



Lukas Vischer: Religious Freedom and the World Council of Churches

1. Place and Date of Publication

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2. Historical Context

Long before Vatican Council II (1962-1965), religious freedom had been esteemed an important issue in the ecumenical movement. Dr. Visser't Hooft, general secretary of the World Council of Churches, pleaded successfully for the subject to be dealt with in an explicit Vatican Council declaration.

3. Summary

When we compare the Declaration on Religious Freedom of Vatican Council II with the texts produced by the general assemblies of the World Council of Churches in Amsterdam (1948) and New Delhi (1961), we see that there is a large measure of agreement. Yet the scope of the problem is not identical for all parties concerned. - After World War I many factors in Western Europe shook the assumption that the inhabitants of a given region were the members of a given Church. The missionary movement and the gradual emergence of "young Churches" prepared the way for a new and deeper understanding of the nature of the Church. During the rule of Nazism in Germany the "Confessing Church" was an attempt to preserve the Church's freedom within a Church and a State that were menaced by a false ideology or had already yielded to it. - In 1937, the Oxford Conference dealt with the nature of those freedoms which the Church could claim from the State. This discussion expanded in the course of time. The Churches could hardly claim freedom for themselves without likewise claiming it for others.

Finally, religious freedom was considered an essential condition for international organizations like the World Council of Churches. The ecumenical movement had been inaugurated to precipitate dialogue and to work together as a community. The Oxford Conference called upon the Churches "to guard against the sin of themselves conniving at repression of Churches and religious bodies of a faith and order differing from their own". It regarded mutual respect as an opportunity for Christian witness, since it is by setting an example of tolerance that the Churches actually promote international understanding. The conference held the view that a Church which tries to attract the members of another Church by non-spiritual means (proselytism) makes it impossible for the Churches to live together. Their communion in Christ imposes upon the Churches a positive responsibility for each other. - Vatican Council II barely treated this aspect of religious freedom.

One question has yet to be discussed in the ecumenical movement: How far is the Church itself a community based on freedom? Where must we draw the line between a plurality that strengthens the witness to Christ and a plurality that destroys it? If the Churches are expected to set "an example of freedom to all", as the Oxford Conference put it, this question is of decisive importance.

The Churches should formulate their convictions in common. There is no need to stress the value of such a witness in a world whose order is imperilled by a false absolutism and undermined by indifference toward the truth as the source of life, respectively.

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edited by NEOPHYTOS EDELBY
TEODORO JIMENEZ-URRESTI

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Religious Freedom and the World Council of Churches

When we compare the *Declaration on Religious Freedom* of Vatican Council II with the texts produced by the general assemblies of the World Council of Churches in Amsterdam (1948) and New Delhi (1961), we see at once that there is a large measure of agreement. Furthermore, if we disregard the theological reasoning on which they are based, we see that, insofar as the principle itself and its practical application are concerned, the texts are often almost identical. This similarity is not accidental, and its importance can hardly be overrated, for it points up a convergence of the Churches in facing certain common questions that arise from the constantly changing conditions of modern society.

It is true that the Churches start from different premises. But in their attempt to understand the task of the Church in the modern world they repeatedly achieve common insights on the basis of that common foundation which unites them in spite of all differences. The various declarations on religious freedom are a particularly clear illustration of this. The different premises from which the individual Churches proceed become evident in the diverse arguments advanced in behalf of religious freedom. The World Council shows that no exhaustive argument is possible. Nonetheless, the decisive statement that every individual has the right to confess his religious conviction publicly and that

this right must be protected is shared in common by the Churches.

Does this admission create additional responsibility? Shouldn't it be formulated and developed? Is it enough simply to state the fact that agreement exists; shouldn't we rather try to draw the logical consequences? The Churches would not be taking their commitment to ecumenism seriously enough if they did not decide to pursue these issues together.

I

THREE FIELDS OF APPLICATION

If we want to understand in what sense the documents of the World Council uses the term "religious freedom", we have to distinguish three different fields in which it is applied. The discussion of religious freedom currently in progress within the ecumenical movement was originally involved with the question of *Church and State*. The Church must be free from all State control and protection, and even when the Church is not left the necessary freedom to preach the Gospel, it must nevertheless always see to it that the State does not overstep its permissible limits. The discussion then passed directly to religious freedom as a *principle of order within the State*, particularly as a *condition for the life of an international society*. It is from this aspect that the Declarations of Amsterdam and New Delhi develop the question. The more progress the ecumenical movement made and the more deeply the separated Churches became aware of what they had in common, the more urgent the question of religious freedom became in the *relations of the Churches among themselves*. The report on "Christian Witness, Religious Freedom and Proselytism", accepted at New Delhi, examined the issue in this light and showed to what extent respect for the principle of religious freedom is the unconditional presupposition for any communion and intercourse between the separated Churches.

These three fields of application are of course closely connected, and it is impossible to deal with one without indirectly

touching upon the other two. Yet they must be distinguished, particularly when we wish to relate the Declaration of Vatican Council II with those of the World Council. *Vatican Council II's Declaration only deals with religious freedom in the second of these three ways*, and while it touches upon the question of Church and State, it does not treat the problem explicitly. The role that religious freedom plays in deepening the ecumenical relationship is not mentioned at all. However much agreement there may be, therefore, we must realize from the start that the scope of the problem is not yet identical for all parties concerned.

II

POINTS TO BE DEVELOPED

Let us briefly survey the earliest beginnings of the discussion within the ecumenical context and select the most important points that have already contributed to the development of our theme.

1. *The Relationship between Church and State*

The inauguration of the ecumenical movement coincided with a much wider upheaval in the traditional relationship between Church and State in the West, particularly within the countries of Europe. While at the beginning of this century one could still cherish the idea that Church and State form a unity and that the Church was in a certain sense the soul of the State and was therefore entitled to certain privileges corresponding to the services it might render, this position became decidedly less tenable after World War I. The political upheavals and revolutions that marked the postwar years; the rapid increase and growing influence of movements, parties and groups that rejected any connection with the Church or were even hostile to it; the more extensive mixing of the population, even in regions where up till then one denomination had predominated; the growing importance of new nations that were anxious to assert their own re-

ligion and culture—all these factors shook the more or less conscious assumption that a given Church could take for granted that the inhabitants of a given region were its members. This was certainly not something new. The close ties which formerly bound Church and State together were already broken in the 18th and, especially, the 19th centuries. But the first decades of this century did bring about a decided acceleration of the process, and the Churches were no longer able to ignore the fact that they were a minority within their own nation. This was a particularly severe realization for the great Protestant Churches of Europe, for due to historical circumstances they had assumed especially close ties with the State and had practically no supra-national bond with one another.

The great ecumenical Oxford Conference (1937) mentioned this fact mainly as a challenge to the Churches: "The Church has not yet faced the new situation with sufficient frankness. With the conservative instincts of all institutions of long standing and influence it has fought a defensive—and on the whole a losing—battle for the maintenance of as much as possible of the old ideal of *Corpus Christianum* and of the privileges and authorities which that implies. . . . The Church finds itself today in a new relation to the community. . . . Domination it cannot have and possibly ought not to desire. . . . It is challenged to find a new understanding of its duty to the common life."¹

2. *The Missions and the New Churches*

This new understanding was not imposed on the Churches solely from without. It also grew from within the life of the Churches themselves. The missionary movement, and above all the gradual emergence of "young Churches", prepared the way for a new and deeper understanding of the nature of the Church. Missionary experience demonstrated that the Church must be understood as a special community called by God for the purpose of proclaiming the message of God's kingdom. The ques-

¹ *The Churches Survey Their Task* (Oxford, 1937), pp. 200-1.

tion concerning the nature of the Church in relation to all worldly and human institutions profoundly stirred theological thought during the years subsequent to World War I. It was becoming increasingly clear that through its close links with nation and State the Church had obscured its own nature and mission; as a consequence its claim to authenticity had to suffer. We only have to recall the sharp attacks launched by the Swiss theologian Karl Barth against identifying the Church with anything that might be labeled "Christian". The authentic meaning of freedom was at the very center of this debate. The Word of God as the sole absolute over against man bestows a freedom such as no human source can provide and as no human society—unfortunately not even the Church, at times—can realize. It becomes real only in the degree to which provision is made for that Word of God.

The debate might not have had such important consequences for the ecumenical movement if it had not assumed practical significance during the rule of Nazism in Germany. The Church suddenly came face to face with a State founded upon an ideology wholly opposed to it. The only way it could proclaim its message was first to liberate itself from the bonds which tied it to the State. The foundation of the "confessing Church" was an attempt to preserve the Church's freedom within a Church and a State that were menaced by a false ideology or had already yielded to it.

What happened in Germany was not without its consequences for the other Churches. They had to decide where and how they could recognize the true Church. The questions evoked by the Church's struggle in Germany were equally valid for Churches in other countries, and consequently it is not at all astonishing that the Oxford Conference of 1937 dealt in detail with the nature of those freedoms the Church could claim from the State. A tentative list of these freedoms was drafted: freedom of religious doctrine, preaching and education, freedom to determine the organization of the Church, freedom to do missionary work and to cooperate with the Churches of other countries and free-

dom to enjoy the same rights as other groups in the same State, such as the right to property, etc.²

The discussion necessarily expanded: the Churches could hardly claim freedom for themselves without likewise claiming it for others. Following the "golden rule", the freedom it claimed for itself would have to be applicable to all. This conclusion was already explicitly accepted by the Oxford Conference: "In pleading for such rights we do not ask for any privilege to be granted to Christians that is denied to others. While the liberty with which Christ has set us free can neither be given nor destroyed by any government, Christians because of that inner freedom are both jealous for its outward expression and solicitous that all men should have freedom in religious life. The rights which Christian discipleship demands are such as are good for all men, and no nation has ever suffered by reason of granting such liberties."³

3. *International Organization*

These considerations acquired additional urgency due to the question regarding the foundations on which an international society could be created and maintained, and insofar as modern technological and ecumenical developments linked individual States more closely together, the need for an answer became more pressing. The founding of the United Nations underlined this need. The non-Roman Catholic Churches found themselves in a difficult position. Since practically all of them were closely associated with some form of nationalism, they could hardly find the principles to solve the problem within the inventory of their own resources. It is therefore not astonishing that the ecumenical movement became preoccupied with the problem. From the very outset religious freedom was considered an essential condition for a viable international organization. The Oxford Conference did not really deal with this in a creative fashion, but all the same it emphatically declared that religious freedom was one of the basic principles: "Freedom of religion is an essential

² *Ibid.*, pp. 84-5.

³ *Ibid.*, pp. 184-5.

element in a better international order. This is an implication of the faith of the Church. Moreover, the ecumenical character of the Church compels it to view the question of religious freedom as an international problem. . . .”⁴ The text briefly explained what was meant by this principle and emphasized that Christians cannot exploit the power of their nation to secure unjust privileges within another nation—a statement that was anything but obvious at that time.

But it was not until World War II and the years which followed it that the theme was seriously tackled. During the war (as far as circumstances allowed) the Research Secretariate of the World Council for Practical Christianity made a study on international organization, and the various exchanges in this connection showed increasing agreement on the point that freedom of the individual’s conscience guaranteed by the State was a basic principle for the creation of an international community. William Temple, Archbishop of York and later Archbishop of Canterbury, made a remarkable contribution to the discussion.

After the war, the thread was picked up with renewed determination. But in the meantime the context of the discussion had changed. The United Nations had actually been founded, and the *Declaration on the Basic Rights of Man* was receiving public attention. It is against this background that we must see the declarations of the World Council at Amsterdam (1948) and New Delhi (1961). They maintain that every man has the right to religious freedom because of his God-given dignity and that this right must be guaranteed to every individual as well as to every religion and religious group. These declarations specify in detail those rights which involve religious freedom and which the Churches must allow to prevail both for themselves and for others. Of all the statements made by the World Council, these two declarations come closest to that of Vatican Council II. Both the general substance and many individual statements are almost identical. In any case, the conciliar Declaration is partly motivated by this same preoccupation with international order.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 184.

Among the differences between them, I may point out that the World Council explicitly bases the principle of religious freedom on non-religious convictions.⁵

In comparing the conciliar Declaration with those of the World Council, we should not forget that the latter do not bind the individual Churches in the same way a conciliar decree binds the Roman Catholic Church. Furthermore, although the consensus has been reached and no Church has objected to the statement, not all the Churches have as yet pursued all its consequences. The Department for Religious Freedom and the Commission of the Churches for International Affairs are the two agencies of the World Council charged with studying the problems implied in the affirmation of religious freedom and the practical steps to be taken to translate it into reality.

4. *Contact between the Separated Churches*

One final aspect must be mentioned which has moved the issue of religious freedom into the foreground of the ecumenical movement: the encounter of the separated Churches themselves. For the non-Roman Churches the ecumenical movement was not inaugurated merely to precipitate dialogue. They felt from the start the need to work together as a community. This was particularly acute on the international level, for if the Churches were to bear witness in the international arena, they would have to do so in common. But how could Churches with different and often even contradictory convictions, with different historical backgrounds and different national and cultural characters form a single community? If this was ever to come about, the recognition of the principle of religious liberty would have to be the first and unconditional presupposition. The community could only grow on the common recognition of each other's freedom. The Oxford Conference was clear on this point, although quite evidently it did not pursue the problem and all its ramifications: "We call upon the Churches we represent to guard against the

⁵ For a detailed comparison, cf. A. F. Carrillo de Albornoz in *Ecumenical Review* 1 (1966).

sin of themselves conniving at repression of Churches and religious bodies of a faith and order differing from their own.”⁶ The report goes even further. It regards this mutual respect as an opportunity for Christian witness, since it is by setting an example of mutual tolerance that the Churches actually promote international understanding.

However, it goes without saying that a community of Churches cannot be built on the principle of religious freedom alone. The bonds which link the Churches in the name of Christ are too strong to find adequate expression in the mere recognition of this principle. Yet just such a recognition is certainly a preliminary condition if that deeper communion in Christ is to become visible. Only if the Churches recognize each other's freedom to bear witness can they really meet, grow together and eventually bear witness in common. As their communion deepens and expands, the Churches will observe rules in their intercourse which go beyond the mere principle of religious freedom.

The right to religious freedom is a civil right. When the Churches speak of religious freedom, they speak of rights that are incorporated in civil law and protected by the State for all its citizens. Moreover, although the Churches must respect these rights, they cannot simply confine their efforts to standing by and respecting each other's witness. Their communion in Christ imposes upon them a positive responsibility for each other, and it will lead them farther into a mutual relationship which is beyond that which the law can enforce. This is particularly clear in the problem of proselytism. A Church which tries to attract the members of another Church by non-spiritual means makes it impossible for the Churches to live together; therefore, the practice must be excluded. But actually only the coarsest forms of proselytism are an offense against religious freedom as a civil right; the more subtle forms can only be eliminated when the Churches become aware through the spiritual foundations of their community that they are responsible for each other and contribute to their mutual sanctification.

⁶ *The Churches Survey Their Task*, *op. cit.*, p. 185.

The World Council had to face this problem in all its acuteness. The Churches had founded a community, and each member was aware that he had bound himself to the truth. They were determined to work with each other. What was the result? The Report on "Christian Witness, Religious Freedom and Proselytism within the Framework of the World Council of Churches" (New Delhi, 1961) gave a preliminary accounting. It not only showed what religious freedom would mean for mutual relations between the Churches, but it also stated some demands which were only to be understood as involving an "ecumenical obligation".

Vatican Council II barely treated this aspect of religious freedom. The *Constitution on the Church* and, above all, the *Decree on Ecumenism* and the *Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World* provide some clues that may lead to a broadening of the issue. An ecumenical discussion is desirable; not only would it clarify the position for both sides, but it could also have numerous practical consequences.

If the discussion is going to be pursued, one question in particular must be treated in depth, a question which has found no answer in the documents of either the World Council or Vatican Council II: How far is the Church itself a community based on freedom? The Church is held together by the common confession of the Gospel. How much difference does this confession allow? Where must we draw the line between a plurality that strengthens the witness to Christ and a plurality that destroys it? Most texts dealing with religious freedom neglect to speak of the freedom that must prevail within the Church. But if the community is to grow and especially if the Churches themselves are expected to set "an example of freedom to all"—as the Oxford Conference put it—then this question is of decisive importance. It cannot be regarded as a purely private matter and be withheld from the ecumenical dialogue; on the contrary, precisely from the point of view of witness it must be included.

CONCLUSION

Once again we are back to the suggestion we made at the outset, namely that the Churches should formulate their convictions about religious freedom in common and should arrive at an explicit and common declaration of these convictions. While this would certainly provide a broader basis for the mutual relationship between the Churches, it is not the ultimate reason. Such a community could in itself be a witness in a world which is crying out for a more stable order. By renouncing in common every kind of domination, the Churches would be in a position to witness against any power that might claim to be absolute. By their awareness of a common bond and a common service in Christ they would be able to show forth the meaning of this bond in truth. There is no need to stress the value of such a witness in a world whose order is imperiled by a false absolutism on the one hand and is undermined by indifference toward the truth as the source of life on the other.