these acts. Of course, it is clear that the declining influence of the churches in social affairs is a contributing factor. Perhaps in such situations it would be better not to jump into too many directions, and to instead concentrate in particular on what is concrete and what is possible by the standards of whichever party. In such a crisis, mere words of consolation may be little more than lax statements.

The statement mentions that it is idolatrous to elevate the rules laid down by the state above the vision of God's reconciliation.³⁰ This kind of position seems a bit "old church" and very abstract in today's world. Of course, in such a complex Christian context, respect for

²⁶ WCC doc. No. PIC 01.1 rev, 2022, 1-3

²⁷ Kunter 2023, lecture: "Ecumenical Movement and Decolonisation"

²⁸ WCC doc. No. PIC 01.1 rev, 2022, 1-3

²⁹ WCC doc. No. PIC 01.1 rev, 2022, 2-3

³⁰ WCC doc. No. PIC 01.1 rev, 2022, 3

tradition is certainly very central. In general, my view of the statement is that it leaves Ukraine's position very weak. I myself was under the impression that the statement was specifically about the war between Ukraine and Russia, but I think the emphasis was more on the general view of warfare regardless of the sides involved. Having watched the debate, I could very much identify with the views of the Ukrainian representatives in particular that their voice should have been heard more clearly. I am also aware that I and many others are certainly looking at this whole issue through a kind of "Ukrainian lens," and that is why important comments on other issues also seem less central.

The World Council of Churches' discussion was, in my opinion, very unproductive. In fact, it seemed to be mainly an opportunity for people to express their opinions, which the President, Metropolitan Nikon of Targoviste, did not seem to appreciate. However, with one exception, the interventions were valuable and impressive, and hopefully corrections will be made. Unfortunately, I do not think that this was the response to the concerns of the people that perhaps most of the Assembly expected it to be.

This is a very sensitive subject regardless of the angle and it is not easy to draw a clear line. It seems that the authors of the statement have worked hard to come up with something that would be at least somewhat helpful to all. But this may be a subject on which it is impossible to formulate something that would address the whole situation. The purpose of this statement seems to me to be more of a potential conversation starter than an official statement of support for those in need. The last speech by the Ukrainian representative was a good example of what the general response to such a crisis could be. Rather than trying to grind together thousands of years of already polemical Christian doctrine, the focus could be on weaving together a common ethical and philanthropic vision to address the tragic war.

The main thrust of the statement dealt with the central objectives of the World Council of Churches and of ecumenism, to which every Christian denomination, regardless of its views, can aspire. The views seek to peacefully engage Christians in fellowship and to highlight those issues that are ecumenically beneficial to all.

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