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HERE WE GO AGAIN? – THE WCC’S STATEMENT ON UKRAINE

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Introduction

The aim of this article is to analyze the statement the World Council of Churches (WCC), made on the war in Ukraine as well as the discussion related to the statement at the WCC’s 11th assembly in 2022. The statement and the discussion of it at the Assembly will also open a wider perspective on ecumenical movements. One perspective is to analyze whether the statement made on Ukraine repeats the problems made in previous ecumenical statements and comments regarding the Second World War (WWII).

A short overview of the statements and its context will be given below in the segment entitled Ecumenical Statements and Comments on War. Then the statements, especially the one made on Ukraine in 2022, will be addressed from few different perspectives. In the subsection “Political, Theological or Both?”, theological as well as political aspects of the statements are described and analyzed. In the following subsection “For the Sake of Diplomacy, Dialogue and Unity,” the diplomatic and dialogical aspects of the statement and ecumenical work as well as problems relating to that kind of approach are addressed. The conclusion includes summaries of the key elements of this article along with additional views on the matter.

Ecumenical Statements and Comments on War

In this subsection a short overview of the statement the WCC made on Ukrainian war in 2022 as well as ecumenical statements and comments on war around the time of WWII is provided. In April 1937 more than 400 representatives from over 120 churches took part in *Life and Work* conference in Oxford. They addressed the current question of what kind of

stance should the ecumenical movement take regarding totalitarianism in Europe. They decided to take an unpolitical position.¹

A similar approach continued to be taken at the First Assembly of the WCC in 1948.² The assembly was held in Amsterdam and formed a statement relating to war and the themes of WWII. The views on the matter were highly divided within the WCC. There were for example members who supported Hitler as well as members from all sides of the oncoming Cold War. The approach was to try to find a middle ground, a “third way”; not taking sides nor saying anything political but rather protecting unity and issuing spiritual statements. This approach was a disappointment to many, and similar reactions can be seen now as well.³

In 2022, from August 31 until September 8, the WCC held its 11th Assembly in Karlsruhe, Germany. Earlier that year Russia attacked Ukraine and the invasion is still ongoing. The assembly issued a statement called *War in Ukraine, Peace and Justice in the European Region*. In June, before the assembly, the Central Committee of the WCC had condemned the war as illegal and unjustifiable. The statement made in the name of the Assembly follows the one made by the Central Committee.⁴ As a whole the statement has nevertheless been seen as inadequate by several theologians.⁵ What follows addresses the different views and comments relating to the statement as well as analyzes its content.

Political, Theological, or Both?

This part of the article explores the question of whether the ecumenical statements made by the WCC on war are theological, political, or both. The focus is on the statement made by the WCC in 2022, but older statements and comments made around the WWII will be used to reflect on some of the context as well as to provide a wider perspective.

Statements made by churches inherently have theological aspects in them. The statement made in 2022 for example uses descriptions like “as Christians—we”⁶ It also uses other theological argumentation such as “war is incompatible with God’s very nature and will for humanity” as well as being against “fundamental Christian and ecumenical principles.”⁷

¹ Kunter, 2022b.

² The WCC was founded in 1948. The decision made in Oxford in 1937 to combine the two ecumenical movements, Faith and Order with Life and Work, was fundamental to this. WWII postponed the founding of the WCC to 1948. Kunter 2022b.

³ Juusela, 2022; Kunter, 2019, 33; Kunter, 2022b; Kunter & Ueberschär, 2022; World Council of Churches 1948, 89–90, 102.

⁴ WCC 2022, 1–3.

⁵ See for example Kunter & Ueberschär, 2023, 60–62; WCC video.

⁶ WCC, 2022, 1.

⁷ WCC, 2022, 2.

But are those theological aspects also political or politically motivated? And does it represent a problem if they are? These themes were addressed in the discussion the Assembly had on the statement in 2022. The relationship between politics and theology can be, has been, and still is generally diverse in ecumenical context. Theology can be intentionally political or it can be built to support political views, while some want to separate theology from politics.⁸

During the WWII period many ecumenical actors like the WCC concluded that they should stay away from politics; not to take a political stance but only make comments within the spiritual sphere.⁹ Similar inclinations can be seen in the statement as well as the discussion in 2022. For example, a Russian representative expressed that the statement is better than he thought it would be as he had worried it would be more politicized.¹⁰ This indicates an idea that the statement made by the WCC should not be political as well as well as impression that the statement indeed wasn't quite so political.

The views on politics have changed during the history of ecumenical movements. After WWII, decolonialization brought greater acknowledgement of the political aspects and responsibilities of the church and theology.¹¹ The statement made in 2022 as well as the discussion around it also represents this change. Themes outside of the spiritual sphere were addressed. For example, a member of the Ukrainian Orthodox Church stated that churches who do not raise their voices where there is violence and injustice are not the salt of the earth anymore.¹² The statement also describes some responsibilities for the churches to act but it is arguable how strong or radical those positions are. The Assembly for example rejects “any misuse of religious language and authority to justify armed aggression and hatred.”¹³ But the role of the churches is described more as social and psychological than distinctly political. I concluded that the political aspect which got more space in the movement around 1970 is not as visible in the 2022 statement as it could be.

The attitude on the role of politics has changed within the ecumenical context and different approaches are still visible. In my view, theology is never unattached from politics as the life of the people within the church is integrally attached to politics. A representative of the Ukrainian Orthodox Church, for example, pointed out how several Russian bishops

⁸ Kunter, 2019, 37

⁹ Kunter, 2022b

¹⁰ WCC video minute 1:23:15-1:26:55

¹¹ Kunter, 2017, 344–346; Kunter, 2019, 39–41; Kunter, 2022a, 47–53

¹² WCC video minute 1:28:28-1:29:10.

¹³ WCC, 2022, 2.

openly support the war.¹⁴ Through its members the church is part of the politics, and those members might also be part of the politics as official representatives of the church, or as a church itself.

On a theoretical level the official collective stance of an organization or community has tried to separate from the personal level of its members. For example Willem Visser't Hooft, the first General Secretary of the WCC, saw that the church should not be political, but at the same time he helped those fleeing from the Nazis.¹⁵ But as the discussion on the statements made on war and Nazi Germany around WWII have later shown, I would argue that not taking an official and collective stance **is** a political act as well.¹⁶ Therefore the key issue is whether the relationship between politics and theology is acknowledged and intentional or denied and unintentional. For example, in the 11th assembly in 2022 the representative of Russian Orthodox Church seemed to criticize the theological side of the statement on the war in Ukraine as being more or less camouflage to hide “the real situation.”¹⁷ At the same time his own views could easily be criticized as being politically motivated or affected themselves.

I conclude that the statement made by the WCC on war is both theological as well as political. But I question whether all aspects of both of those sides are intentional and in balance. This is addressed below.

For the Sake of Diplomacy, Dialogue and Unity

This subsection of the article sheds some light on the question of diplomatic and dialogical approaches of the statements and the WCC are addressed along with some of the problems diplomatic and dialogical approaches can create. As important values as unity, diplomacy, and dialogue are, they may also entail problematic approaches, especially if the influence of power and authority are dismissed.¹⁸

The unity of churches is a central part and goal of the ecumenical movement. The importance and priority of the unity is visible in the statements made on war. In the 2022 statement the WCC, for example, highlights “the calling and obligation of WCC members to seek unity and together serve the world.”¹⁹ Crises like WWII and the war in Ukraine can challenge that unity. The theme of the 11th assembly in 2022, “Christ’s love moves the world to reconciliation and unity,” ironically highlighted the challenge to take a stance on the war

¹⁴ WCC video minute 1:17:50-1:19:08.

¹⁵ Kunter, 2022b; Zeilstra, 2018, 116, 130–134, 150–152, 167.

¹⁶ Kunter 2019, 33.

¹⁷ WCC video minute 1:23:15-1:26:55.

¹⁸ Kunter, 2022c, 34–35; Kunter & Ueberschär, 2023, 61.

¹⁹ WCC, 2022, 2.

while not compromising unity.²⁰ There were few ways the WCC tried to respond to this challenge.

One of the central ways the WCC tries to hold on to unity while giving a statement are emphasizing dialogue and neutrality as well as being open to everyone. These are performed, for example, by trying to appeal to everyone by giving something to everyone. The war and inhumane actions are, for example, condemned without openly condemning anyone who has made, enabled, or supported those actions. By doing this the WCC aims to maintain the unity, support dialogue and peacebuilding as well as to avoid being too political. Similar approaches were used in the discussion around WWII.²¹ The success of these aims can be justifiably questioned.

Unity relates to dialogue, and in the statement the WCC emphasizes its own responsibility, as well as the responsibility of churches in general, to provide “a platform and safe space for encounter and dialogue”²² to support peace building. Committing “to an intensified dialogue on the issues that divide us”²³ is described as a core purpose of the WCC and the 11th Assembly was described as an opportunity for that dialogue in relation to the war in Ukraine. The success of these aims could be and has been argued. The representative of Ukrainian Orthodox Church, for example, pointed out how they were not part of the process of writing the statement while the Russian Orthodox Church on the other hand had several representatives both writing as well as voting for the statement.²⁴

While trying to remain neutral and giving something to everyone, the WCC seems to end up in a position where it does not really give enough to anyone and by doing that might give even more to those in power. This problem, where trying to make everyone happy leads to making everyone unhappy, can be seen in both Ukrainian and Russian representatives’ comments on the statement. Both for example claimed that “truth” isn’t found in the statement.²⁵

Another example of staying neutral by trying to please everyone is the way in which the WCC uses different words to describe the situation in Ukraine several times. It describes it as war, as Russian invasion, as well as a conflict with at least two more or less equally

²⁰ WCC, 2022, 1.

²¹ Kunter, 2022b.

²² WCC, 2022, 2.

²³ WCC, 2022, 2.

²⁴ WCC video minute 1:17:50-1:19:08; Juusela, 2022. The Orthodox Church of Ukraine isn’t an official member of WCC. In media it is also said that there also wasn’t any official dialogue between Ukraine and Russia provided by the WCC during the Assembly. Kunter & Ueberschär, 2023, 61–62.

²⁵ WCC video minute 1:17:50-1:19:08

responsible sides.²⁶ It also condemns the war and uses theology to justify the war but does not name those who are doing so. It denounces the war and rejects its theological justification but does not take a stance relating to those of its members who support the war on theological grounds.²⁷ A similar approach was seen in statements around WWII where the WCC showed solidarity to those opposing Nazis but did not condemn those members who were supporting Nazis.²⁸

All this relates back to the problem of unity. The WCC commits itself to “hold one another accountable for maintaining the bond of unity in Christ.”²⁹ But what breaks the unity? Is it not already broken when a member of the unity acts against another? Or is it only broken if, for example, the WCC would take a stronger stance against those of its members who have acted against its values and the other?

Conclusion

The statement the WCC made on war in the year 2022 as well as older statements from the period of WWII have been described and analyzed above. Based on the notions presented earlier I conclude that there are strong similarities in these statements. Both lack a strong political stance and visible condemnation of those members who are acting against one another. It was neither obvious nor necessary that the statement made in 2022 would repeat such an approach. The changes that happened since WWII could have given ground for a stronger statement.

The definition and understanding the WCC has on unity and its importance lies behind the repetition of disappointing statements. The protection of unity does not necessarily lead to neutral and unpolitical statements. To the question of what breaks the unity, it is the moment when a member acts against another or if others take a stronger stance against those who act against another. With the former stance the ecumenical movement would be able to hold on to the importance of unity while making stronger and political statements and actions. Unity could be seen as a reason for those stronger political statements and actions. If unity is broken when one side acts belligerently against another and is not willing to change that behavior, excluding those who are breaking the unity could be one way to save the unity. Exclusion would not need to mean permanent nor total exclusion. It could include the aim and work for new inclusion of those excluded and, in that way, restore the wider unity. These kinds of

²⁶ The claim on more or less equal responsibility isn't written out in itself but it's visible on the statements such as “---appeal to all sides in the conflict---”. WCC 2022, 1–2.

²⁷ WCC 2022, 1–2, 4

²⁸ Zeilstra 2018, 150–152.

²⁹ WCC, 2022, 2.

views are and have been used in different theological approaches, including decolonial approaches which have already changed the ecumenical movement once.³⁰ Why not do it also in the case of Russia's invasion on Ukraine?

³⁰ See for example William Cavanaugh's interpretation of excommunication. Cavanaugh, 1999, 176; Cavanaugh, 2014, 390.

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