"Christian World Community and the Cold War"
Projects Statement

Norman A. Hjelm
CHRISTIAN WORLD COMMUNITY AND THE COLD WAR
PROJECT STATEMENT
by Norman A. Hjelm

For the past few years a number of church historians, political scientists, and church leaders have been asking questions about the role of churches and ecumenical organizations during the period from 1945 to 1989/1990 that is commonly referred to as “the Cold War.” Lawrence Freedman of King’s College, London, has described the period as “an undifferentiated chunk of history that stretched across time and space, with a vast cast of characters and occasional moments of drama” and most analytical studies of that chunk of history have looked at it through the lenses of political, ideological, diplomatic, economic, social, and surely military conflict. But do those angles of vision tell the whole story?

It has become increasingly clear to some that the time has surely come for a thoughtful and honest study of the role of the global Christian community in that crucial period of human history. This is, in point of fact, a “missing piece” in our common understanding of our recent past.

To be sure, there is an increasing body of literature that views the Cold War from particular and crucial ecclesial angles: one can refer to the important collection of essays edited by Klaus Koschorke of Munich, *Falling Walls: The Year 1989/90 as a Turning Point in the History of World Christianity*;1 or to the four German volumes published between 2002 and 2007 assessing the role of the churches of Eastern Europe and the end of Communist rule and edited by notable scholars such as Jens Holger Schjørring, Peter Maser, Hartmut Lehmann and Katharina Kunter.2 What is clearly yet to be undertaken, however, is a genuinely global and ecumenical study not limited to the northern hemisphere or to the ideological conflicts centered on Moscow and Washington.

First steps in that direction were taken over the past several years at small meetings in Cambridge, Massachusetts, Frankfurt, and Bratislava. Then, supported by a grant from the Višegradfund, a foundation with connections to the governments of the Czech and Slovak Republics, Hungary, and Poland, a first International Research Conference was held in September 2011 at the Evangelical Theological Faculty of the Comenius University in Bratislava, Slovakia. That conference brought together nearly fifty historians, theologians, and church leaders from East and West Europe, the United Kingdom and the Nordic countries, North America and India with a Skype connection to Hong Kong. Participants, moreover, represented not only geographic and political (even ideological) varieties, they were also ecumenically representative—Orthodox, Roman Catholic, and Protestant individuals all made substantive historical and theological contributions to both the conference and its ensuing publication. The theme of the event was “Christian World Community and the Cold War” and a significant volume of the conference papers.

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has been published, some of which are now reprinted in the present journal. Subsequent regional conferences have been held in Sigtuna, Sweden, and Frankfurt, Germany; others are being planned for the United Kingdom, Hong Kong, and North America. Plans for the preparation of four volumes of essays of political, ecclesial, and regional diversity are presently being formulated.

The individual responsible for leading this global effort was initially the well-known Finnish ecumenist and church leader, Dr. Risto Lehtonen. Dr. Bruce Rigdon of the United States has recently been designated chairperson of the project’s Coordination Committee (he is also chair of the American committee) and Professor Julius Filo of the Comenius University in Bratislava has taken up the post of international coordinator of the ecumenical endeavor.

What can this research project contribute to our overall understanding of what is generally described as “the Cold War”? (It is to be acknowledged that that phrase itself perhaps has ideological overtones that are questionable. “Cold War” implies that one side was the clear victor in the struggle, but throughout the world there are many who in the aftermath of 1990 would seriously question that.) The questions we face are, indeed, many.

At root this endeavor is an attempt to illuminate two questions: What was the role of churches and ecumenical organizations in Cold War events and developments? And what have been the effects of the Cold War on those same churches and organizations? Not only was the Christian community a player – a victim, perhaps, and/or a perpetrator – in the world divided by the forty-five-year struggle of the Cold War – that community was itself at points bitterly divided by the ideological and political struggles of the time.

At the end, to study “Christian World Community and the Cold War” is to raise ecumenical questions of theology, ecclesiology, and mission. The 1948 World Council of Churches debate between John Foster Dulles and Josef Hromádka, the fate of the Christian Peace Conference and its effects within church bodies particularly in Eastern Europe, the vacuum created by the loss of reflection concerning Kirche im Sozialismus, the Third World and the creation of what many call “the American empire” – what have these and countless other Cold War tensions and developments to do with the oikumene and its future? What do the seismic shifts that took place during the Cold War have to do with the future of the church? Can the deep divisions which the Cold War caused both between and within churches – in which many cases still persist – be overcome? What does this history have to do with the church’s unity? Its mission? Its struggle for justice and peace? These are questions of great importance, questions to which the developing study on “Christian World Community and the Cold War” is directed.

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