



Lukas Vischer: The World Council of Churches and the Churches in Eastern Europe during the Time of the Communist Regimes

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2. Historical Context

Lukas Vischer served the World Council of Churches as research secretary and director of the Commission on Faith and Order, from 1961 to 1979. The following personal recollections—largely of the 1960s and 1970s—were first presented at the second Seminar in Berlin, 14-16 May 1995, on Reappraising the Recent Past in the Churches of Eastern and Western Europe.

3. Summary

In the early years after the Second World War, the central question of the WCC was the evaluation of ideologies in East and West. It was laid down emphatically that the WCC was to identify itself neither with the centrally-controlled communist system, nor with the “laissez-faire” capitalism, but to confront both systems with the vision of a “responsible society”. - A profound change occurred when the Russian Orthodox Church joined the WCC in 1961 and a whole range of Orthodox Churches followed. The first task was simply to explore them, above all the Russian Orthodox Church. Only in the course of time it became clear that the Soviet authorities followed a twin-track strategy. On the one hand they supported credibly in the world the concept of “peaceful coexistence” of systems; on the other hand they accelerated the disappearance of churches at home. In view of the persecutions in the 1960s the central question for the WCC was: How far could open criticism go without forcing the Russian Orthodox Church to make unjustified denials and possibly even putting its membership in jeopardy? Visser't Hooft, supported by Fr. Vitali Borovoy, held the opinion that the churches should constantly be asked critical questions. But at the same time he worked towards creating relationships of trust. The policy of quiet diplomacy remained characteristic of the period. - At the beginning of the 1970s the relations with Eastern Europe moved into the context of the exploitation of Third World countries. For many Third World representatives the face of western capitalism was so odious that in comparison the face of communism appeared attractive. Criticism of communism appeared therefore increasingly inopportune. - The détente policy of the early 1970s again created a new situation. The view was put forward, above all in the WCC Churches' Commission on International Affairs, that everything had to be done to make the Helsinki Agreement a success. Public statements criticising particular violations of human rights had to be avoided. Another group among the staff believed, however, that dissidents in and around the churches should be able to recognise an advocate in the WCC.

In retrospect neither the World Council of Churches nor the individual Western European churches succeeded in following two critical paths at the same time, as the “third way” suggests. A more thorough debate with the ideological roots of communism should have been vital in the confusions of the Cold War, above all when the Marxist body of thought became a source of hope for many theologians from the Third World. The contacts with the churches in Eastern Europe were not used enough to establish contacts with the “grass roots”. Nevertheless many individual contacts of hitherto invisible significance are only now coming to light. And many signs confirm that the option for a “third way” bore positive fruits on those occasions when it was thoroughly carried through.

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The World Council of Churches and the Churches in Eastern Europe during the Time of the Communist Regimes: a First Attempt at an Assessment*

LUKAS VISCHER

These remarks do not claim to be a full and balanced exposition. They are based on personal recollections and assessments. For that reason they are largely confined to the time when I was active as a member of the staff of the World Council of Churches – that is, the 1960s and 1970s. But even for this period the picture that I can give here is necessarily only fragmentary. To be in a position to evaluate properly the attitude and activity of the World Council of Churches would require extensive archival studies – in Geneva, in church and state archives, some of which are still inaccessible. I know that here and there researches are being undertaken and I am convinced that they will bring much into the light of day. What I present here is therefore no more than a first, personal attempt.

The World Council of Churches has set up a group with the mandate to write a 'History of the Ecumenical Movement' since the General Assembly in Uppsala in 1968. The first phase of the ecumenical movement up to 1948 has been thoroughly presented by Ruth Rouse and Stephen Neill.¹ In 1968 there followed a presentation of the first twenty years of the World Council of Churches under the title *The Ecumenical Advance*, edited by Harold Fey. A history of the last three decades should, if possible, appear before the next WCC General Assembly in 1998. A special chapter will be devoted to relations with the churches in Eastern Europe. It is my hope that this chapter, whoever writes it, will be conceived, documented and discussed on a broad basis.

Basic Perspectives

The roots of the position of the World Council of Churches (WCC) in relation to communist Eastern Europe are to be found in developments and decisions in the early years after the Second World War. The basic options were already identified at the General Assembly in Amsterdam in 1948. The central question was the evaluation of ideologies in East and West. The opposing positions were clear in the verbal duel between John Foster Dulles and Josef Hromádka. In the discussion that ensued it became clear that the WCC would maintain a certain distance from both systems. It

*This paper was first presented at the second Seminar on Reappraising the Recent Past in the Churches of Eastern and Western Europe, Berlin, 14–16 May 1995.

was laid down emphatically that the WCC was to identify itself neither with the centrally-controlled communist system, nor with 'laissez faire' capitalism, but to confront both systems with the vision of a 'responsible society'.

At that time the voice of Karl Barth had a decisive influence on the discussion. He had already taken up a position on this before Amsterdam. It was above all a visit to Hungary in 1948 that gave him the opportunity to develop his thoughts on the postwar situation.² A year later, in a lecture in the city church in Thun, which was to become famous, he said:

Let us not join in this conflict! It doesn't concern us as Christians. It is not a genuine, necessary or interesting conflict. It is purely a conflict over power. We can only warn of the much greater sin of wanting to sort out this conflict by means of a third world war. All we can do is make use of the fact that we [i.e. as Swiss] are geographically 'in between' to address any easing of tension, any remnant of reason that mankind, notoriously irrational, may yet retain. All we can do is walk between the two hostile giants with the Gospel in our hearts and on our lips, pleading: 'Deliver us from evil!' ... The following question stands as a warning to us: Since the opposition between East and West consists simply in this battle of giants, how can it be Christian from any point of view to come out in support of either East or West? Is it not the case that the path of the community of Jesus Christ at present has to take *its own alternative, third direction?*³

In the early years of the existence of the WCC its leadership several times expressed criticism of communist regimes. A good example was its declaration on the Korean War, which led to considerable tensions with the church in China; and at the time of the 1956 revolution in Hungary WCC leaders, especially the general secretary, came out clearly in support of those campaigning for the renewal of the church, and it took quite a while after 1956 before relations were normalised again. Nevertheless, even when the WCC was more critical than Karl Barth – as in the case of the Hungarian revolution – it still basically followed the line he had recommended.

A profound change occurred when the Russian Orthodox Church joined the WCC in 1961. Until then, Eastern European member churches had been of Protestant orientation, but now a whole range of Orthodox Churches came in: as well as the Russian Orthodox the Romanian, Bulgarian, Serbian, Polish, Czechoslovak and Georgian Orthodox and the Armenian Apostolic Churches became members. All these churches were *terra incognita* for the WCC; the first task was to explore them. Above all the Russian Orthodox Church had largely been cut off from contacts with other churches since the 1917 Revolution. Only a few people, therefore, had an accurate picture of how things really stood within that church. It was clear from the beginning that political calculations lay behind the application for membership. What was not immediately clear, however, was that the Soviet authorities were following a twin-track strategy: on the one hand to lend increased credibility in the world at large to the concept of the 'peaceful coexistence' of systems, and on the other hand to speed up the disappearance of the churches at home. The 1960s were for the churches a period of persecution through administrative measures. I will never forget a discussion with Archpriest Vsevolod Shpiller during the meeting of the WCC Central Committee in Paris in 1962. He took me to one side to explain that when we dealt with the Russian Orthodox Church we must take account of two sets of interests: on the one side the interests of the state, and on the other the interests of the church. He begged me to intervene to ensure that the WCC would do everything to

satisfy the interests of the state, but above all to come to the aid of the church in this difficult time of persecution. The central question for the WCC was: How far could open criticism go without forcing the Russian Orthodox Church to make unjustified denials and possibly even putting its membership in jeopardy? How was this question resolved?

Stages in Relations with the Churches in Eastern Europe

Visser 't Hooft held the opinion that the churches should constantly be asked critical questions, but at the same time he worked towards creating relationships of trust. Sometimes news circulating in the media was used as the spur for letters to the churches of Eastern Europe. Sometimes news arriving at the WCC was first of all passed on to a newspaper and then later quoted in an enquiry to a church.

After the accession of the Russian Orthodox Church Fr Vitali Borovoy quickly achieved a position of trust in the WCC. In doubtful cases his judgment was accorded great significance. He basically supported a critical stance on the part of the WCC but at the same time warned against too strong an orientation towards the voice of the dissidents.

For me personally, a visit to Romania in 1964 was of great significance. The enquiries which had been directed to the Romanian Orthodox Church in the run-up to the visit had borne fruit. Two theologians under arrest were freed before the WCC delegation arrived. After the visit, and with the agreement of Visser 't Hooft, I went to see the Austrian president who was about to make an official visit to Romania immediately afterwards and handed to him a list of arrested pastors. This form of 'quiet diplomacy' was characteristic of the period.

This policy was basically continued under Visser 't Hooft's successor, Eugene Carson Blake, in office from 1966 to 1972. Blake had a slightly different perspective on things, however. He was an American and was thoroughly moulded by the civil rights movement in the United States. His main priority was the fight against racial discrimination. He was the real founder of the Programme to Combat Racism which was to dominate the life of the WCC in the following years. But he was also deeply concerned about the situation of the churches in Eastern Europe. The persecution had in fact abated after the fall of Nikita Khrushchev in 1964, but administrative controls remained a part of daily life under Leonid Brezhnev. Blake wrote critical letters again and again to the Eastern European churches, above all to the Russian Orthodox Church. I am thinking here particularly of two cases: the administrative measures against the communities in the Russian city of Gorky and in the Belorussian town of Smorgon. At that time the idea was mooted of an unofficial attempt to get in touch with the Roman Catholic Church and possibly to work out a common approach. But, just as with later attempts, this remained unsuccessful.

At the end of the 1960s and above all at the beginning of the 1970s the relations with Eastern Europe changed, because of two important factors.

In the course of the 1960s the composition of the WCC had become increasingly universal. Although the accession of the Orthodox churches had aroused the greatest interest, it should not be forgotten that the number of African and Asian churches which had applied for membership at the General Assembly in New Delhi in 1961 was much greater. The demand for worldwide solidarity became a priority in the years that followed. Relations with communism moved into a new context. The question which the WCC faced was increasingly: What role can the churches play to help end the exploitation of the countries of the Third World? Criticism of the

western economic system was, from this point of view, inescapable. For many representatives of the Third World the face of western capitalism was so odious that in comparison the face of communism appeared attractive. Criticism of communism therefore appeared to them increasingly inopportune. They had the impression that critical utterances simply supported the aims of western propaganda which was using the 'No' to communism as a means of self-justification. Against this background critical strategies became ever more difficult. I remember for example how at the beginning of the 1970s I tried to get a number of theologians from the Third World to make a public stand in favour of Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn, but without exception they turned down the idea.

The result of this development was that the Eastern European churches were dragged more and more into international church politics. In the early years of their membership they had held back, confining themselves to making use of the doors which the ecumenical movement had opened for them. But state bodies soon discovered that the churches' participation in the ecumenical movement allowed the pursuit of political advantage. The WCC was often pleased with their support for certain positions and programmes which met opposition in the West. East and West were increasingly set off against one another. A good example is the visit of general secretary Philip Potter to the two parts of Germany in 1973. On the agenda was the controversial antiracism programme which had aroused enraged opposition in the West. Potter visited the GDR first and then went to the West. The question, however, remained open and unanswered as to how far the agreement of the churches in the GDR really represented the agreement of the church members.

The participation of the Russian Orthodox Church in the ecumenical movement also had a financial dimension. The member churches in Eastern Europe were not in a position to make financial contributions in internationally convertible currency. They could only offer 'hospitality' in their own countries – for delegations and, increasingly, for WCC meetings. A new element was added at the end of the 1960s: the Russian Orthodox Church began to assume the travel costs of church delegates, above all from the Third World, who were taking part in ecumenical meetings. The condition was that the tickets could be paid for in roubles and that meant, as a rule, that they had to travel via Moscow. In this way Moscow became the focal point for a lively 'ecumenical traffic'.

A New Stage in the 1970s – Détente

The détente policy of the early 1970s again created a new situation. How was this policy to be evaluated? What attitude in this new geopolitical situation was most helpful – in the short and longer term – for the churches? In those years a considerable debate arose at the level of official WCC committees as well as among the staff.

It was obvious that the WCC had to support détente. Had it not declared from the start that a third world war must be prevented? Had it not always warned of the dangers of a conflict conducted with nuclear weapons? The efforts towards 'security and cooperation' in Europe had, then, to be welcomed by the churches. On the other hand, no one disputed the precarious position of the churches in Eastern Europe. Détente itself soon led to a huge growth in the quantity of news reaching the West. The symbol of the Helsinki Agreement gave many in Eastern Europe, who had previously remained silent, the courage to step out into the open.

Divergence began on the question of what role the churches should play in this new situation. The view was put forward – above all in the Churches' Commission

on International Affairs (CCIA) – that everything must be done to make the Helsinki Agreement a success. Above all, the task now was to build trust. All criticism, which brought with it the danger of a hardening of the two fronts, must therefore be avoided. Public statements criticising particular violations of human rights should preferably not be made in this new situation. There was a continuing concern about becoming harnessed into the machinery of western anticommunist propaganda. Information which reached the WCC was often branded as ‘one-sided’ and protests as ‘not helpful’.

In October 1974 a meeting on the question of human rights took place in St Pölten in Austria, organised by the CCIA. It set itself the task of defining what the basic human rights were. With the Helsinki Agreement in mind, the ‘dialogue of the deaf’ between East and West was to be overcome. The churches were to show that the ‘collective’ (social) and ‘civil’ (political) human rights were not to be played off against each other. The points on which the St Pölten meeting laid emphasis remain of significance today. It was certainly a good thing that the western world should remind itself about the basic social rights in view of the horrendous economic injustice that exists today. However, the meeting *de facto* gave too little weight to individual rights. The right to religious freedom is in fact mentioned in the list of six basic rights, but it is characteristic that it was only in the course of the meeting – mainly thanks to the interventions of Archpriest Vitali Borovoy – that it was added. Many participants had initially felt that the demand for religious freedom might be misused by the West. The St Pölten meeting laid the ideological foundation for the years to come.

Another group among the staff, to which I myself belonged, believed that the time was now right to use every opportunity for critical intervention. The critical voices which were now being heard in and around the churches in Eastern Europe should be supported as seriously as possible. Dissidents should be able to recognise an advocate in the WCC and the church leaderships should feel that developments in their churches were being followed closely. Certainly, *détente* should be promoted, but *détente* should for its part also contribute to the promotion of critical dialogue with the churches in Eastern Europe.

A few examples will serve to illustrate the debates of that time.

At the end of 1974 and the beginning of 1975 the trial and sentencing of the Baptist pastor Georgi Vins took place in the Soviet Union. I became aware of a letter that Andrei Sakharov had written to the WCC. After a great deal of effort I succeeded in having a letter sent to the Ministry of Justice of the USSR. As expected the letter remained unanswered. Should it then be published? After long hesitation it was finally, in January 1975, made public.

This affair caused so many arguments that it was decided that a group of staff members should be charged with the task of drawing up an internal memorandum on relations with the churches of Eastern Europe. The actual drafting fell to me. The text was ready in February 1975. But there was no follow-up. The proposals and recommendations were not taken up.

In April 1975 a delegation of representatives was sent to the Soviet Union. At the end of 1975 the Fifth General Assembly was to take place in Nairobi. It therefore seemed worthwhile to establish deeper contact with the Russian Orthodox Church. From the staff Brigalia Bam, C. I. Itty, Stanley Samartha and I joined the delegation. Discussions with Metropolitan Nikodim were unusually open. At the meeting with the representative of the state Council for Religious Affairs, Titov, there was detailed discussion about the German congregations in Siberia.

Before the visit, in close collaboration with the institute Glaube in der Zweiten Welt (in Zollikon near Zürich), I arranged for the translation of a number of theological and ecumenical texts into Russian, including a study of faith and science. I used the visit to seek out Andrei Sakharov unofficially. I asked him if he was prepared to send a memorandum to the WCC on the position of the churches if required. He replied that he could arrange this with church friends. He showed an interest in the Russian texts we had brought along.

In March I received at the WCC a petition from several thousand Volga Germans who wished to leave the Soviet Union. It was addressed to the Conference on Security and Cooperation in Europe. The question was how it could be brought to the attention of the Conference. An enquiry of the ambassador of the Federal Republic of Germany established that Bonn was not prepared to associate itself with it. In the end it was the International Commission of Jurists that took it up.

The opposing views within the World Council of Churches came into particularly sharp conflict at the General Assembly in Nairobi. The open letter addressed to the General Assembly by Gleb Yakunin and Lev Regelson sparked a full-scale heated debate, initially at the General Assembly itself but lasting for a lot longer.

The letter had apparently been arranged by Andrei Sakharov. The authors had sent it to several addresses in the West. I received it shortly before the opening of the General Assembly from friends in the United States. I handed copies in Russian and English to the leadership of the General Assembly. The letter turned into real dynamite when it was published in full in the bulletin of the General Assembly. The Russian Orthodox delegation was not prepared for the criticism that followed. After the delegation of April 1975 a second delegation from the Churches' Commission on International Affairs had visited the Russian Orthodox Church and dispelled all 'fears'. When as a result of the open letter the candidature of Metropolitan Nikodim for the WCC presidium was put into question the consternation within the Russian Orthodox delegation was complete.

The debate on the Helsinki Agreement and human rights in Europe at the General Assembly was profoundly affected by the difference of opinion. The declaration issued on this theme is a telling witness to this.⁴ It reflects something of the tension that existed at that time.

At the same time the debate resulted in noticeable tensions within the WCC staff. These were increased by unfounded suspicions on the part of some staff members. Some people were saying that the unresolved conflict over relations with Eastern Europe had been exploited in order to undermine the authority of the general secretary. An article in the East German press even spoke of a 'well-prepared conspiracy' by Reformed delegates from Western Europe.

On 30 January 1976 the Russian Orthodox Church suspended Gleb Yakunin as a priest and he was later sentenced to several years' imprisonment.

The next two meetings of the Central Committee, especially that of summer 1976, were dominated by the theme of human rights. The arguments were not simple. News about the situation as well as signs of growing dissident activity in the Eastern European churches had become ever more abundant. But the defensive attitude of the authorities had grown correspondingly. However effectively the Helsinki Agreement might offer a general framework for détente and contacts, it did not overcome the confrontation of the superpowers. Deterrence of the enemy remained the order of the day. Concern about peace came more and more to the centre of attention. On one side, the view was advanced that in the long term only nuclear weapons could guarantee peace. On the other side, the emphasis was all put on 'confidence-building

measures'. Contacts were to provide the basis for cooperation. While on one side violations of human rights were exploited for propaganda purposes, on the other there were attempts to prevent the hardening of the two fronts.

The arguments in the Central Committee resulted directly in the World Council of Churches withdrawing somewhat from direct responsibility for the promotion of human rights within the framework of the Helsinki Agreement. Some believed that the question was a specifically European one which was primarily the responsibility of the Conference of European Churches. It was argued – with some justification – that the Western European churches could not expect the WCC to achieve a task which was their own responsibility to tackle. In the years that followed the Conference of European Churches devoted more attention to the issue of human rights. But naturally it too faced the same difficulties, and the individual West European churches were also working within the same basic framework as the WCC. The initiative on making protests came increasingly at the national level, and protests were made not so much by official church leaderships as by human rights groups and movements within the churches. Among the churches which made solidarity with dissident groups a commitment the Dutch Reformed Church should above all be mentioned.

A Critical Evaluation

Even today I still believe that the option of a 'third way' was basically correct. The church could not in fact identify and link itself with one of the competing systems. This is today clearer than ever: after the collapse of the communist system in Eastern Europe the churches face the western system with all its opportunities and injustices. The need for a critical witness is clear.

The carrying through of this option was, however, never easy. A 'third way' requires a serious witness to both sides – it can become practicable only when two critical paths are followed at the same time. But neither the WCC nor the individual Western European churches achieved this satisfactorily. The clarity of vision got lost again and again – or perhaps increasingly – in the confusion of political constellations.

The World Council of Churches, as well as the other ecumenical organisations, did not get involved enough in a critique of the ideological bases of the communist system. The rather simplistic thesis of Karl Barth that the 'No' to communism goes without saying and therefore does not need to be expressly repeated was adopted too quickly. A more thorough debate with the ideological roots of communism should however have been vital in the confusions of the Cold War. Above all when the Marxist body of thought became a source of hope for many theologians from the Third World a critical elucidation of Soviet and Eastern European Marxism should have been even more important.

The Western European churches started with the much too obvious assumption that the communist system and the opposing great powers were here to stay. Even in their own minds, then, they lacked inner freedom to identify with the protest of the dissidents. They also started from the assumption that 'politically' the dissidents had no future.

The World Council of Churches was well aware throughout of the questionable nature of many partners in the ecumenical movement. It has to be said, however, that there was not enough reflection about the implications of ecumenical contacts. How much did they involve being tarred with the same brush as the church leaderships in

Eastern Europe? How much should the support for ecumenical programmes by certain church leaderships have been taken at face value? How much were they supported by church members? It must certainly be said that in general the contacts with the churches in Eastern Europe were not used enough to establish contacts with the 'grass roots'.

When all is said and done, however, and despite these limitations, a sense of community did grow up over the last few decades which should not be underestimated. Many individual contacts of hitherto invisible significance are only now coming to light. Many signs confirm that the option for a 'third way' also bore positive fruits on those occasions when it was thoroughly carried through. While the need for self-criticism should be recognised, these fruits should not be forgotten.

Notes and References

- ¹ Ruth Rouse and Stephen Neill, *A History of the Ecumenical Movement 1517–1948* (SPCK, London, 1954).
- ² Karl Barth, *Christliche Gemeinde im Wechsel der Staatsordnung* (Zürich, 1948).
- ³ Karl Barth, *Die Kirche zwischen Ost und West* (Zürich, 1949), pp. 9ff.
- ⁴ David M. Paton (ed.), *Breaking Barriers* (Nairobi, 1975; London, 1976), pp. 172–74.

(Translated from the German by Felix Corley)