

The “gadfly” on trial:
the “political” commitment
of the World Council of Churches

Alexandros Papaderos

- Reprinted from Voices of Unity, essays in honour of Willem Adolf Visser 't Hooft on the occasion of his 80th birthday, Geneva, WCC, 1981.

The “gadfly” on trial: the “political” commitment of the World Council of Churches

*Alexandros Papaderos**

And so, men of Athens, I am now making my defence not for my own sake, as one might imagine, but far more for yours, that you may not by condemning me err in your treatment of the gift God gave you. For if you put me to death, you will not easily find another, who, to use a rather absurd figure, attaches himself to the city as a gadfly to a horse, which, though large and well bred, is sluggish on account of his size and needs to be aroused by stinging. I think the god fastened me upon the city in some such capacity, and I go about arousing, and urging and reproaching each one of you, constantly alighting upon you everywhere the whole day long. Such another is not likely to come to you, gentlemen; but if you take my advice, you will spare me. But you, perhaps, might be angry, like people awakened from a nap, and might slap me, as Anytos advises, and easily kill me; then you would pass the rest of your lives in slumber, unless God, in his care for you, should send someone to sting you.¹

When I was invited to provide an Orthodox comment on the “political” commitment of the World Council of Churches for this festschrift, I immediately recalled this moving and prophetic passage from Plato. Thereafter, it pursued *me* as a “gadfly,” leading me to concentrate on the “gadfly” role of the ecumenical movement in general and the World Council of Churches in particular. Though I can only guess at the *daimonion* which possessed the pioneers of the modern ecumenical movement, I am convinced that we should have had neither an ecumenical movement nor a World Council of Churches if these pioneers had not been provided as heaven-sent “gadflies” to arouse the churches, spur them, reprove them — and certainly to trouble them too!

* Dr. ALEXANDROS PAPADEROS is Director of the Orthodox Academy of Crete.

1. From Plato, *Apology*, 18, tr. H. N. Fowler (Loeb Classical Library) (Cambridge, Mass., 1966), pp. 111-13.

This is especially true of the man to whom this volume is dedicated. May he continue to be the *Batouchka*, the spiritual leader, the "little father" that the Russian Orthodox long ago saw him to be.² Willem A. Visser 't Hooft will certainly be remembered by the church as the most persistent "gadfly" of world Christianity in the twentieth century.

But the World Council of Churches, which he laboriously constructed with prophetic devotion, has for some years been on trial. Socrates, who already "lived with the Logos" long before the incarnation of the Logos,³ was accused of "atheism"; he did indeed preach "new *daimonia*" — truths which astonished the "pious" and gave them offense, "words which, like bees, sting and perish in stinging" (in the phrase of Odysseas Elytis, *To Axion Esti*); words which lead the one who utters them to his death. The dangerous truths and stinging words of the ecumenical movement, forced on the attention of contemporary churches and Christians by the World Council of Churches, often have the same effect as the mordant bites of the gadfly. It was obviously too much to expect Anytos — Socrates' chief accuser — to ignore such a disturbance of his slumbers. The critics therefore assumed the task of the *diabolos* and incited the Athenians to initiate a prosecution in order to get the insect out of the way before it was too late. The trial had already lasted a few years. The judges, the accusers, and the charges change from time to time; but the trial itself still continues, sometimes amid great tensions, sometimes in a lower key, while additional incriminatory evidence is awaited.

It is understandable that Orthodoxy should take part in this trial, for the ecumenical gadfly has made itself felt in a quite special degree in our body as well. It is certainly no exaggeration to say that, second only to the predominance of an atheistic system of government in many Orthodox countries, the ecumenical movement represents the major challenge to Orthodoxy in this century. For although we should not minimize Orthodoxy's own contribution to the creation of the ecumenical movement — indeed, to the claim of the movement to be called ecumenical at all — it nevertheless constitutes the first massive challenge of Protestantism to Orthodox Christianity. This is so above all because of the more or less dominant presence of the Reforma-

2. Cf. W.A. Visser 't Hooft, *Memoirs* (London, 1973), p. 271.

3. In the words of Justin Martyr: "We have been taught that Christ was First-begotten of God (the Father) and we have indicated above that he is the Word of whom *all mankind* partakes. Those who lived by reason are Christians, even though they have been considered atheists: such as, among the Greeks, Socrates, Heraclitus, and others like them." Tr. by T.B. Falls, in *The Fathers of the Church: A New Translation. The Writings of St. Justin Martyr* (Washington, 1948), p. 83.

tion churches in the ecumenical movement from the very beginning and the likelihood that this dominant presence will continue in the foreseeable future. Both theologically and in socio-political terms, this represents a permanent challenge for Orthodoxy.

But the Orthodox position on the socio-political commitment of the World Council of Churches is not and cannot indeed be a uniform one. So far, Orthodoxy has offered only partial answers. Nor can a pan-Orthodox answer on the basis of common reflections be expected in the near future, unless the projected Great and Holy Synod were to meet soon and also be able to discuss this important question (as is the intention). Even then, the answer could not be complete and final, since the challenge itself is not uniform or unalterable. What Orthodoxy perceives in its encounter with Protestantism in the setting of the ecumenical movement is a polyphony which is not always in harmony.

But it is not only this polyphony, further reinforced by global political and cultural tensions, which makes any uniform response by Orthodoxy impossible. It is even difficult for Orthodoxy itself to achieve a harmonious symphony on the contemporary social and political field. The context in which Orthodoxy lives today is marked by an extremely diverse pluralism, permitting only a polyphonic expression of the self-awareness and world-outlook of the Orthodox Christian, which were once more or less uniform.⁴ It is only to be hoped that among these many sounds the inner harmony of the Orthodox ethos can be maintained. To give an answer, based on this Orthodox ethos, to the socio-political challenge of the ecumenical movement and above all of the present world situation is a long overdue Orthodox responsibility. Recent steps in this direction have unfortunately been very few, though encouraging in themselves.⁵ To a certain extent these constitute a solid starting point.

4. Cf. A. Papaderos, "Das liturgische Selbst- und Weltbewusstsein des byzantinischen Menschen," in *Kyros*, IV, No. 3 (1964), 206ff.

5. In addition to the Pan-Orthodox Conferences, which have been held since 1961, and the 2nd Pan-Orthodox Conference of Theologians (Athens, 1976; cf. *Procès-Verbaux du Deuxième Congrès de Théologie Orthodoxe*, Athens, 1978), we should mention two consultations documented in C. Patelos, ed., *The Orthodox Church in the Ecumenical Movement* (Geneva, 1978) — those on "Confessing Christ Today" (Rumania, 1974) and on "The Church's Struggle for Justice and Unity" (Crete, 1975); also the 1977 Valamo Consultation on "The Ecumenical nature of the Orthodox Witness," published as a paper by the WCC Orthodox Task Force; and the 1978 consultation in Crete on "Church and Service: The Orthodox Approach to Diaconia," from which my paper "Liturgische Diakonie" has been published as a manuscript (Otterbach, 1979).

Comfort and pleasure?

In every court case the first question is the identity of the accused. He must say himself who he is before the case can begin, before the prosecutor and defense counsel can begin to outline their own picture. What the World Council of Churches is intended to be has been discussed, decided, and formulated by the member churches together in statements and agreements. But what has this produced? How does the World Council of Churches really view itself?

Let me focus first on a characteristic statement. When Eugene Carson Blake welcomed the Ecumenical Patriarch Athenagoras to the Geneva headquarters of the WCC on November 6, 1967, he compared the World Council of Churches to a building created by the churches for "pleasure" and "use." But this building was still far from completion. More rooms would be required as the ecumenical family grew. Thus the plans had to be changed constantly in order to ensure greater "pleasure" and "usefulness!"⁶ Dr Blake's metaphor would have given the false impression that the WCC's main task is to offer the member churches pleasure and comfort, if he had not concluded by referring to the danger a building brings with it — that of its occupants' settling down in peaceful isolation. I am convinced that not a few Christians, perhaps even many member churches, look to the Council more for pleasure and comfort than for stings from the gadfly. Were the Council itself to endorse this expectation, it would certainly have failed in one of its major tasks, that of being "a continuous constructive challenge to the churches," as Metropolitan Meliton of Chalcedon said in a commentary on the Uppsala Assembly.⁷ In view of this danger, it seems appropriate here to address to the World Council of Churches some questions raised by the passage from Plato.

— For whose sake does the WCC in each specific case defend itself in this continuing trial? For its own sake or for the sake of the "Athenians?"

— Does the WCC still regard itself as a gift of God to Christendom, and does it recognize that this gift is not an end in itself, nor is its purpose some goal chosen by the Council itself, but really only these "Athenians" themselves, even when they come forward as its accusers?

— Has it really been the conviction of the WCC — to which it still cleaves — that it does have its own quite specific task to fulfil and that it has therefore been given by God "to the city as a gadfly?"

— Does it continue to sting the large horse which is prone to sluggishness, even to be a deliberate nuisance to it? Or has it become so alarmed by the

6. Cf. Patelos, *op. cit.*, pp. 251ff.

7. *Ibid.*, p. 294.

horse's reactions that it now strikes it gently, even at the risk of sending it into deeper slumber? Does it not sometimes even seem inclined to imagine itself transformed into a noble steed and to accept laziness as its proper station in life?

— How acute is the danger for the "Athenians" themselves? Will they continue thankfully to support the WCC, instead of condemning it? Or, following Anytos, will they become morose and frivolously condemn it, destroy it so they can be free to sleep on with untroubled conscience?

The World Council of Churches and the temptation of power

The tempting of the saints by power is a permanent challenge in Christian life, from which not even the World Council of Churches is exempt. For in its dealings with power, it is always in danger — whether it is powerful or powerless — of acting in such a way that power actually tempts it. It can either come under the thumb of those who possess power in this world, or, because of its own concentration of power, come to trust in power and to adopt in its own thinking and action the attitude of the powerful.

In the first place, the Council can fall victim to power structures within the ecumenical fellowship itself. Those member churches which dispose of wealth in one form or other (wealth of tradition, or spirituality, or revolutionary zeal, or missionary experience, or money, or relief service, or connections with economic interests; or even member churches under pressure from ideological or military blocs) may perhaps be tempted to get their own way and seek to manipulate the WCC in the direction they choose. The World Council, it is then said, must have a more "vertical," less "horizontal" orientation; it should be more conservative or more eager for revolution, less "profane," more "spiritual," "more cautious" or "more courageous," ideologically neutral or ideologically committed, against militarism, of course, but careful not to risk jobs in the arms industries; it should resolutely seek peace, yet, for all that, not underestimate the need for the balance of terror ... and so on and so on!

The World Council, moreover, is not exempt from the danger which confronts us all, namely, that of being confronted by the powerful of this world in such a way that these can commit us as Christians and churches to their own policies and in their own interests, forcing us into an alliance with them or at least ensuring themselves of our silence by intimidating us or turning us into helpless robots serving their ends.

But it seems to me that the real danger facing the World Council in relation to power lies in its own self-awareness. For we need no reminder how strong the original diabolical temptation remains, whispering to us that we might be

something different — indeed something more — and tempting us to break out of our real existence as defined. I have already referred to the danger of the Council's one day yielding to the temptation to be no longer a mere gadfly and to become instead a noble steed! I am not referring here primarily to the desire sometimes attributed to the Council of becoming a super church. Many of the earlier suspicions of this seem to have been dispelled. I am referring, rather, to the charge that the Council overestimates itself and gives the impression that it is really in a position to penetrate the contemporary power structures of politics, militarism, economics, technology, science, racism, sexism, exploitation, ideological controversy, and the mass media, and to bring about an effective change in their substance or direction.

The frantic way some member churches — and even non-church circles — react favourably or unfavourably to this or that social or political initiative of the World Council gives the impression that they believe it is really in a position to realize what is hoped for or to avoid what is feared in each case. If the World Council of Churches itself were to come to believe this, it would mean, as I see it, that the Council had completely misunderstood the essence of its socio-political task: namely, that of being simply a gadfly, a voice in the wilderness, a sign of hope, a signpost to him who alone is the way from the hopelessness of our human situation.⁸ The WCC would then also have failed to accomplish another important task of the ecumenical movement, that of offering the churches the possibility of exchanging their experiences in their dealings with power in the past and today, in the hope that this or that church might thereby be delivered more easily from its own dreams of power and recognize where its real power lies, in the foolishness of the cross! In its gadfly role, at any rate, the WCC, for all its powerlessness, will never be able to abandon the difficult task of challenging — as the crucified Christ did — the principalities and powers (sometimes even the "spiritual" principalities and powers) of this world.

Masking and unmasking

A few years ago, in the Greece of the "Colonels" a sermon by Metropolitan Meliton of Chalcedon was broadcast over the radio. The sermon, preached at the beginning of Lent, provoked considerable excitement. It was a hymn in praise of the carnival, in praise of masks. These masks allow us, at least once a year, to appear in public without hesitation as the people we really are all the time. On this day we are not afraid to wear our "face" in

8. Cf. W.A. Visser 't Hooft, *No Other Name: The Choice Between Syncretism and Christian Universalism* (London, 1963).

public, whereas the rest of the year we are compelled to live and suffer in the fear of being unmasked.

I often wonder whether the fear the WCC awakens in some of us cannot in part be traced back to the fact that it is constantly confronting us with decisions which have the same effect on us as an unmasking. For making believe, pretending to be, is certainly one of our favourite habits. How often we resist the question, "What are you really like?" But this question is constantly being addressed to us in the ecumenical fellowship, whenever we are faced with concrete problems and tasks which shake our normal assumptions and behaviour and force us to put our cards on the table. At the Eighth Assembly of the Conference of European Churches in Crete in 1979, when the message of welcome from the Ecumenical Patriarch Dimitrios officially urged the Roman Catholic Church to become a full member of the Conference,⁹ embarrassment seemed to run like an electric current through the assembly hall. Everyone suddenly realized that this specific invitation acted as a touchstone for ecumenical honesty and maturity on all sides.

We can all recall similar and even more critical moments of ecumenical unmasking, however limited our ecumenical experience may be. For example, some have not rested content with mere phrases about human rights, racism, minorities, refugees, but have been prepared to uncover, unmask, the whole complex of root causes of such evils. Even when we reject some particular WCC venture into the social and political realm, indeed, precisely *because* we reject it, we are drawn into a process of inner tension. We find ourselves called upon not only to justify ourselves to others but also to question our own real grounds for repudiating this venture. Here, too, we can find ourselves unmasked. However painful the stings of conscience resulting from direct confrontation with concrete realities may be, we should surely be grateful to the ecumenical movement for this special ministry — all the more so since it is impossible to say for sure which is the more painful, the unmasking of our own face or the unmasking of our brother's. In either case, the pain caused is a healing one, especially perhaps when it exposes our assimilation to the powers and structures of this world and makes us aware of our powerlessness, in the isolation of our dividedness, effectively to fulfil the prophetic ministry entrusted to us.

The stinging "thou"

Strictly speaking, it is not the World Council of Churches itself which performs the gadfly role, but the confrontation which it brings about between

9. For the full text see the report of the assembly, *Unity in the Spirit — Diversity in the Churches*, pp. 50f.

the churches, and with facts which challenge, arouse, and stimulate them, just as gadflies become obtrusive and persistent. In the initial phase of the ecumenical era, this was precisely the effect of the mere encounter of the churches with one another. Suddenly representatives of churches founded by the apostles had to sit down at the same table with "young" churches, venerable patriarchs with lay theologians, even with women, and act with them on an equal footing, sometimes having even to be content with secondary positions and silently to put up with public marginalization. On the other hand, Christians keen for reform had to exercise patience with a ponderous and imposing ritual.

Again, representatives of nations which had recently clashed in war met together while the wounds were still unhealed, hearts were still heavy with guilt, bitterness, suspicion, or even perhaps illusory victory. Centuries-old assumptions clashed with each other and were shaken; firm convictions were called in question. At every turn, people were confronted with differences all the more stinging because of their mutual claims to validity: different religious experiences, different ways of thinking and arguing about theology, different views as to the tasks of the church, different individual and church life-styles. All these were painful stings for everyone concerned, and they were able to bear them patiently and experience them as creative spurs prodding them forward only because they were sincerely searching for fellowship and unity in the power of the Holy Spirit.

Stinging facts

As I have said, confronting the church with facts is the second way the World Council of Churches has to perform its role as gadfly. It is not always clear, here, what the "rock of offense" really is in each particular case. Is it the way the WCC acts or what it actually does? Is it really the way grants from the Special Fund of the Programme to Combat Racism are allocated that provokes the notorious controversy, or is it perhaps the fear that as a result of this grant a given church may find itself in conflict with forces and vested interests in its own milieu which depend on the continuance of the *status quo*? In either case, this or that church is made to feel the sting of facts, especially in the case of programmes with a direct political relevance. The special element in this context is of course that the "facts" we are confronted with no longer relate exclusively to our immediate area of mission but embrace distant areas and situations which are not so easy for us to understand. For one of the great blessings conferred on the churches by the ecumenical movement is the way it has helped them to come out of their isolation and provincialism and to encounter world Christendom. Since all of

us are constantly tempted to think and act in this way, the World Council of Churches is surely indispensable to the churches here in its role as a "gadfly." All the more so in view of the fact that, despite the enrichment of our macrodimensional experience of ecumenism and world politics, we are always tempted to cling instead to our microdimensional habits.¹⁰

Indolent silence

All of us are constantly being summoned to account not only for our speaking but also for our silences. The indolence which inclines us to silence is another of those church habits from which the World Council of Churches should help to free us by its gadfly stings. Certainly there is a silence which is holy. The Christian mystics, like the mystics of all religions and like Christian piety generally, are familiar with the sense of the *mysterium tremendum*, that dread mystery before which one can only keep silence in reverence and astonishment.¹¹ In complete contrast to this however, there is a sinful and guilty silence often cultivated by those of us whose business it is to speak, especially those of us who have to speak up for those who must remain silent. If it is a virtue to remain silent when injustice is done to us, it is certainly a sin not to speak when the unjustly treated are before our eyes. The silence which is the fruit of fear, of lack of love and courage, or even a tactic dictated by self-interest is certainly not the silence approved by God.

Here once again we have to acknowledge the sluggishness of the horse, the most ancient and the most modern tendency of the people of God and its leaders. The whole history of salvation, Old Testament and New, is surely characterized by that all-too-familiar and matter-of-course apathy of silence; so much so, indeed, that prophecy, the protest against silence, seems almost a mere pause for thought before a correction of course. And yet we know that God never leaves his church for long without the gadflies, without those "fools," those prophets and martyrs who even in our day raise their voices and let the world know "that all these things — these concessions, this docility, these compromises, as well as the traditional truces between the Church and the earthly powers — are evil."¹²

Nevertheless, although we know that the *orge* — the wrath — of God hangs over us when we ignore the prophets and despise prophecy, we go on

10. On the problem of our micro- and macro-dimensional tasks, see my "Liturgische Diakonie," pp. 11, 21f.

11. This is the terminology first used by R. Otto, *The Idea of the Holy* (London, 1926).

12. Quoted from A. Solzhenitsyn, *Kirche und Politik*, ed. P. Ingold and I. Rakosa (Zürich, 1973), pp. 68f.

doing so again and again, preferring silence to speaking at the right time and place and in the right way. It must be recognized and humbly confessed that even Orthodoxy is no exception to this rule, despite the great host of its fathers and saints of old and of today who, because they have spoken when "sensible" people were keeping quiet, have suffered torture and martyrdom. I am not referring here to the conduct of our spiritual leaders during the long period of alien rule over our Orthodox peoples, for in this respect the church has again and again proved to be the pioneer of liberation. Nor am I referring to the "symphony" between Church and State, which is not always correctly understood by our Western brothers and sisters. I am referring principally to the way the misuse of this "symphony" has been tolerated, its reduction to a usurpatory "monophony" on the part of the State, deliberate cooperation in the "reconciliation" of contradictory data, the closing of our eyes and ears to crying social injustice, our indolent persistence with familiar platitudes so that the *kairos* passed us by and did not return.

Partisanship or neutrality

Finally, a brief discussion of the problem of neutrality is appropriate, since it is often used to excuse our indolence.

The criticism levelled at the WCC is usually not directed against its social and political commitment as such. In principle, there seems to be general agreement that the World Council of Churches has social and political tasks to fulfil, especially since the member churches can hardly oppose what they themselves are already doing (though some of them occasionally level charges at the WCC which could easily be turned back on themselves; cf. Rom. 2:1). Certainly no one wants the Christian family represented in the ecumenical movement to lag behind what even the Roman Catholic Church and many Christian and secular organizations are doing in the social and political field. For the World Council of Churches has a long history of pioneering work in this field. Quite apart from that, the member churches would also be guilty of inconsistency if they wished to prevent the Council from carrying out social and political tasks which they themselves have entrusted to it. The attacks so often made, therefore, are not on the social and political commitment as such but rather on its *status* and its *direction*.

It is asserted, in the first place, that the social and political commitment is increasingly being given too high a status among the activities of the Council. The question which needs to be asked is whether it really is a case of *too much* social and political commitment. By what standard is this judged? Can it possibly be the actual distress of a world tortured by famine, injustice, and exploitation? Or the measure of the evil to be mastered, along with all its

labyrinthine dehumanizing structures? It would certainly be impossible to measure the work of the WCC against all that. Such a comparison would certainly cut it down to size. More important still, it would be absurd if it were to give the impression that the Council is already so gripped by the temptation to power as really to believe it has the power or the assignment to rid the world of all this evil!

No matter how much some enthusiasts and social ideologues may occasionally try to sidetrack this or that debate in that direction, those who hold responsible positions in the Council are surely remote from any such temptation. Obviously, therefore, the criterion is not *too much* social and political commitment, but *too little*, that is, too little promotion of the goals which some member churches have seen from the very beginning as the *real* tasks of the Council, which alone justify its existence. According to some critics, these goals, which focus on concern for the spiritual renewal of the church and efforts for its unity, have been increasingly neglected if not laid aside completely.

Here I cannot dwell on this in any detail or offer even a provisional reckoning of previous efforts to achieve theological agreement and visible, tangible unity. It is not easy to recognize advances in this area, much less to measure them statistically. They are not sensational news for the daily press and make no direct impact on the wider public. But the question is how far we have to seek our unity first and foremost in theological reflection and sacramental fellowship or need to test, recognize, and experience it also at the same time in our confrontation with the social and political challenges of our time.

It was not by chance that, in the famous 1920 Encyclical of the Ecumenical Patriarchate, priority should have been given to the joint fulfilment of "practical" tasks by the churches. What prompted this was not simply a recognition of the risk of starting out ecumenical rapprochement with theological discussions. Nor can the recommended preference for what today is called "horizontalism" be adequately explained by the post-war situation in 1920. In addition to these factors there was undoubtedly also the conviction that shared commitment on behalf of humanity in Christ's name would also make it easier to recognize unity and strive for it.

Today, after all the experiences we have been through together, we should ask ourselves: How far is it true to say that there really has been a shift of the priorities of the World Council of Churches in the direction of social and political commitment? And if there has been such a shift, we must ask how far social and political commitment can promote the cause of unity or injure it.

It would require a detailed survey of the entire history of the ecumenical movement to answer the first of these questions. On the whole, however, I think it would be fair to say that, if there *has* been any shift in the priorities of the World Council of Churches, it has been in the opposite direction to that which is usually assumed, namely, *at the expense of social commitment rather than to its advantage*. The basis for this bold assertion is the fact that ecumenical reflection and cooperation originated above all in the desire that the churches should respond effectively to crying social needs, and the fact that many of these needs were to some extent met with an astonishing vigour and an exemplary commitment of persons and resources under the ecumenical banner, both in the period before the Second World War as well as immediately following it. But this commitment, with its primary focus on the relief of need, also produced at the same time the great turning point in the quest for unity. Would anyone seriously argue that theological discussions, however skilled and intensive, could ever have achieved even a fraction of what was immediately achieved in the advancement of Christian unity by that total Christian commitment? For example, in dispelling mutual ignorance and a whole range of prejudices, in breaking down barriers, in bringing to light the diversity of God's gifts to his people, in renewing the congregations, but also in engendering fresh theological thinking on ecclesiological, anthropological, ethical, and social issues, not only discussed interconfessionally for the first time but also grasped and experienced existentially at the level of personal relationships. Certainly an equivalent commitment with similar positive effects on the ecumenical climate and the advancement of unity has no longer been evident in recent years.

As for the question of the direction of ecumenical social and political commitment, there has undoubtedly been a shift. But this shift seems to me qualitative rather than quantitative. It is not a question of "more" or "less" but rather of the *objective* of what is striven for and done. This shift goes hand in hand with a *changed understanding of mission* in recent world missionary conferences (Mexico City 1963, Bangkok 1972/1973, and more recently still Melbourne 1980), in which the wholeness of the human being has become more and more the focus of interest, and which reaffirms the indivisibility of salvation and human well-being and emphasizes the relevance of the kingdom of God for this world here and now.

Direction here means *partisanship*, a daring and perhaps even dangerous tendency of the World Council of Churches (as is often asserted). This is clearly the old and still unsolved problem of the justified or unjustified

neutrality of the Christian commitment. Some persons overlook the inherent contradiction between these two concepts: commitment necessarily implies a rejection of neutrality. It was thought once that neutrality pointed in no particular direction. Thus the thing to do in the work of the Christian academies, for example, was to provide a neutral forum for encounter and controversy, hoping that truth would emerge triumphant. But even this view has been shaken. It has been realized that neutrality of this kind only appears to be above the parties, whereas in fact it is extremely partisan, since it allows the *status quo* to appear to be just as legitimate as every new alternative striven for on the basis of Christian commitment.

Meanwhile, thanks to the social and political commitment of the World Council of Churches, and the theology developed as a result of wrestling with this commitment, many of us have come to see that the eschatological Exodus initiated in Jesus was a clear rejection of the *status quo* and that his gospel counts for those who count for nothing. It is directed to all human beings who are "poor," that is, who are ready to become poor, who are willing not to "purchase" the grace of God with what they have and are but to receive God's love and deliverance in complete solidarity with those who have nothing and are nothing.

Those who have much and therefore think they are something have some quite understandable difficulty with the biblical passages now emphasized: Jesus became poor, not rich (2 Cor. 9:9); he identified himself with the cause of the poor, not with that of the rich (Matt. 25:21f.); the kingdom of God is promised to the poor, not to the rich (Matt. 5:3; James 2:5).

But these difficulties can only be surmounted by those who are willing in the end to understand that where Christ makes himself known to them they will not be dealing with a pallid ethics of "love of the neighbour" but with the basic ontological categories of ecclesiology, as epitomized in the principle *ubi Christus, ibi Ecclesia*. This elementary truth exposes the absurdity of any expectation that the unity of the church can either be maintained or restored by observing strict neutrality towards social and political controversy. By the very attachment of our church tradition to space and time, by the pressures of the social and political conditions in which we have to live, and by our own personal lives, we already belong to a "party," we already takes sides (wittingly or unwittingly), we are already subject to the party line and used or even misused by the party. It hardly seems possible for us any longer, therefore, to understand, strive for, and achieve — that is, be able to experience — our unity as a socio-political "symphony" as well. "*The goal is not a fellowship exempt from conflict but one which is reconciled by*

God."¹³ This statement by the Council of the Evangelical Church in Germany points in the only possible direction in which we can all confidently strive.

We have here a primary task which all of us must seek to carry out at all levels, from the congregations to the supreme courts of the church, as well as in our dialogue with people of different experiences, religions, cultures, and ideologies. On the way towards this "fellowship in controversy," reconciled by God and with God, we shall perhaps also recognize it as our specific Christian mission to help to change, and so to reconcile, the forces which are the source of conflicts today between people and nations. The criterion by which the member churches should judge the pioneer programmes which the World Council of Churches is commissioned by its decision-making bodies to carry out, and the initiatives it takes, and even perhaps its seemingly utopian models of a future world order ought not simply to be the likelihood of their achievement or their potential for complicating the relationships of this or that church with the state or industry. Their essential and most valuable function is a "signalling" one. They are signposts which may perhaps also have the effect of a "gadfly" sting, prodding the life of our churches awake when we are tempted as we usually are to remain in our indolence.

Those who dissociate themselves from these contemporary tasks of Christendom will hardly be in a position to excuse themselves by pretending that the work of the ecumenical movement in general and that of the World Council of Churches in particular has not provided us with the requisite equipment for these tasks: mature theological and socio-political insights, an extensive and varied ecumenical body of material, instrumental and other resources for the work of ecumenical education, and, above all, a network unprecedented in the history of Christianity of global communication and cooperation, in the solidarity of a fellowship of brothers and sisters which has certainly been to a large extent sensitized by the sting of the ecumenical gadfly.

13. "Memorandum on the Relationship of the EKD to the WCC," *Ökumenische Rundschau*, XXVIII, Part 1 (Jan. 1979), p. 43.