

# ECHOES OF VANCOUVER

[A reflection of "Voices from Vancouver" - the official report of the Anglican Delegation to the Sixth Assembly of the World Council of Churches held in Vancouver, BC, in 1983 on the theme "Jesus Christ the Life of the World"]

In his foreword the Archbishop of Canterbury wrote:

"This Assembly was really trying to discover what the specific Christian contribution to the world's problems might be."

Now we all know what he meant, but the gulf between meaning and what was actually written is massive. It is a Freudian slip of the first order. It is as if there is an unconscious awareness of the role which the Christian religion has played in shaping, contributing to and exacerbating the problems which the world now faces. This unconscious awareness of the church's contribution to the world's problem is so close to the surface that it is almost at the point of breakthrough but yet not quite there. Consciously, the Assembly was caught up with the task of providing solutions. Unconsciously, it was beginning to identify the contribution to the problem. It is for that contribution, that unconscious strand of agenda that this particular echo-sounder is tuned.

There has been a thematic and dynamic consistency in the agenda of succeeding WCC Assemblies since their inauguration in Amsterdam in 1948. The theme of that gathering affirmed the dialectical opposition between "Man's Disorder and God's Design" and its message affirmed, "It is not in man's power to banish sin and death from the earth, to create the unity of the Holy Catholic Church, to conquer the hosts of Satan, but it is within the power of God". Under the shadow of Hiroshima and the Holocaust and the psychotic convulsions of the Second World War is focused this deep awareness of the battle between Light and Darkness, Sin and Death, Light and Life, together with the confession of human impotence and the assertion that the ultimate solution is within the power of God. It does not represent a dialectical synthesis, but rather the overwhelming of the antithesis by the thesis. It is a powerful sign of hope, however unrealistic it may be.

Similar signals emerged from subsequent assemblies, responding to the felt needs of an evolving world agenda and focused in the words "Hope", "Light", "Freedom", "Unity", "Renewal" and now in 1983, "Life". The theme :

"Jesus Christ - The Life of the World' ... was seen to be a confession of faith in the power of the Living God over the power of Death. To confess Jesus Christ as the Life of the world meant choosing life rather than death. It would lead the members of the W.C.C. straight to the heart of the biblical confession of the one faith... It would be a theme that would involve the churches in fresh study of their basic assumptions."

There is a fundamental continuity with that first assembly in Amsterdam. There is a consistent, conscious search for some contribution to the solution of the apparently insuperable problems faced by the world and yet at an unconscious and dynamic level there is also a continuous assertion of precisely the way in which the Christian church contributes to those very problems. The process promulgated is the idealisation of two fields into absolute

antithetical opposition followed by the choice between one field or the other, the battle between them and the overcoming of the perceived bad field by the perceived good field. That is precisely the dynamic of the world and it is precisely the contribution to the problems of the world which the Christian church has made so devastatingly down the centuries.

The assertion is made that the theme would encourage and involve the churches in a fresh "study of their basic assumptions". But one must question what that study involves. Is it really a study of the basic assumptions in the sense that these basic assumptions themselves come under examination and critical assessment? Or is it a worshipping, a meditation, a naive restatement of the basic assumptions without examination, a studious recapitulation of the grounds of faith, followed by renewed proclamation of that which is received from ages past. What are the ground rules of "study" within the Christian church? How open is the WCC to the examination of truth for the sake of truth? Or is it really bound by its basic assumptions, to examine which in the searing, searching openness of radical study is fundamentally taboo. Time alone will tell, but at this stage of proceedings, it would appear that the acceptable boundaries of study of basic assumptions are very clearly drawn, very tightly defended and in those very ground rules of the game, lies the fundamental block to discerning what it is that the Christian church is actually contributing to the problems of the world.

Noting some of the highlights in the conduct of the Assembly, Canon Poulton refers to:

"An all-night vigil for Peace and Justice climaxed by a celebration of the Orthodox Liturgy. The double significance of this being the anniversary of the dropping of the bomb on Hiroshima and also the Feast of the Transfiguration gave a special poignancy and depth of meaning to the celebration."

The Christian church is a Messianic community. It is always looked to with hope, however disappointed that hope might be. Its fundamental culture is, therefore, one of pairing, its basic dynamic assumption is that it is the sector of society deemed ultimately to bring forth that which will lead the world into newness of Life, and so inevitably and unconsciously the symbols of sexuality emerge within the process. The schizophrenogenic juxtaposition of nuclear flash and transcendent glory as the symbols of Life and Death converge on their solar source creates intensely disturbing anxiety, genitally focused and expressed, however sublimated. Poulton's choice of the word "climaxed" for the consummation of the night's activity hides under a thin veil the fertility rituals of primitive gathering at the unconscious level, displaced into some kind of schizoid orgasm in the face of ultimate terror and dread.

It is the symbols of dynamic worship which speak most loudly of the unconscious processes at work. One point at which these were most open to observation centred in the prayer life of the Assembly:

"A round-the-clock prayer vigil was maintained for the Assembly throughout its meeting. Local Canadian Indians kept alight a sacred fire on campus, and from it were lit candles used in Assembly worship. The native Indian presence and participation (for most are Christian) was further underlined by the erection of a newly-carved twenty metres high totem pole on the university site. It has now been sent to W.C.C. HQ in Geneva as a permanent symbol of the gratitude of land-rights claimants world-wide to the churches which stand beside them in their struggles."

The mind boggles at the potential pregnancy of meaning of such symbols. Fire and phallus are brought into the very heart of the sanctuary of the Christian church. Another commentator noted: "The raising of a totem pole, which for the Indians is a religious ceremony and to which we were all invited. It was carved by Indians in the B.C. Agassiz prison and donated to the World Council". These ancient symbols of the most primitive forms of religion carry today the same depth of unconscious significance for worship, which however overlaid by millennia of sophistication still lies at the heart of the Christian faith. Earth, fire, air, water, sun, wind, storm, sea, phallus, womb, breast, bread, wine, eating, drinking, birth, copulation and death, these are the symbols of our being, however rearranged and reordered they may be within the specific constructs of the differing religious systems. So the sacred fire on the campus, like the great fire of Olympus, becomes the source of light and heat, burning at the tips of the phallic images used in the heart of worship. Hardly surprising that Poulton uses the word "erection" to describe the positioning of the 60 foot high totem pole. The obelisk, megalith, sun-needle, totem pole - all phallic symbols - take their place within the Christian pantheon as in the centre point of St. Peter's square. That this Indian phallus is now erected in Geneva points in some mysterious way to the hope of some new conceptions, some new insemination of the World Council of Churches that in due time might give birth to the Saviour of the oppressed peoples of the North American continent. It is the source of the seeds of hope, and yet it is also rape and retaliation, for the horns of Sitting Bull were impotent against the guns of Europe. It was precisely the churches which condoned and indeed encouraged the land pillage from these 'benighted heathens' in an attitude which was part turning the blind eye, part justifying genocide, territorial expropriation and the ground rules of eminently unjust trading transactions, backed by the threat of superior power, both military and naval. Precisely here then, has the church made its most significant contribution to the problems of the world and at this point the real issues are denied and repressed, covered over in some kind of whitewash. The presentation of a carving with gratitude hides the unconscious inarticulate outrage that longs to burst from the indigenous peoples against the oppressive powers of their alienating overlords. How in all conscience can the World Council of Churches be so blind to the symbolism to which it is being subject - has it no eyes that it can see? No ears that it can hear? No mind that it can understand what is being said to it by the poor of the world? Can they only speak in unconscious symbolism?

In Melbourne it was Ernst Kädsemann who was used to focus the dark side of the principalities and powers, coming as he did from the split culture of Germany, with its recent history so clearly presenting the monstrosity of that side of humanity which most seek to forget as fast as possible. Similarly in this assembly it was Dr. Allan Boesak from South Africa, that dichotomised, polarised, continental tip where all issues are drawn in black and white and colours are seen only in the context of polarities, who had the responsibility to raise to consciousness the dark side of the force. He asserted:

"That every act of inhumanity, every unjust law, every untimely death, every utterance of faith in weapons of mass destruction, every justification of violence and oppression is a sacrifice on the altar of the false gods of death; it is a denial of the Lord of life... for millions of people it is true: we are not uplifted by the Word of life, we are crushed by the litany of death ."

And yet the myth held up as a sign of hope for the world in its crushedness is the metaphysical drama of the crushing of the litany of death by the Word of life. It is the battle between good and evil, life and death, that forms the context of crisis, the point of choice in

which the church is called upon as the humble community of the champion of the Knights of Light.

His address drew the polarised distinctions between death and perdition and life eternal, between discrimination, hunger and poverty and life abundant, between violence, hatred, war and destruction and the peaceable rule of the Messiah, the Prince of Peace, between victimisation and evil powers and the benign authority of the Almighty.

So the idealisation process is forced deep into the cleft of the world. Here is no questioning as to the source of such splitting in individual and social psychosis. Here rather is a reaffirmation, an intensification of the split, a reification, an uplifting, an arching out and over of one side of that dichotomy in an attempt to annihilate its antithesis. So the crusader annihilating the heathen is himself the heathen to be annihilated by the righteous and Armageddon is armed. Here again, in this process, sublimated into transcendent theology, we perceive the contribution which the church has made to the problems of the world.

As Poulton turns to the issues confronting and identified by the Assembly it is inevitable that the exponential militarisation and armament of national boundaries comes to the forefront. This splitting and arching of one side of a polarity over against the other becomes a self-feeding cycle of terror and anxiety. It attempts to deal with perceived threats by generating greater threats, which are then perceived as the reason for arming on the other side of the boundary, so confirming the first perceptions. These dynamics represent in the nitty-gritty of wealth expended, hunger unrelieved, injustice and oppression meted out, the outworking of the dynamics of polarisation which are endemic in the psychic and political life of humanity.

Injustice was not, of course, limited to the military issues but was also seen in the political/economic dependency of the developing world and in particular in the use of growing debt as the mode of management of the new slavery. In the face of the interactive network which generates that particular transactional phenomenon, the Assembly exhibited "a feeling of totally helpless dependency", which:

"Led to the call for the new Central Committee to consider how best to initiate a fresh study of the whole international economic, credit and monetary system."

Boundary transactions between nation states and groups may be represented in terms of military confrontation or its preparation, but also in terms of the interchange of wealth, supplies, assets, commonly known as the trading relationships. All these transactions, as indeed the transactions of the new field of information technology, are symptomatic constructs of the underlying boundary transaction dynamics of the human species in its sub-group behaviour. It is quite impossible for the Christian church to analyse, or to intervene effectively in such dynamics, while preserving precisely in its own fundamental core the same dynamics of polarisation, the blackening of the out-group and the attempt by the in-group to overwhelm the powers of darkness on the outside. It is these core dynamics, symbolised in the heart of the world religions which underlie the transactional matrix which has become the catastrophic generator of the traumatic levels of suffering experienced by contemporary humanity.

Significantly at this point:

"German speakers pleaded for positive study of Scriptural imagery of spiritual 'powers'. Though these had been overcome by Christ on the Cross, they still exercised sway through earthly rules. 'What we found under Hitler is now true for others in other parts of the world'."

So the Teutonic agenda, articulated by Kädemann in Melbourne, is carried forward into the World Council itself in Vancouver and endorsed with applause by the Assembly. The mechanism of displacement is familiar. It is much easier to study the problem as if it were a theological issue to be understood in terms of the conflicting powers and principalities of a metaphysical realm than to understand the realities of the origin of such utter conflict, splitting, polarisation and mutual annihilation experienced across the boundaries of human groups in contemporary society.

In contrast:

"There was at a number of points a call for 'a deeper theological understanding of human nature'

and yet one senses that the assumptions made by calling the study 'theological' might themselves beg the very questions which need probing if the understanding of human nature is in fact to get to the core of that which generates the problems themselves. What is required is fundamental analysis of those dynamics which at the interpersonal, inter-group and international levels lead to the alienation, scapegoating, division and oppression which are experienced as the dark side of the world. In the church their antithesis emerges in the idealised symbols of light and life. The struggle between the opposing fields is dealt with in ineffective ritual in the drama of the battle between light and darkness, as if the projection onto some wide screen and stereo sound of the cosmic conflict is anything other than a sedating diversion from the problems of its resolution in the here and now of human reality.

Prophetically, Bishop John Habgood felt towards a distant but intuitively grasped "more coherent Christian social ethic". He was searching for a sense of the interconnectedness of the vast problems as if the analysis must rise to a new level of synthesis, requiring a new origin if the links are to be made between cause and symptom in such a way that significant intervention into global process can actually be made before the present world disaster reaches catastrophic proportions. The echo to his search is the question as to whether that agenda can itself actually be tackled without at the same time raising for fundamental questioning and examination the basic assumptions of the Christian religion itself. It would appear that the church is caught up in a psychotic collusion with the very dynamics which it seeks to overcome. One senses that the agenda of the World Council of Churches is shifting from the mechanics of unity and the schizoid distractions of theology to the fundamental and yet fundamentally disturbing area of dynamic in human process.

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