

Religion & Democracy

A Newsletter of the Institute on Religion and Democracy

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World Church Assembly Proves Bias

To those who believe that charges of extremist bias in many church agencies were the product of malicious "innuendo," the Sixth Assembly of the World Council of Churches may have been a revelation. The American press, to its credit, carried candid reports on the debates and resolutions of the Vancouver Assembly, which ended on August 10. The WCC's antagonism toward the democratic world was made unmistakably clear.

Whatever benefit such a demonstration may provide, it was nevertheless also a cause for considerable disappointment. A distinguished commission of Christian leaders from a broad range of denominations had achieved remarkable success in drafting a WCC statement on "Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry" which could contribute greatly to rebuilding unity in a theologically and sacramentally divided faith. By the end of the WCC Assembly this valuable ecumenical undertaking was all but swamped by the blizzard of one-sided, divisive political resolutions which swept off the Assembly floor.

Afghanistan

The most startling of these was the statement on Afghanistan, which aroused intense debate even within the WCC. The draft resolution neglected to condemn the Soviet invasion, and seemed to condone a continuing Soviet military presence in Afghanistan until whatever time an "overall political settlement" might be arranged. By contrast, the draft demanded an immediate cut-off of outside aid from non-Communists to Afghanistan's determined resistance movement.

Bishop Alexander Malik from Pakistan proposed that the resolution be amended to call for "unconditional withdrawal of Soviet troops from Afghani-

stan," arguing that "if this was a Western country involved, the World Council would have denounced it in the strongest possible language in the dictionary." Bishop Gunnar Liserud of the Church of Norway sought to delete the demand for a cut-off of aid to the Afghan liberation movement, on the grounds that this, too, was one-sided. Even Bishop James Armstrong, President of our NCC, challenged the resolution, with the pointed argument that "we vote in this body not as an extension of the U.N., but as members of the World Council whose Lord is Jesus Christ."

But the draft resolution was adamantly defended by a curious succession of speakers -- William P. Thompson, Co-States Clerk of the Presbyterian Church, USA, and seven delegates from the Soviet bloc. While Thompson argued that the draft resolution was a "compromise," the Soviet bloc delegates made it clear that for them it was an all-or-nothing proposition. Any amendment to the resolution would be "a challenge to our loyalty to the ecumenical movement," Archbishop Kirill of Leningrad declared. The amend-

ments were defeated by the unusually close vote of 306 to 278.

Central America

There was not even a gesture toward balance in the WCC's resolution on Central America -- a point that was widely noted in press commentary. No explicit demands were made upon Nicaragua, Cuba or the Soviet Union to withhold their contributions to the bloodshed. Revolutionary leaders in Managua may be surprised to learn that they were even congratulated for making "significant progress in constitutional development preparatory to holding elections in 1985." As the Sandinistas were being offered this bouquet, it was reported in the Wall Street Journal



WCC photo

General Secretary Philip Potter hoists a totem pole at the opening of the 6th Assembly of the World Council of Churches. A WCC leaflet distributed during the ceremony said that totem poles "were not pagan gods or demons as is commonly supposed." WCC Assemblies are held every six to seven years.

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(the only major eastern paper to carry the story) that the home of Violeta Chamorro -- publisher of La Prensa, Nicaragua's only remaining independent news medium -- was attacked by a violent mob.

Religious Freedom

The WCC again refused to make any public statement on behalf of the millions of persecuted Christians living under the Soviet empire. Appeals by imprisoned believers were spiked on the grounds that they did not come from member churches of the WCC -- churches which, everyone knows, are under crushing pressure from their governments.

But there is at least a deep uneasiness within the WCC about permitting an atheistic despotism to exercise this veto right over Christian witness. David Russell, a British Baptist, declared from the floor in this debate, "The subject of freedom is conspicuous by its absence from this Assembly." To judge from the way Russell's protest echoed on the Assembly floor and among observers, this matter is probably the WCC's gravest weakness.

The Middle East

The only specific mention of religious oppression anywhere in the world referred to "the plight of indigenous Muslim and Christian communities suffering from the repressive actions of the occupying power in East Jerusalem...." Evidently, in the WCC's assessment, Christians, Jews and Muslim minorities are treated quite liberally throughout the Arab world. When pushed by the press to explain this curious imbalance, WCC General Secretary Philip Potter raised some eyebrows. He explained that the WCC need not speak out against the persecution of Jews in Arab countries or in the Soviet Union because "they (the Jews) have a massive world organization."

Disarmament

The usual: the WCC tortures the conscience of the democracies about nuclear weapons, while ignoring the Soviet threat. Not content to be out-bid by the American Catholics, the WCC adopted some propositions the Catholic Bishops had voted down: the Assembly rejected any justification for nuclear deterrence, described the mere possession of nuclear weapons as "a crime against humanity," and urged individual Christians to refuse to work in anything related to nuclear defense. Bishop James Crumley of the Lutheran Church in America, Bishop David Preuss of the American Lutheran Church, and

Archbishop John Habgood of the Church of England offered some dissent from the disarmament statement. Archbishop Habgood characterized the statement as an "incitement to civil disobedience" which fails to recognize the political realities of the need for compromise.

Though its policy stands are regrettable, the WCC did provide a valuable service to the U.S. Christian community. In response to the criticisms of the past year, the NCC and its member denominations have been burning up their budgets to convince members and contributors that charges of radical bias in the international programs of the mainline churches are poppycock. After Vancouver, that will be harder to sell.

"The atrocities committed by Soviet troops in Afghanistan are never mentioned. Are the Afghans not human...or is it because they are non-Christian?... How would delegates feel if America had sent troops to Canada?"

Bishop Alexander J. Malik, Church of Pakistan

But some people are still willing to buy. The extremism at Vancouver has even spawned a new -- one could say, "dialectical" -- justification for the politics of the WCC. It has already appeared this month in a number of prestigious publications. As one usually sensible editorialist put it, "What appears to be a one-sided critique of American society is actually a profound, though unstated, affirmation of the freedoms of speech and religion in our country."

Well, Christians may ultimately be called upon to forgive those who abuse them. But those who treat such abuse as a form of love are generally described as masochists. Besides, the WCC clearly does not consider the democracies superior to the "socialist" societies -- its resolutions on nuclear arms, for example, treat both as equally amoral super-powers. (The West is even portrayed as the more dangerously provocative.) WCC resolutions on international economics and development treat us as the world's exploiters.

Even if the WCC were trying to pay the world's democracies a compliment, would this cryptic method really be the way to do it? And what is the WCC doing to prevent its criticisms from being exploited by those who evidently mean to weaken the democracies, militarily and economically? To argue that the WCC is really trying to tell us the opposite of what it is actually saying...well, we can't help but remember what George Orwell once said:

"You have to belong to the intelligentsia to believe things like that; no ordinary man could be such a fool."

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"So Persecuted They the Prophets"

Armando Valladares (here with his wife Marta) was the recipient of the Institute on Religion and Democracy's 1983 Religious Freedom Award. Mr. Valladares was released last October after 22 years in Castro's prisons. The IRD honored Mr. Valladares as "Christian, poet, Cuban patriot, and prisoner of conscience who symbolizes all the persecuted Christians and prisoners of conscience whose faith has never wavered." We reprint here his moving acceptance speech:

...I was unjustly imprisoned when I was 23 years old, accused of crimes that I never committed. At that time my religious convictions were genuine, but probably superficial. My religious beliefs had been learned at home and at school, in the way a child learns good manners or the alphabet. Nevertheless, that minimal religious conviction singled me out as an enemy of the Cuban communist revolution, and somehow helped convince my judges and accusers that I was a potentially dangerous adversary.

However, as soon as I was in prison, I began to feel a substantial change in my religious beliefs. In the first place, I embraced God, perhaps for fear of losing my life, since I was in danger of being executed.

Today, twenty-two years after those nights of horror and fear, that way of approaching Christ seems to me human but incomplete. Later I had another Christian experience: grieved with pain, I saw many young people -- most of them farmers and students -- die, shouting "Long Live Christ the King!" I realized then that Christ could be of help. Not merely by saving my life, but also giving my life and my death, if that was the case, an ethical sense that would dignify them.

I believe that it was at that particular moment, and not before, when Christianity, besides being a religious faith, became a way of life that in my own circumstances resulted in resistance. Resisting torture, resisting confinement, resisting hunger, and even resisting the constant temptation to join the political rehabilitation and indoctrination programs that would end my predicament.

But, resistance as a Christian could not become a blind form of temerity, nor of personal courage, but a thoughtful and calm stance in defense of my democratic beliefs; a firm commitment to maintaining my dignity and self-respect, even in the bottom of a cell, naked and being turned into human refuse.

To be Christian under those circumstances meant that I could not hate my tormentors; it meant to maintain the belief the suffering was meaningful because if man gives up his moral and religious values, or if he allows himself to be carried by a desire to hate or for revenge, his existence loses all meaning.



Photos by Rebecca Hammel

I should add that this experience has not been mine only -- I saw dozens of Christians suffering and dying -- committed like myself, to maintaining their dignity and their richness of spirit beyond misery and pain.

Today, I remember with emotion Gerardo Gonzalez, a Protestant preacher, who knew by heart whole Biblical passages and who would copy them by hand to share with his brothers in belief. I cannot forget this man who all of us called "Brother in Faith." He interposed himself before a burst of machine-gun fire to save other prisoners who were beaten in what is known now as the massacre of Boniato prison. Gerardo repeated, before dying, the words said by Christ on the cross: "Forgive them, Father, for they know not what they do." And all of us, when the blood had dried, struggled with our consciences to attain something so difficult yet so beautiful: the ability to forgive our enemies.

For God, there are no impossibles. Nor are there impossibilities for those who love and seek God. The more ferocious the hate of my jailers, the more my heart would fill with love and a faith that gave me strength to support everything; but not with the conformist or masochistic attitude; rather, full of joy, internal peace and freedom because Christ walked with me in my cell.

...The honor which you bestow upon me today will have special significance for Cuba's political prisoners. I'd like to tell you why. During those years, with the purpose of forcing us to abandon our religious beliefs and to demoralize us, the Cuban communist indoctrinators repeatedly used the statements of support for Castro's revolution made by some representatives of American Christian churches. Everytime that a pamphlet was published in the United States, everytime a clergyman would write an article in support of Fidel Castro's dictatorship, a translation would

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reach us and that was worse for the Christian political prisoners than the beatings or the hunger.

While we waited for the solidarity embrace from our brothers in Christ, incomprehensively to us, those who were embraced were our tormentors.

Castro's political police have used these statements of support for Castro with such skill and for such a long time to confuse the prisoners and population in general, that today the Christians in Cuba's prisons suffer not only the pain of torture and isolation but also the conviction that they have been deserted by their brothers in faith.

It is for this reason, dear friends, that I said that this distinction you give me will be very important for all Cuban prisoners. When it is known in Castro's political prisons, and it will be known, they will all be filled with joy. They will feel they are no longer alone; that they have not been forgotten; that their brothers in Christ support them from afar. Also the insidious pamphlets the political commissars read to them containing articles signed by American religious leaders, do not represent the opinion of American believers -- but the point of view of a small group. We also have to forgive this small group, because they probably also "...know not what they do."

The lack of religious freedom in Cuba is not fully known. Freedom is an all-encompassing concept; either there is freedom or there is no freedom at all.

I can tell you that there is no religious freedom in Cuba today. Some Protestant churches have been closed. With my own eyes I saw a church on the Isle of Pines turned into a warehouse for fertilizer. The same thing happened to the Catholic churches of Villanueva and San Francisco....

The celebration of Christmas was banned by Castro and the Christmas tree is also banned, being considered a religious and counter-revolutionary symbol.

If a student is known to attend church, he is expelled from the University.

If a young child talks about God or Christ with his classmates, his parents are called to school where it is explained that those ideas are unscientific and remnants of an obscurantist past.

If the parents insist, they can be accused of the crime of ideological deviationism according to the revolutionary code.

The very few children who attend catechism classes are warned by the priests themselves that what they talk about in church is a very intimate and personal matter and that under no circumstances should they talk about it with friends. This is done to protect the children.

I want to ask you to remember my brothers, my fellow prisoners in your prayers, especially the Protestant pastor, Humberto Noble Alexander. They suffer because of their ideas and beliefs and the only way to help them is to announce to the world that they exist and are humiliated, punished and tortured. To remain silent will never bring them out of prison. Only a campaign to make the public aware and to apply public pressure can set them free. My own case demonstrates as much.

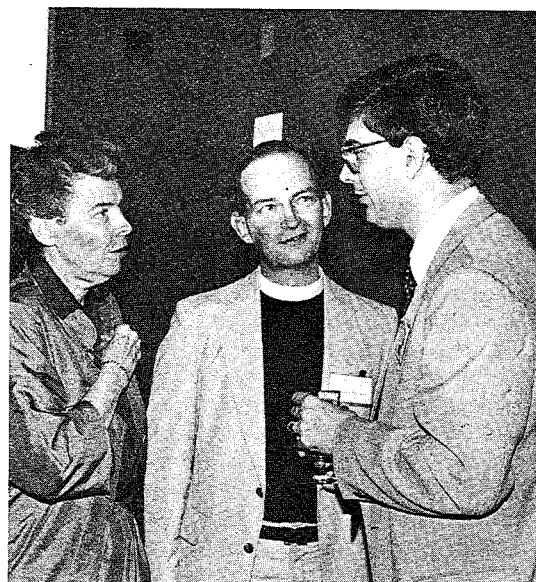
To finish, I'd like to read from another much more successful writer than I, who also knew of persecutions, St. Matthew:

"Blessed are you when men shall revile you, and persecute you, and shall say all manner of evil against you falsely for my sake. Rejoice, and be exceeding glad; for great is your reward in heaven; for so persecuted they the prophets which were before you."

-- Matthew 5:11,12



Armando Valladares (left) is congratulated by Representative Dante Fascell (D-Fla), chairman of the U.S. Commission on Security and Cooperation in Europe. Right, Jeane Kirkpatrick (Permanent U.S. Representative to the United Nations) talks with IRD Advisory Board members Richard John Neuhaus (center) and George Weigel at a reception honoring Mr. Valladares.



Delegates Captive to Staff-Controlled Process at Assembly

An observer at the WCC Assembly finds as little regard for democracy in the Assembly's processes as there is in its proclamations. I found that with the exception of the last few days, when the spirit of authentic participation fitfully broke through, the meeting seemed more like a "People's Congress."

Almost a third of the WCC's member churches pay nothing into the treasury, yet they -- and their leaders -- receive many benefits. The inescapable tendency for this to lead toward a patron-client relationship is made more pernicious by the resolutely pro-Third World ideology of many Western church bureaucrats, who are often far more pro-Third World than the Third World itself. If a leader of a Third World church dissents, he not only endangers his benefits, he also risks a challenge to his identity. Thus, it is remarkable when some do speak out.

All delegates to the WCC Assembly get intensive orientation in pre-Assembly meetings, which begin more than a year in advance of the event. "Issue papers" are provided in advance -- but the actual language of resolutions the delegates will be asked to vote on is not given them until very late in the Assembly. The most intense mental and psychological preparation of delegates comes, however, during the first week of the Assembly itself.

During the entire first week of the Vancouver meeting, the delegates were transformed into an audience for staff-managed orientation programs: lectures, symposia, slide shows, mime shows. After this, it was promised, would come hearings on the WCC's three program units. The hearing I attended, "Justice and Service," proved to be less than might have been expected. For 40 minutes, one group of bureaucrats asked another group of bureaucrats prepared ques-

tions, and were read prepared answers in response.

When it came to statements from the floor it turned out that much of the available time had been allocated in advance for still another round of prepared statements. In the brief period allowed for questions it became clear that controversy was bad manners. If a delegate could summon the energy to ask a difficult or critical question, the staff felt no obligation to provide an answer. A note might be made, or the questioner might be thanked politely for his concern and -- next question. This was indeed a hearing -- and the delegates were mere listeners.

The delegates were also funneled into eight issue groups. One had the impression that these groups might develop -- or

Socialism a la the World Council

The WCC has moved even farther from traditional Christian concerns for corporate social responsibility toward attacks upon the free economy itself.

The WCC Program on the Churches and the Transnational Corporations adopted by its Central Committee gives this assessment:

Although strategies for setting constraints on the behavior of the TNCs (transnational corporations) may be important in the short term, they are not sufficient to overcome the structure of injustice. Such strategies and the TNCs themselves must be analyzed in the context of the world market system as a whole. This system and TNC operations in it are incompatible with our vision for a JPSS (Just, Participatory and Sustainable Society).

At the recent Assembly, Dr. Dorothee Soelle, a West German,

at least review -- the key policy statements and resolutions which would come before the Assembly. Not so.

When the delegates went to cast their votes during the last frantic days of the Assembly, they were presented with policy resolutions which they had never seen, even though the meeting was by now in its third week.

And who had written the resolutions? You guessed it: the staff.

— Kerry Ptacek

"(I do not) delude myself that there is much likelihood that my letter will be read out loud at one of the Assembly's sessions. It is very difficult for us to reach you, much more difficult than to reach God. Still, I dare not remain silent."

Vladimir Rusak, a deacon of the Russian Orthodox Church

socialist, delivered an address on economics at the plenary session entitled "Life in its Fullness", and summed up the topic this way:

While Christ came that we might have fullness of life, capitalism came to turn everything into money....

The following session was addressed by Jan Pronk, Deputy Director of the United Nations Conference on Trade and Development, and an advisor to the WCC. He explained the WCC's alternative to the sinful economic arrangements of the present: the New International Economic Order. The NIEO, as Pronk explained it, is just another way of describing "international democratic socialism." He asked why people object to enforcing policies internationally that are now acceptable in many Western European countries.

Pronk was not clear about how an economic order run by the U.N., most of whose member countries are led by generals, autocrats, or Communists, could properly be called "democratic socialism." It occurred to some observers that a more apt term might be "international fascism."

Activists Press Labor on Jessup Role

If other methods of persuasion don't work, try to threaten a guy through his employer.

This was the not-so-subtle tactic adopted last June by eight church officials and activists who issued a statement urging "our friends in the labor movement to work to end labor's participation in the attack upon religious organizations." Their target is IRD founder David Jessup, a UM layman who works for the Committee on Political Education of the AFL-CIO.

The church officials did not argue that the IRD's pro-democracy stance is incompatible with the foreign policy positions adopted at AFL-CIO conventions or council meetings. In fact, some left-leaning church leaders may be exploiting this incident to try to pressure labor to adopt their foreign policy views. UM Newscope reported that Peggy Billings, one of the signers of the letter, complained in an interview that "labor organizations do not support the church when it addresses suffering in Third World nations or peace and disarmament negotiations." Billings told Newscope, "The issue is much larger than David Jessup."

The attack on Jessup has provoked other church leaders to

defend his right to participate freely in his church. According to Robert L. Wilson, Duke Divinity School, a group of nine United Methodists — including two bishops and three seminary professors — have signed a letter to AFL-CIO President Lane Kirkland, noting that "Ours is a strong denomination, born of dissent....We find it extraordinarily inappropriate that an attempt is being made to dissuade someone (David Jessup) from exercising his rights as a church member by trying to pressure his employer." At least one other bishop wrote Kirkland independently, also defending Jessup's right to function in his church without interference from his employer.

Mr. Kirkland responded to the fuss by writing to Claire Randall, General Secretary of the NCC:

...We would not consider it appropriate to intervene in the internal policy-making process of church organizations or of any other private organizations outside of the trade union movement, just as we would not welcome such intervention in our own policy-making process by groups outside of our movement. The AFL-CIO

considers it especially inappropriate to attempt to instruct or discipline our members or employees with regard to matters of religious worship or participation in church affairs.

What is not clear to me is what those who have criticized Mr. Jessup's IRD activities would have the AFL-CIO do. Would they have us fire or muzzle him for exercising his rights as a member of the Methodist Church? Would they have us publicly denounce the IRD -- that is, to take a position on the issues now being debated within the churches? Is it seriously proposed that the AFL-CIO should review the international funding activities of the NCC and pass judgment on them — or that we should investigate the political character of the IRD, which has neither requested nor received support from the AFL-CIO?...

We also believe that employees of the Federation have a civil libertarian right, on their own time, to pursue their own outside interests without fear of reprisals aimed at their livelihood....

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Address Correction Requested