

Nairobi 1975: a crisis of faith for the WCC

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Mr Nicholls, an associate editor of Themelios, attended the Fifth General Assembly of the World Council of Churches as an observer. As International Co-ordinator of the Theological Commission of the World Evangelical Fellowship, he is in a good position to assess the significance of the Assembly for theology and mission throughout the world, and as a long-standing resident in India he is particularly sensitive to its likely repercussions in the Third World. What follows is a personal, not an official, view.

This is one man's report of a very complex happening, written by one who was a first-timer at such an ecumenical gathering, like 70% of those attending Nairobi. The sheer pluralism of the WCC and its attempt to address itself to a wide range of global problems, political, economic, social and religious, in the space of eighteen crowded days, makes a balanced and fair report exceedingly difficult. Time for re-study of all the documents and reflection is needed.

The diversity of people attending Nairobi was impressive. 664 delegates from 286 churches together with advisers, delegated observers, observers from international organizations, press, staff and visitors together totalled more than 2,300. Almost half the delegates were from the Third World. Ninety-six came from the eastern European churches. 20% were women and 10% youth—higher percentages than in the previous Assemblies.

Nairobi was an attempt at a consensus of traditions in which a place was found for everybody's views, including those of the observer! With the growing influences of the eastern European churches and the diversity of Third World churches, including those of doubtful Christian orthodoxy, this search for consensus is breaking down. Outwardly it might appear that the goal of the ecumenical movement in the visible and sacramental unity of the churches is being slowly achieved, but in reality a true unity of faith is being lost. The dangers of apostasy and syncretistic theology remain as acute as ever. On the surface Nairobi was an improvement on Uppsala, but the very noticeable ignoring of biblical authority and of any serious theological discussion, causes me to doubt whether the gain was substantial.

The very structure of such a mammoth Assembly makes genuine democratic proceedings almost impossible. The gap between the obvious goals that the Secretariat had set for the Assembly and the concerns of the participants was noticeable. The reasonably strong evangelical participation received little visibility either in the plenary sessions or in the leadership of the sectional groups. John Stott's eight-minute reply on evangelism was the one clear exception! The fundamental unity and clear but limited goals of the equally large Lausanne Congress stood out in sharp contrast to Nairobi.

The WCC faces an identity crisis. The Assembly was ambivalent in its attitude on how far the WCC exists to reflect the concerns of the member churches and how far it exists in its own right as a prophetic voice leading the churches to a fresh understanding of their mission. The trend to theological radicalism and left-wing politics in the Secretariat was evident in the choice of plenary speakers, but among the participants, particularly those from Europe, there was a decided conservative reaction and a desire to give a much stronger emphasis to evangelism than the organizers of the Assembly had originally planned. Only the future will tell how responsive the Secretariat is to this concern of the member churches.

All such international conferences raise the fundamental issue of whether the expenditure of time, energy and finance on such a large gathering is justified especially when the consensus approach offers so little clarity in its message to the churches. Perhaps the future lies in smaller gatherings organized on a national or regional scale with defined and limited goals and a stronger measure of fundamental agreement among the participants.

The authority and use of Scripture

The Assembly was projected as a celebration, a participation in the *praxis* of Jesus Christ freeing and uniting. The experience-centred approach of Bangkok was taken as a model for Nairobi. The small group Bible studies, the experimentation in worship of many traditions and the brilliant use of drama, dance, films and the daily wall newspaper all contributed to make Nairobi an experience in unity and liberation. The one-page message of

the Assembly to the world, *An Invitation to Prayer*, was a summary of what the Assembly had experienced together. It called for prayer to the Creator to help us conserve the earth's resources for future generations, to the God of love to help sustain world community, and to the God of hope to struggle against injustice. But there was no reference to the authority of Scripture or to the proclamation of the gospel to the lost.

The Assembly was also an attempt to find authority in the consensus of Christian traditions. The assumption was made that the New Testament is the record of the traditions of the early church and that these have been supplemented and enriched by the traditions of succeeding generations of Christians. The Moderator, M. M. Thomas, offered a synthesis of ecumenical, orthodox, catholic and evangelical traditions, especially in the area of evangelism and mission. Yet, the orthodox delegations were intransigent in their insistence on the primacy of the traditions of the first six centuries as the only basis for eucharistic unity. In a somewhat triumphal spirit Dr Philip Potter spoke of the ecumenical tradition as embracing the whole *oikoumenē* with only the Roman Catholic Church to be gathered in. He made no reference to the vast numbers of conservative evangelicals who stand outside the ecumenical movement, or to those regions of the world, such as Latin America, where only a very small minority of the churches of the region belong to the WCC.

One of the most disturbing aspects of the Assembly was the minimal emphasis given in the papers and reports to the Scriptures as the authoritative Word of God. The crisis of faith in the WCC is clearly one of authority. The history of the ecumenical movement reveals a clear shift in its attitude to and use of the Bible. The founders of the WCC believed the Bible was normative for their message to the world and the unity of the Bible was assumed. The biblical-theology school, dominated by Barth, which deeply influenced early ecumenical thinking, reached a high-water mark at the New Delhi Assembly in 1961, where the phrase 'according to the Scriptures' was added to the simple doctrinal statement of the WCC. The givenness of the Bible as a testimony to salvation history and its uniqueness were stressed. Bible study had a central place in the New Delhi Assembly's programme.

The fourth conference of the Faith and Order Commission at Montreal in 1963 proved a watershed in WCC thinking about Scripture. Käsemann denied the unity of New Testament ecclesiology and raised the hermeneutical problem of the

relevance of the biblical message to the modern world. The Bristol meeting of the Faith and Order Commission in 1967 further questioned the unity of Scripture and interpreted the Bible as a variety of traditions and insights which must be examined, each in its own cultural setting. There was no agreement on whether the Bible was normative, or a product of the traditions of the early church, or only one element in the complexity of Christian truth. The Uppsala Assembly reflected the same uncertainty. A study report was presented to the Faith and Order Commission at Louvain in 1971, in which the content of the faith was further questioned. The inspiration of the Bible was held to be its inspiring character. The report asks, 'Why should not Basil, Augustine, Thomas, Luther, or some modern author be inspired too? Surely it was their work of interpretation that led to the Bible speaking again with fresh authority?'

This loss of the authority of Scripture as normative produced a hermeneutical crisis. The New Delhi approach to hermeneutics as 'map-reading', by which the acts of God in biblical history provide a clue to understanding the present world, was gradually replaced by a situation hermeneutic in which the cultural content was the controlling factor. The cultural life situation determines the use made of the Bible and imposes its own unity on it. At Nairobi the new hermeneutic was evident in numerous ways. The passages selected for the small group Bible studies under the theme 'Jesus Christ Frees and Unites' were chosen to illustrate the theme of human liberation, and the perspectives of the biblical writers adapted to this 'relational centre'. It was a reversal of historic evangelical hermeneutics.

The new hermeneutic was applied in an imaginative way in the parable of the prodigal son presented by the United Bible Societies. The dynamic-equivalent principle of translation was not only applied to specific cultural metaphors such as 'he fell on his neck', but also to the basic goal of the parable. The presentation suggested that the younger son was right to break with his father in the interests of self-determination and the older son was right to stand up to his father and that the parable is an open-ended story to show how the father can keep both sons. While these insights reflect accurately the tensions in modern family life, it can be seriously questioned whether any valid exegesis of the passage can support them.

The cultural context rather than the biblical message dominated the addresses of all the plenary sessions with the exception of Bishop Arias' paper

on Evangelism. In the opening position paper by M. M. Thomas, the Moderator of the Assembly and Chairman of the Central Committee of the WCC, I noted only one reference to the text of Scripture, in what was a theological and well-documented review of the issues before the Assembly. Again the report of Philip Potter, the General Secretary, and Robert McAfee Brown's address, 'Who is this Jesus Christ who Frees and Unites?', began with scriptural exposition but soon left it to deal with issues of social, economic and political oppression. None of the women speakers in 'Women in a Changing World', nor Prime Minister Manley in his address 'From the Shackles of Domination and Oppression', nor Professor Charles Birch in his address 'Creation, Technology and Human Survival' made more than a passing reference to the text of Scripture. Many of these authors quoted profusely from human authors and UN documents, but remained silent on the Word of God.

The use of Scripture in the sectional reports varied considerably. Section I, 'Confessing Christ Today', gave serious attention to Scripture while others, particularly Section IV, 'Education for Liberation and Community', and Section V, 'Structures of Injustice and Struggles for Liberation', had no reference to Scripture whatever. Similarly, it was disturbing that no attempt was made to deal with biblical principles or with passages of Scripture that had given rise to conflicting interpretations in any of the social issues debated, such as sexism, racism or the widening gap between rich and poor. It was evident that some speakers owed more to the theories of Karl Marx than to the Bible. I enjoyed the eight Bible study group sessions as times of sharing interpersonal experiences, but there was virtually no attempt at exegesis of the passage, in our case Romans 8. No reports on these groups were asked for in the plenary sessions.

Thus it was clear that the crisis of faith in the WCC is a crisis of authority. Any attempt to find a consensus of Scripture, tradition and experience will end in confusion. The subjectivism of the current approach to hermeneutics only worsens the crisis. The failure to relate Bible study to the discussion of political and social issues only accentuated the impression that Nairobi was a shadow United Nations, and as someone rather unkindly added, a 'third-rate one with few political experts'.

The unity of the church and the unity of mankind

A passionate call for visible unity has always been central to the ecumenical movement. Since Uppsala

a new dimension has been added. The unity of the church is a sign of the unity of mankind. This expanded concern was given considerable attention at Nairobi.

New Delhi described God's will for unity in terms of one fully committed fellowship of all God's people in each place, in all places and in all ages. Uppsala emphasized that the search for unity is a quest for diversity in unity and continuity. The idea of conciliar fellowship was added by the Faith and Order Commission at Louvain. At Salamanca, Spain, in 1973, it was stated, 'The one church is to be envisaged as a conciliar fellowship of local churches which are themselves truly united. In this conciliar fellowship each local church possesses in communion with others the fulness of catholicity, witnesses to the same apostolic faith and therefore recognizes the others as belonging to the same church of Christ and guided by the same Spirit.' At Nairobi the section report, 'What Unity Requires', expanded the theme of conciliar fellowship as an aspect of life of the one undivided church functioning at different levels. It is an 'interior unity' of churches separated by space, culture or time.

The Orthodox emphasis on a Christ-centred dimension to the church is welcome as an alternative to a secularized Christianity which reduces the doctrine of the church to that of a unified classless society with humanistic goals. On the other hand the Orthodox intransigence on the eucharist makes unity impossible. Although the Orthodox churches participated more fully in Nairobi than in Uppsala, with the election of Russian Orthodox Metropolitan Nikodim of Leningrad as one of the six Vice-Presidents of the WCC, the general disenchantment of the Orthodox churches with the prevailing secular mood of the WCC may mean that the Orthodox churches will find a new affinity with the church of Rome. It was significant that the protests against the secularized policies of the WCC, whether in plenary or in sectional sessions, came either from evangelicals or from Orthodox participants. With the continuing confusion among ecumenical Protestants, we may yet see evangelicals, biblical Roman Catholics and Orthodox believers standing together in defence of the biblical faith. The future of Roman Catholic relationships with the WCC remains uncertain. In his greetings to the Assembly, Pope Paul wrote 'May the assurance of our fraternal solidarity be a support to you in the coming years', but he gave no indication that the Roman Catholic Church would join the WCC in the foreseeable future. Many observers doubt that Rome will ever do so. At Nairobi the eucharist was

celebrated separately by the Orthodox and by the Protestant churches. At the one attempt at a united eucharistic celebration the Orthodox were present but did not receive the elements.

The Uppsala concept that the unity of the church is a sign of the unity of mankind was endorsed by Philip Potter when he said, 'I want to keep always before our minds the fact that the ecumenical movement is concerned with the *oikoumenē*, the whole human race, as it struggles to discover what it means to be human in the purpose of God.' In his address, 'Visible Unity as Conciliar Fellowship', Dr John Deschner argued that visible unity has to do with classism, racism, sexism and the segregation of the handicapped as much as it has to do with denominationalism. He and other speakers argued that this unity in the church is only the forerunner of the unity of mankind. Dr Robert McAfee Brown of California noted that Jesus Christ divides as well as unites, but even here he was thinking more of the division between the oppressed and the oppressor. Brown asserted that Jesus is only provisionally the divider, for in the end he will unite the whole human family. This universalistic hope had no eschatological content. There was no distinction between the kingdom of God now and the kingdom of God to come when the King returns. The Assembly was sadly silent on the themes of the wrath of God and the final judgment and heaven and hell.

This emphasis on a secular eschatology meant that the leadership of the Assembly, impatient with any concept of gradual reform, was open to the idea of violence in order to bring about radical change in society. On the models of the church-state alliances in eastern Europe and in Zaire, it was evident that many Third World leaders, and Africans in particular, were looking to governments to support their programmes for the unification of the church and for the achievement of social goals. I fear we are seeing the beginning of a return to a Constantinian era in which the church is in danger of losing its prophetic role against corruption in national politics and of becoming a partner in the restriction of religious liberty and freedom to propagate the Christian faith. We may see increasing persecution against religious minorities. The vigorous defence by the Russian delegates of their own government's and church's concept of human freedom, and their total rejection of a letter to the Assembly by two dissident Orthodox members appealing against the ill-treatment of religious prisoners in psychiatric clinics and nursing homes, was a warning to all at Nairobi. In the post-Nairobi era powerful church groups may seek political

support for the enforcement of policies of moratorium and the restriction of evangelism by evangelical groups. At the same time political rulers will use the churches as a tool in the interests of national unity.

The New Testament teaches that unity is always unity in truth and faithfulness to the apostolic witness. It warns against the spirit of anti-Christ and denounces false doctrines. As Dr Klaas Runia has noted, when we speak of the 'true church' we must also speak of the 'false church'. This the WCC refuses to do. Their over-stress on 'the sin of division' makes it difficult for them to speak against heresy. Fifteen new churches, all but one belonging to the Third World, were admitted to either full or associate membership of the WCC during the Assembly. In accepting them there was little emphasis given to orthodoxy in belief as a necessary factor in membership. African independent and splinter churches are applying for membership; will the WCC be able to reject those with syncretistic and heretical beliefs and practices?

The priority of evangelism

Since the merger of the International Missionary Council with the WCC at New Delhi, evangelism has received less and less attention. 'Uppsala', wrote Dr McGavran, 'has betrayed the two billion who do not yet know the gospel.' At Bangkok, programmes for dialogue with other religious faiths and politically motivated projects replaced the historic understanding of evangelism as the mission of the church. In the original planning for Nairobi, no provision was made for a section on world mission and evangelization; however, the impact of the Lausanne Congress on the WCC member churches meant that this traditional concern could not be ignored.

Despite the fact that Philip Potter had told the synod of Roman Catholic bishops in Rome in 1974, 'The conviction of the World Council of Churches has been that evangelization is the ecumenical theme *par excellence*,' he made no reference to evangelism in his general report to the Nairobi Assembly. He did speak of repentance and renewal of faith but this was in the context of the struggle for a shared life in community and for a just society. The plenary session on evangelism, however, was one of the highlights of the Assembly. Bishop Mortimer Arias of the Methodist Church in Bolivia, in the keynote address on 'That the World May Believe', reminded the Assembly that 'the intention to "stay together", which was the basis of the World Council, is secondary to the indispensable task of the Church of Christ: the

evangelization of the world'. He referred to the 2,700 million who do not know Christ and live under global ideological or religious systems. He rightly stressed that the one medium for the communication of the gospel was the Christian and the Christian community.

John Stott's long-awaited reply was received with considerable enthusiasm by the Assembly. But it was disappointing that the planned plenary debate on the theme had to be cancelled as the allotted time for the session had expired. There was widespread reaction against an emotive and vindictive reporting of Stott's address in the Assembly newspaper *Target*. After acknowledging the positive contribution of Arias' address and a sympathetic reference to the twenty-seven theses of the document *Evangelism in Latin America Today*, Stott questioned whether the Bishop's address was typical of recent ecumenical utterances. He noted, 'It seems to many of us that evangelism has now been largely eclipsed by the quest for social and political liberation.' Stott made five affirmations of what the World Council needed to recover. He called for a recognition of the lostness of man and the judgment of God, confidence in the one revealed gospel, conviction concerning our stewardship to proclaim the uniqueness of Christ, a sense of urgency about the priority of evangelism, and a personal experience of Jesus Christ. In a final word that applied to all of us he said, 'I sometimes wonder if the greatest of all hindrances to evangelism today is not the poverty of our own spiritual experience. True evangelism is the spontaneous overflow of a heart full of Christ.'

The report of the section 'Confessing Christ Today' was undoubtedly the best statement of the Assembly. It affirmed the Church's evangelistic responsibility and called upon the churches to confess Christ alone as Saviour and Lord. It stressed the costliness of conversion and discipleship and deplored cheap conversions without ethical consequences. It declared, 'We regret that some reduce liberation from sin and evil to social and political dimensions, just as we regret that others limit liberation to the private and eternal dimension.' The report spoke with sensitivity on the many economic, political and ecclesiastical structures that obscure the confession of Christ and which themselves are oppressive and dehumanizing. It emphasized both personal and communal confession of Christ, the importance of worship and a Christ-centred life-style. At least a third of the participants in the Assembly asked to be assigned to this section, indicating a widespread desire for a spiritual emphasis in the Assembly. It

is hoped that this report will have an effective influence on the member churches and we hope the WCC Secretariat will press the many practical recommendations of the report upon the churches. With an over-committed programme and shrinking income the WCC faces a crisis in the priorities of its programme.

On the negative side some of the theological assumptions embedded in the presentation and discussion of evangelism were disturbing. At times Bishop Arias slipped into an incipient universalism. He described his experience of an integrated evangelistic programme of proclamation and action among atheistic Bolivian tin-miners struggling to rise above their oppressive working conditions. 'All that was missing was the naming of the Name and we had to recognize that perhaps these people had more of Christ in them than we who spoke in his name', he said. He echoed the idea of anonymous Christianity when he said, 'To evangelize is to help men to discover the Christ hidden in them and revealed in the gospel. All men and all human values are destined to be recapitulated in Christ.' 'Universalism,' replied John Stott, 'fashionable as it is today, is incompatible with the teaching of Christ and his apostles, and is a deadly enemy of evangelism.'

In line with current ecumenical language, the Bishop also argued for a holistic and integral approach to evangelism. He endorsed Emilio Castro's statement that 'social justice, personal salvation, cultural affirmation, church growth, are all seen as integral parts of God's saving act'.

In a significant document entitled *Jesus Christ Frees and Unites* prepared by the elders and deacons of the Nairobi Baptist Church as an evangelical response to the pre-Assembly documents, the authors made the important distinction between the soteriological purpose of evangelism and the ethical concerns of social justice. While evangelism and social action are not exclusive of each other, they must not be confused. Nairobi did little to clear this confusion, so evident at Bangkok. The present ecumenical trend of including all of God's mission in the world as 'salvation' is but another form of the liberal social gospel, and parallels the controversy in the medieval church on the holistic nature of faith and works. The Chicago Declaration, 1973, is a significant evangelical contribution on salvation and ethics, and deserves careful study.

Another disturbing factor in the discussion on evangelism was the attempt by M. M. Thomas to synthesize the findings of recent consultations on evangelism, namely Bangkok, 1973, Lausanne, 1974, the Bishops' synod in Rome, 1974, and the

Orthodox Consultation at Bucharest, 1974. Although he noted that Lausanne clearly distinguished between evangelism and social action, Thomas argued that these consultations were agreed in their affirmation of the comprehensive nature of salvation. To my mind the theological assumptions and defined goals of Bangkok and Lausanne are as different as cheese is from chalk, and it is impossible to gloss over these differences. It was significant that Thomas's call for 'a Christ-centred syncretism' caused some embarrassment to the Assembly.

Seeking community: the common search of people of various faiths, cultures and ideologies

The section under this heading dealt with the goal of mission and with dialogue between living faiths, which is a very sensitive area in contemporary ecumenical thinking. Although Metropolitan Gregorius (Paul Verghese) of India made it clear that the purpose of this section was to seek world community and not to debate dialogue, the inter-relation between the two is such that one could not be discussed without the other. For Dr S. J. Samartha, Director of the Programme for Dialogue with People of Living Faiths and Ideologies, the concern for the unity of mankind and world community replaces evangelism as the primary concern of the WCC. He claims that the impact of eastern religions on western culture and the decreasing influence of Christianity in many countries has intensified the desire for accepting religious plurality and the necessity for co-operation between religious communities. As evidence of this concern a Hindu, a Buddhist, a Jew, a Muslim and a Sikh were invited as guests to participate in the reality of religious plurality. Some of their insights were incorporated in the report.

The search for a theological basis for world community proved unsatisfactory in the light of the total absence of any attempt at biblical exegesis. In the desire to minimize doctrinal differences and to maximize social involvement at the community level, the vertical, spiritual, dimensions of the debate were completely over-shadowed by the horizontal. Some participants wanted to describe the concern for global community as 'wider ecumenism'; others felt that the term 'ecumenical' should be restricted to inter-Christian dialogue and that the wider dialogue should be referred to as an inter-religious one.

The presuppositional thinking of the leaders of this section was never openly acknowledged. It is, however, clear that a very significant change has taken place in ecumenical thinking. Hendrik

Kraemer's stress on the 'discontinuity' between the religions of man and the revelation of God, which dominated the WCC since the Tambaram Conference, has given way to a sympathetic understanding of the universality of God's revelation. The emergence of a theology of 'a cosmic Christ' at the New Delhi Assembly and the popularizing of 'anonymous Christianity' by Karl Rahner and others, are factors that have prepared the way for a wider acceptance of a relativistic theology. In this climate there is little sympathy for a unique and final revelation in Christ made known through the written Word of God as the only basis for the salvation of man.

The assumption that special revelation is only a particular case of general revelation has always been the hallmark of religious syncretistic thinking. This was reflected in the discussion on common spirituality which some defined as 'seeking to understand with empathy the dimensions of worship, devotion and meditation in the religious tradition and practice of the partners'. Others rejected the term empathy on the grounds that spirituality is not a neutral factor. Christian prayer, for example, cannot be assimilated into other forms of spirituality. The final draft warned against the demonic in any religious or spiritual tradition and expressed a pastoral concern for those who feel threatened by the hazards of sharing spirituality.

A last-minute addendum to the report presented to the plenary session was a preamble to the introduction which gave a welcome emphasis on the need to proclaim the great commission, to recognize the *skandalon* of the gospel and to oppose any form of syncretism 'incipient, nascent or developed'. Strong opposition to this warning came from a number of Asian theologians, some of whom argued that Christianity itself was essentially syncretistic.

In the discussion in this section there was sharp debate on the nature, if any, of Jesus Christ's work in other religions, and also over the nature and use of dialogue. Raymond Panikkar's statement in the preparatory document that the Christian 'puts his trust in truth. He goes unarmed and ready to be himself converted. He may lose his life; he may also be born again', was paralleled by Dr Samartha's statements in a press conference.

In the areas of culture and ideologies the sectional report reflected many valuable insights shared by participants in the discussions. It stressed the diversity of culture, the secularity of technological culture, the continuity between village and city cultures. The belief that Jesus Christ both affirms and judges culture, that the church is

embodied in culture but not incarnate in it, are some of the contributions that evangelical participants were able to make to the report. It was rightly noted that the present disunity of Christians makes a mockery of the new community in Christ as a model for world community. The discussion on ideologies and the search for community was dominated by participants from Eastern Europe and Cuba. The challenge of Marxist socialism enabling the church to see its own oppressive structures was discussed. Many questions were raised but few answers given. Unfortunately there was virtually no discussion on biblical eschatology, without which any seeking of world community can only lead to a false utopia.

Christianity and cultural identity

The relationship of Christianity to national culture was a recurring theme that pervaded many aspects of the work of the Assembly. The section on Education for Liberation and Community spoke of alienation from culture and national history, and warned that educational systems and institutions are often mirror images of society, reinforcing its practices and values. The increased Third World participation in the Nairobi Assembly brought into sharp focus the tension between westernized Christianity and national aspirations for self-identity and unity. The urge to harmonize the plurality of cultures in the interests of Christian unity and world community surfaced again and again in group and plenary discussions and in experimentation in forms of worship. It appeared to many observers that the passion for cultural identity eclipsed the concern for faithfulness to biblical truth.

The Assembly was made a platform to vent feelings of resentment against the missionary movement as being western, triumphalistic and neo-colonialistic and the forerunner of new patterns of oppression and of sterile forms of theological understanding. While it is true that the missionary movement has sometimes been an unwitting tool of western colonialism and has been insufficiently sensitive to cultural values that are consistent with the biblical revelation, the contribution of the missionary movement in sacrificial service and compassion for suffering and oppressed peoples was unfortunately not recognized at Nairobi.

Ecumenical preoccupation with the plurality of gospels and with cultural theologies was very evident. The black theology of North America and South Africa, emphasizing black consciousness and the recovery of the dignity and power of the black man in self-knowledge, was given a sym-

pathetic hearing. Similarly with the liberation theologies of Latin America and Asia. African theology, emphasizing the dignity of the African through the rediscovery of African culture and practices in African traditional religions, naturally received the greatest attention at Nairobi. Professor John Mbiti, a leading exponent of African theology, advocates transposing the immensely religious traditional life of African people into a Christian life-style in order to fill the vacuum created by modern technological society. The late Dr Byang Kato, General Secretary of the Association of Evangelicals of Africa and Madagascar, expressed his concern that the sources for African theology are increasingly African traditional religions rather than the Bible. In the attempt to interpret the pre-Christian and pre-Muslim African experience of their gods, Kato saw African theology heading for syncretism and universalism. He declared that it is not black theology we need, but the application of Christian theology to the African situation. 'It is not a black Jesus or a black god we want, but obedience to the omnipotent God of the Bible.'

Two events that took place during the Assembly illustrate this tension. The All-Africa Conference of Churches, the co-ordinating structure for ecumenical activities in Africa, took time out of the Assembly for an elaborate and well-prepared ceremony of laying the foundation stone for their proposed continental headquarters, estimated to cost twelve million shillings, located on the outskirts of Nairobi. The colourful ceremony, involving several professional dance groups, centred around the chief guest, President Kenyatta. The proceedings had the aura of a political event rather than one called to give glory to God. The rough-hewn foundation stone dug from Lake Turkana on the Kenya-Ethiopia border, where archaeologists have found the oldest human fossils, symbolized that Christianity was being built on the pre-historic civilizations of Africa. The President spoke of the impact of pre-Christian knowledge of our fathers, which influenced and shaped early Christianity in North Africa. He called for the Africanization of the church and appealed for a return to the genius of authentic cultural traditions. As an observer I felt that Christianity in Africa was in danger of becoming a tool for the furtherance of national aspirations and the uniformity of culture and religion.

The second event was the play *Muntu*, presented on the second day of the Assembly. The AACC had commissioned a Ghanaian playwright, now working with the University of Nairobi, to present his interpretation of what Africa's past had to say to

Africa's present. Muntu, the word for man in several African languages, and his sons and daughters are searching for the essence of being free and for community identity. The play opens with scenes in the pre-Christian era symbolizing man's harmony with nature and the rhythm of the seasons. Comparative peace and happiness reign in the tribal society. The modern tragedy begins with the arrival of the Christian missionary holding the cross in one hand and a gun in the other, followed by traders offering bargains in silks, cottons, and with guns and liquor, and by a mining engineer grasping for gold and diamonds, alongside merciless Arab slave traders. The missionary, eager for mass conversions, limits his interests to the spiritual while the colonists defraud the Africans of their land and turn them into slaves. This in turn leads to a second cycle of oppression in which Muntu's second son becomes a ruthless military dictator oppressing his own people. In their increasing alienation the people long for the days of their ancestors. At last Muntu himself returns to revive the old religious pattern and a powerless messiah, Nana, synthesizing Christian and pagan traditions, hovers in the background. The play ends abruptly with despair. Nothing which Africa has learnt or suffered has brought back harmony. The future is dark and unknown. The play raised many important issues but gave a one-sided interpretation of Christianity in Africa. The implicit call to return to pre-Christian culture is no answer to the complexity of the modern world.

The call for moratorium, which has become a major issue in ecumenical thinking since Bangkok, received surprisingly little direct attention during the Assembly, though the AACC had asked for it to be put on the agenda. Evangelicals are not opposed to moratorium rightly understood, if in particular situations it leads to the strengthening of national leadership, a new thrust in evangelism and church growth and the release of resources for unevangelized areas. The Lausanne Covenant drew attention to this point. The Theological Commission of the AEAM, meeting in Nairobi prior to the WCC Assembly, published a statement asking for a theological clarification of the call for moratorium. Unfortunately the statement was given little publicity during the Assembly and provoked little discussion.

The struggle for liberation and the quest for human development

Undoubtedly the main focus in the planning of the Nairobi Assembly was the theme of liberation from political, economic, social and personal oppression.

This holistic interpretation of liberation articulated at Bangkok pervaded every session of the Assembly. We were faced with the enormity of institutional evils and confronted with the specifics of oppression. As evangelicals we were convicted of our over-generalizations which often do little more than maintain the *status quo*. At the same time we were appalled by the lack of awareness of God's sovereignty in the world and that he alone can save individuals and nations from destruction. It was a heyday for Pelagianism.

The issues raised were selective. Racism continued to be the number one item on the agenda. Professor Brown pre-empted the issue with a self-condemnation of himself as one who was white, a male, a member of the affluent class and a citizen of the USA, all of which he called 'a litany of shame'. The Programme to Combat Racism, which was instituted since the Uppsala Assembly, was endorsed, and criticism of the misuse of its funds for violent programmes of liberation largely muted. Racism in South Africa was once again singled out for attack and various embargoes proposed. Several multi-national companies were named and condemned for their technical and financial involvement in nuclear collaboration with South Africa. It appears that any hope of change through peaceful reform has been abandoned.

Resolutions calling for the observance of fundamental human rights in several parts of the world were adopted. In Latin America, details of oppression were listed and the governments of Argentina and Chile were singled out for special mention. World powers were asked to respect the autonomy and territorial integrity of Angola. The three liberation movements were only mildly criticized for their failure to establish a unified government along peaceful lines. The rights of the Palestinian people to self-determination were recognized but there was no condemnation of oppressive Arab economic policies nor of the PLO's goal to eliminate Israel as a nation. A plea for the respecting of the holy places in Jerusalem and freedom for each community to worship was accepted. The Assembly appealed for the implementation of the Helsinki agreement; an amendment expressing concern about the restriction of religious liberty in the USSR was carried by an overwhelming majority, but then, following strong protests from the Russian delegation, was revoked, and after much behind-the-scenes debate and a special evening session a new motion was passed deleting the name of USSR and asking for a report at the first meeting of the Central Committee. In this failure of nerve, many delegates felt the WCC had lost its credibility and

forsaken its prophetic function by its selective indignation.

Sexism was singled out as a major social evil. It was argued that as long as women were excluded from decision-making processes, they would be unable to realize their full partnership with men, both in the church and in society. A change was needed in the theological understanding of equal participation in society, and in relationships, particularly in the family. There was a strong voice in favour of full ordination of women to the ministry. The Assembly set a commendable example in responding to this concern. 20% of the delegates were women, two of the six new Vice-Presidents are women and women shared equally with men in chairing the sessions. In all the presentations on sexism, however, no attempt was made to give a biblical basis to the new stance and only one speaker recognized the existence of deliberate sin in sexism.

The growing gap between the rich and poor nations was rightly recognized as a major issue of our time. The only solution offered to this evil was that of radical, socialistic democracy. This was particularly true of the brilliant address by the Hon. Michael Manley, Prime Minister of Jamaica. Some of the suggestions for public participation and peoples' tribunals had a familiar Marxist ring about them.

A plenary address on 'Creation, Technology and Human Survival' by Professor Charles Birch, a biologist from Sydney, was by far the most significant paper in the area of human justice. He saw the world as on a titanic collision course. Only a change in direction could avert total disaster. In a well-documented address he outlined five threats to survival, namely, population explosion, which will add a billion people in the next 15 years; food scarcity, in which the present 300 million people now living at starvation level will increase to a billion within thirty-five years; the rapid depletion of non-renewable resources such as fossil fuels; global pollution which is doubling every fourteen years; and the threat of war with stock-piling of atomic bombs. He argued that technology is an uncertain blessing and he appealed for a sustainable global society with zero population growth, zero growth in consumable goods and zero growth in pollution. He failed to deal adequately with the problem of war.

Birch is an admirer of process theology. Arguing that ecology is an essential element in salvation and evangelism, he put his hope in man's recognizing the intrinsic value of nature in which God is present. His appeal for a change of heart towards nature

failed to grapple with the problem of sin against God and ignores the ultimate hope of the second coming of Christ and the new heaven and new earth.

In personal discussion, Dr Birch admitted that his position was basically one of pantheism, which sees God in everything and everything in God, an interlocking relationship between the Personal and the All. Pantheism closes the gap between the Creator and the creature, blurs the nature of sin and has no place for a biblical eschatology. It undergirded the neo-Platonism of the medieval mystics and is central to the theologies of Teilhard de Chardin and J. A. T. Robinson. It is at the heart of the movement towards universalism and syncretism and it constitutes the most fundamental theological crisis facing the WCC today.

A conclusion

The WCC faces an acute crisis of faith and ethics. David Edward commented on Uppsala, 'For the sake of the world, the next Assembly should be more theological.' This did not happen at Nairobi. Unless there is a return to truly biblical theology before the next Assembly the WCC ship is on a perilous course. As evangelical theologians we must act responsibly and by God's grace address ourselves to the issues of our contemporary world with a prophetic voice. But we must do more. Our doctrinal understanding must begin with the Word of God and not with the cultural context. We will recognize the priority of a fully-orbed theology of world evangelization which takes seriously the lostness of man. We need a fresh understanding of the church and its discipling of the nations in relation to the kingdom of God. We need to recover the first article of the Constitution of the WCC clarifying the relationship of God the Creator to God as Saviour, and a renewed emphasis on the cross, the resurrection and salvation by grace alone through faith. In the power of the Holy Spirit we need a new, confident but humble trust in the Lordship of Jesus Christ enabling us to stand against temptation, persecution and death itself. We are called to be faithful interpreters and communicators of the one gospel. This will inevitably involve costly self-sacrifice.

It is of supreme importance that we evangelicals who acknowledge the full authority of Scripture stay together as a world-wide community, recognizing the diversity of gifts and ministries that God has given to each of us. We must support those evangelicals who, in good conscience and as belonging to member churches of the WCC, accept their

responsibility to maintain an evangelical witness within the ecumenical structures. We must equally support those evangelicals, who in good conscience, will continue to remain totally apart from the WCC

and who through strictly evangelical structures proclaim the whole counsel of God. May Jesus Christ free and unite us to be his ambassadors of judgment and hope to a dying world.
