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The World Council of Churches and the Churches in Eastern Europe*

GERHARD LINN

Introductory Remarks

From its beginnings the World Council of Churches (WCC) has been committed to the building of bridges between East and West, and in so doing it has striven to be with its member-churches in socialist countries, encouraging them on their difficult journey. After the Russian Orthodox Church became a member, followed by other Eastern European churches, in 1961, the task was to reach out to all eight states of the then socialist European camp.

Today, four* years after the '*Wende*' (changes), we know a great deal more about their situation, which was complex and also differed from country to country. We know more than was possible for WCC representatives from other parts of the world during this period of considerable isolation. In the light of the clearer view now possible, critical questions as to the WCC's role in Eastern Europe have arisen. It matters every bit to us not only that critical questions are asked, but that we be seen to carry out a thorough exhaustive search of the now accessible written records of those once involved, to get closer to the real answers. The archives of the WCC stand open for researchers. We do not see it as our task to initiate our own examination. On the other hand, the WCC's former assistant general secretary now retired, Professor Dr Todor Sabev, is in touch with the member-churches of the countries in question to ascertain their opinion of the relationship between the WCC and the churches of Eastern Europe.

Because of the short time allotted to me, I would like to concentrate on examples I have myself experienced and shed light on these.

An Assessment of Religious Freedom in the USSR

Towards the end of the Fifth General Assembly of the WCC in Nairobi, Kenya, on 8 December 1975, Policy Reference Committee III had before it, among other resolutions to be discussed and voted on, a resolution which had been presented to the CSCE meeting in Helsinki that same year. Supported by the Scottish delegate Richard Holloway, the Swiss delegate Jacques Rossel moved the following amendment: 'The WCC is concerned about the infringement of religious freedom, especially in the Soviet Union. The General Assembly respectfully asks the government

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of the USSR to abide by Article 7 of the Helsinki Final Act.’¹

The debate which followed was the most heated I have ever experienced at a WCC conference. The atmosphere was characterised on the one hand by American support of the motion; their sarcastic line was: ‘We representatives of the US churches are sorry that we constantly find ourselves in the dock on behalf of our country; we would gladly welcome representatives of the Soviet Union to sit beside us on this bench.’ On the other hand there were bitter complaints by two Russian Orthodox delegates that a motion of this kind had been put forward in the General Assembly plenum without consulting them. After the debate, the two-thirds majority necessary to pass such a motion was not achieved. A proposed amendment to Rossel’s motion led finally to the whole bill being sent back to committee with the aim that a text would be submitted the following day which would make broader consensus possible. The Eastern European delegations were thus able to consult each other. In one of the corridors used for exhibitions somebody posted up a pointed satire of the conference theme ‘Christ liberates and unites’: ‘Christ has liberated Jacques Rossel to make a motion, he united the East European delegates – but will he divide the WCC movement?’

The following morning a new text was submitted to the plenum, which once again unleashed a very intense debate. ‘The General Assembly’, said this new text, ‘has spent considerable time debating the alleged non-observance of religious freedom in the USSR. The General Assembly finds that the churches in the different parts of Europe live and work under greatly differing conditions.’ As an example, access to the media was cited, as being something which the churches in Western Europe had and those in Eastern Europe did not. The text continued:

The solidarity born of faith in a common Lord enables Christians to share joy and sorrow with each other and obliges them to correct each other. Christians may not remain silent when other members of the Body of Christ, wherever they may be in the world, have problems to overcome. Whatever is said or done must however come from mutual consultation and be an expression of Christian love.

Before the vote which led to the adoption of the text, Professor Borovoy announced that the Russian Orthodox delegation would abstain, not because of the text now at issue but because they wanted to express their disapproval of the atmosphere engendered by the whole process.

I cite this as an example of a constant difficulty facing the WCC over the years: whenever it wanted to say something critical about the human rights situation in any given country, it always had to take into account how the representatives of the churches in that country were going to vote.

The Role of the Work Programmes in the WCC

At least as important as declarations of this kind was the opportunity for the WCC to help to orientate its member churches towards liberation by including them in work programmes, for example the ecumenical study on ‘the missionary structure of the parish’ between the General Assemblies of 1961 and 1968. In 1964, from the German Democratic Republic, I became the youngest member of the working group for this study programme. I was able to experience how committed colleagues from Western Europe worked with members of the staff in Geneva to help us to get away from our preoccupation with the future of the church for its own sake. We saw our

previous concern for the equal importance of consolidation and outreach for what it was: a sterile search for a position of stability. Giving priority to outreach over consolidation meant that we now had to ask what God's will was, to ask what he expected of us in the interest of all our country's people, and to entrust to him our concern about the future of the church.² As a result of this liberating process of questioning, the voices of lay people who knew what was really happening in their society took on a greater importance. The Geneva organisers told us that thanks to this liberating new way of thinking and asking questions the structures study had more resonance in the GDR than anywhere else.

In the Protestant Church in Berlin-Brandenburg, for example, it led to a four-year campaign (1968-72), involving most of the parishes, for parish seminars. The aim of these seminars was to find guidance from the Christian faith in addressing all kinds of pressing issues, and to do this through a communal effort involving all the seminar participants. Making the connection between everyday life and the biblical message was the key methodological theme. In evaluative 'lay consultations' many of the seminar participants stressed how much they had been helped to understand how they could actively live out their faith in a repressive environment. Others, who did not consider themselves Christians but who were brought in as specialists in an advisory capacity, expressed their gratitude for what they regarded as important meetings which had broadened their horizons.

One of the fruits of this new understanding of Christian discipleship in a society we lived in but had not chosen was the memorandum *Die Rolle der Christen in dem Prozess der Einführung industriemässiger Produktionsmethoden der Landwirtschaft* (*The Role of Christians in the Process of Introducing Agro-Industrial Mechanisation*) which was to be discussed by the synod of the Protestant Church of Berlin-Brandenburg in March 1970. In an unprecedented move the state authorities demanded that it be removed from the agenda. We could not of course concur with this demand. In my opening address I then tried to assert that our aim was to learn from justified Marxist criticism of the church when it had been faced with the social consequences of industrialisation in the nineteenth century. This time we wanted to help people in advance to prepare themselves for the foreseeable social consequences of changes in their working conditions rather than just treat their wounds after the event. The response by the authorities was not to contest our analysis but to make it quite plain that this was interference in the state's agricultural policy. Yet the threatened 'consequences' for the church did not materialise.

Many other examples of the after-effects of this and other WCC programmes for the churches of the GDR could be cited. It should also be pointed out that the churches in the GDR were able to use their own experiences to take their own initiatives for WCC work programmes. The inspiration for the conciliar process towards 'Justice, Peace and Integrity of Creation' announced at the Sixth General Assembly in Vancouver in 1983 was a result of input from our delegation from the GDR churches. The three ecumenical assemblies which took place in 1988 and 1989 in Dresden, Magdeburg and again in Dresden in the framework of this conciliar process had a decisive influence on the ideas groups pushing through the political 'Wende' in the autumn of 1989.

An Example of WCC Activities in Eastern Europe which Could not be Publicised

In the years between 1968 and 1981, I organised informal meetings of active

Christians from four countries on behalf of the mission department of the WCC. I did this in close collaboration with friends from different confessions in Poland, Czechoslovakia, Hungary and the GDR – predominantly intellectuals from various disciplines and a number of church ministers. Together we evaluated WCC meetings which were important for us and encouraged each other actually to do what little we as Christians were able to do in our societies. At the larger annual meetings of this growing group of friends, which transcended national and confessional differences and which took place alternately in the GDR and Poland, there was always a Geneva representative present who travelled in on a tourist visa. To the dismay of our friends in Geneva we had to ask them never to publish anything about what they heard or experienced while they were with us. We had to insist on this mainly in the interests of our Czech participants, some of whom had spent twelve or thirteen years in prison under Gottwald.

Many of those who took part in these meetings over the years subsequently had the opportunity to take an active part in their country's political renewal – the first being the Poles, of whom some got involved in the early stages of the Solidarity movement.

Notes and References

- ¹ See *Bericht aus Nairobi 75* (Frankfurt am Main, 1976), pp. 178–85.
- ² 'Missionarische Struktur der Gemeinde in der DDR', *Ökumenische Diskussion* (WCC, Geneva), vol. 3, no. 2, 1967, pp. 113–22.
- ³ Gerhard Linn, *Ökumene – Hoffnung für eine gespaltene Menschheit?* (EVA, Leipzig, 1992), pp. 90–95.

(Translated from the German by Edward Thomas)