

This is a draft of a chapter that has been published by Oxford University Press in the book International Law and Religion: Historical and Contemporary Perspectives edited by Martti Koskenniemi, Mónica García-Salmones Rovira, and Paolo Amorosa, published 2017, <https://global.oup.com/academic/product/international-law-and-religion-9780198805878?cc=fi&lang=en&>

Whose justice? What political theology?

On Christian and theological approaches to human rights in the 20th and 21st centuries

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Abstract

The essay offers a contribution to scholarship that has suggested that a good deal of twentieth century internationalism was faith-based, even if this faith remained tacit. It offers insights into religious attitudes underpinning twentieth century internationalism and the formation of international legal concepts and institutions. It looks at how religiously framed matters and articles of faith were given a ‘secular’ reinterpretation during the first part of the twentieth century, in the name of peace and a just international order, and it offers an account of the specific political theology that this reconceptualisation of ‘the sacred’ in terms of ‘the secular’ expressed.

The essay shows that liberal theological thought, with an optimistic outlook on man and history, a progression narrative, and an attempt to mediate between theology and the epistemological demands of the positive sciences—among other things through dismissal of traditional metaphysics and a turn to ‘ethics’/value judgments and ‘vocation’—formed the framework within which internationalist Christian action in the early twentieth century was to a large extent grounded. Christian salvation was understood as deliverance to freedom of service for the world and in the world in the personal, societal and political contexts where one lived. Eschatology was not a religious border-concept but an immanently to-be-realised socio-ethical ideal. History was presented as a creation of God and man.

This laid the ground for optimism and a vision of international work as expressive of Christian discipleship and God’s vision for the world. The essay emphasises that within ecumenical Christendom there was no consensus on political and economic matters, nor regarding the way to bring about social reform. Yet, as regards those who did support international action, their vision of a just social order combined a liberal project of rule of law with a favourable yet not uncritical stance to capitalism. Human rights, and international law more generally, became understood as a weapon in the defence of the individual person against the totalitarian state and unlimited state power.

Introduction

At times there is a certain type of theology that intersects with revolutionary events. It is necessary, however, to clearly designate exactly what kind of theology we are speaking about. We must be clear here because it is equally certain that not all theologies cross revolutionary phenomena but, on the contrary, there are some theologies that cross the opposite of revolution: namely, pure ideological reproduction of Empire.¹

This essay explores one thesis of the group on international law and religion's research statement, which 'questions the very possibility of producing "secular law" as an aseptic product immune from religion and apart from a supposedly apolitical religious sphere. Here we follow those who have understood much of 20th century internationalism operating on the basis of a faith that has often left itself unarticulated as such.'

The essay will not discuss things that were made sacred in the name of secularity, as the editorial statement puts it. It will, however, focus on how religiously framed matters and articles of faith were given a 'secular' reinterpretation during the first part of the twentieth century—in the name of peace and a just international order—and offer an account of the specific political theology that this reconceptualisation of 'the sacred' in terms of 'the secular' expressed. In addition, the essay will point at another political–theological counter-discourse. Whether that counter-discourse offers meaningful new spaces for emancipatory critique of the 'liberal credo' it criticises its adversaries for too readily signing up to is the topic of another essay.

What is offered in the following essay is a reading of matters of international law and religion from the perspective of theology, and on the basis of other current work on early twentieth century Christian internationalist action for peace and a just international order, including legal order and human rights.² Returning to the editorial statement once more, the essay will offer insights into religious attitudes underpinning twentieth century internationalism and the formation of international legal concepts and institutions.

John Milbank's Critique of Human Rights

The political theologian John Milbank is regarded as one of the foremost representatives of contemporary radical orthodoxy. In his writings, he offers a foundational critique of the so-called modern liberal project—the liberal credo—and its religious roots. In the first ever issue

¹ Antonio Negri in Antonio Negri and Gabriele Fadini, 'Materialism and Theology: A Conversation', *Rethinking Marxism* 20, no. 2 (2008): pp. 665-672. The article was written as part of the author's Academy of Finland Academy Research Fellow Project 'Management of the Sacred – A Critical Inquiry' (2013-2018).

² Some of the following ideas have also been elaborated in Pamela Slotte, "'Blessed are the Peacemakers": Christian Internationalism, Ecumenical Voices and the Universal Declaration of Human Rights', in *Revisiting the Origins of Human Rights*, edited by Pamela Slotte and Miia Halme-Tuomisaari (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015).

of the Oxford Journal of Law and Religion, established in 2012, Milbank makes his case ‘Against Human Rights’. His goal is, among other things, to make us aware of the distributive outcomes that human rights generate under the pretext of inalienability, absoluteness, and equality. According to Milbank these outcomes are anything but laudable. Human rights are, in fact, all about subjective entitlements, and cannot accommodate ideas about distributive justice.

What we find at the centre of human rights is a reduced notion of an isolated individual—not an individual who is shaped through her relationships with others—while being simultaneously someone unique. The last would be a reading of the person that Milbank himself favours. Instead, it is an inscrutable abstract interiority that is inviolable, while all social manifestations of the person remain subject to state will. Since if the human person is not constituted through her relationships—being an ‘irreplaceable “personality”’—then she is also not ‘essential to the composition of any social aggregate’. Instead she becomes ‘an always replaceable and disposable atom, component of an impersonal machine’.³ Thus, paradoxically, ‘the very ontological isolation ironically ensures the [individual’s] substitutability, and in consequence his autonomy proves to be less of a self-defence than that provided by inherent relational dependency against the arbitrary sovereignty of God, nature or the State’.⁴

Moreover, human rights claims are infinite and can in reality lead to nothing but anarchy, ended only when authoritarian power steps in. For the rights in themselves say nothing about what they mean in practice. They are unqualified. Enter the ‘unrestricted formally-grounded power of the sovereign political power’ to render operable what lies beyond the ‘absolute negative liberty of the individual’—a distinction that is also ultimately in the hands of the sovereign.⁵ As a result, the actual implementation of human rights involves making choices and prioritising one set of rights over another. To Milbank’s mind this is an arbitrary exercise as rights are not realised against the background of the idea of a right order.

Furthermore, the space for arbitrary exercise of power is great in a society whose key components are these rights holders, as mediating bodies (organic relationships) between individuals and the ‘sovereign political power’ are reduced in importance. For, given the ‘strictly nominalist logic of liberty’—which for Milbank underscores human rights ideology—and thus the absence of an overarching ideal of right and notion of right order, ‘it can appear [only] logical to conclude that all and any “democratic” expression of collective will—whether by specific freely associating group, or by the freely associating people as a whole—violates

³ John Milbank, ‘Against Human Rights: Liberty in the Western Tradition’, *Oxford Journal of Law and Religion* 1, no. 1 (2012): p. 207.

⁴ Milbank, ‘Against Human Rights’, p. 218.

⁵ Milbank, ‘Against Human Rights’, p. 229.

the neutrality of the state organ, whose own absoluteness exists in order to underwrite the equal absoluteness of the inviolable will of the “self-owning” and property-owning individual’.⁶

This leaves the stage open for a capitalist economy, which according to Milbank is the political economy of human rights. Milbank thus suggests that human rights are not apolitical; nor are they a-economic.⁷ The discretion at the heart of human rights discourse favours a notion of the ‘just polity’ that is ‘explicitly based upon the primacy of individual subjective rights that will have its concomitant in the negatively free capitalist market’.⁸ To quote him at length:

[T]he more that doctrines of human rights are seen as the normative basis of all politics, then the more they covertly encourage a slide of neoliberalism towards a fully fledged totalitarian capitalism, by passing over the democratic in the name of freedom as well as efficiency—given that, without the restoration of mutualist bonds of trust, micro-organisation is the only barrier against anarchy and the violation of rights by an individual liberty appealing back through exception to the bios component of its dual bio and political foundation (as witnessed by the quotation already given from Hobbes which speaks of a pre-political right of nature).⁹

Summing up, human rights are ‘an historical aberration of our genuine western identity’:¹⁰

Their buried foundation lies in a questionable theological voluntarism and a questionably atomising metaphysic. In either case the same logic upholds both the absolute negative liberty of the individual and the unrestricted formally-grounded power of the sovereign political power. And only the latter can render the former operable, only the latter can effectuate positively the supposedly ‘natural’ character of rights, whether this naturalness is taken to be ‘fallen’ (Ockham) or innocent (Rousseau).¹¹

Milbank’s analysis of human rights has a mainly historical focus. He is a political theologian within the Christian tradition and favours another politics than that which the modern doctrine of subjective rights promotes. To him, the notion of justice accompanying the idea of subjective rights—if there really is one—is not compatible with the Christian legacy that he wishes to pick up ‘for an alternative modernity’.¹²

Setting the scene

⁶ Milbank, ‘Against Human Rights’, p. 206.

⁷ Milbank, ‘Against Human Rights’, p. 230.

⁸ Milbank, ‘Against Human Rights’, p. 210.

⁹ Milbank, ‘Against Human Rights’, p. 207.

¹⁰ Milbank, ‘Against Human Rights’, p. 209.

¹¹ Milbank, ‘Against Human Rights’, p. 229.

¹² Milbank, ‘Against Human Rights’, p. 234.

Milbank's critical remarks regarding human rights are not totally new. The reason for taking his thoughts as a point of departure, however, is that his political theology is a counter-discourse of sorts. As regards human rights, Milbank opposes what he sees as contemporary historical revisionist accounts. These accounts are put forward by, in the main, American liberal Christians, according to whom the notion of subjective rights is compatible with the Christian faith. They stress continuity instead of rupture in the history of *ius*, and 'freedom' gains the upper hand over the notion of a right order in their thinking.¹³ To return to the opening quote, by championing human rights in their theological practice, they partake in the reproduction of Empire in the form of a totalitarian capitalist order.

From here, I want to move to the year 1953, and an address offered by the Swedish diplomat Dag Hammarskjöld (1905–1961) as he took up the office of Secretary General of the United Nations (UN) just after Easter. In the address, Hammarskjöld connected the Christian message of redemption (by God through Jesus Christ) with work for peace and conciliation: 'May I remind you of the great memory just celebrated by the Christian world. May I do so because of what that memory tells us of the redeeming power of true dedication to peace and goodwill to men.'¹⁴

Commenting on the speech was American Lutheran theologian O. Frederick Nolde (1899–1972), who by this time is the long-term Director of the Commission of the Churches on International Affairs (CCIA), a body of the World Council of Churches (WCC) that seeks to bring a Christian understanding to matters such as international law, human rights, development, peace, and disarmament.¹⁵ Nolde is renowned as an important lobbyist for Christian organisations and the churches in the ecumenical movement during the establishment of the UN and the drafting of first the UN Charter, and later the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR). He has been particularly accredited for his efforts in connection with Article 18 of the UDHR on freedom of thought, conscience, and religion.¹⁶

¹³ Milbank, 'Against Human Rights', pp. 209-210.

¹⁴ Reproduced in O. Frederick Nolde, 'Human Rights in Retrospect: A Contemporary Appraisal', *The Ecumenical Review* 20, no. 4 (1968): pp. 395-403.

¹⁵ The CCIA, which still exists, was formally established by the WCC and the International Missionary Council (IMC) in 1948. Provisionally it came into existence in 1946. The aim of CCIA was to serve the 'world-wide constituency' of these two organisations 'as a source of stimulus and knowledge in their approach to international problems, as a medium of common counsel and action, and as their organ in formulating the Christian mind on world issues and in bringing that mind effectively to bear upon such issues'. *The First Six Years 1948-1954: A Report of the Central Committee, of the World Council of Churches on the activities of the Departments and Secretariats of the Council* (Geneva: World Council of Churches, 1954), p. 92.

¹⁶ See e.g. Matti Peiponen, *Ecumenical Action in World Politics: The Creation of the Commission of the Churches on International Affairs (CCIA), 1945-1949*, Schriften der Luther-Agricola-Gesellschaft 66 (Helsinki: Luther-Agricola-Society, 2012), pp. 74-80, 33, 338-339. For a thorough analysis of the formulations that found their way into Article 18 and how these connected with the political projects and personal visions of the persons involved

Based on the cordial bond that he had developed with Hammarskjöld, Nolde made the following biographical remarks. As a child, Dag Hammarskjöld entertained a friendship with the daughter of the Archbishop of Sweden, Nathan Söderblom (1866–1931). The families of Hammarskjöld and Söderblom were close and the children Dag and Brita would have breakfast first in one house and then in the other. According to Nolde, the ‘Söderblom background’ is important for us to appreciate the full meaning of Hammarskjöld’s words and the sources on which he drew in his international work,¹⁷ and where statements like the following can be found:

[T]he Cross, although it is the unique factor on which Christians base their hope, should not separate those of Christian faith from other ... but should instead be that element in their lives which enables them to stretch out their hands to peoples of other creeds in the feeling of universal brotherhood which we hope one day to see reflected in a world of nations truly united.¹⁸

Nolde also added his own personal memory of Söderblom. In 1923, being a young fellow at the Lutheran Theological Seminary at Philadelphia, Nolde had the good fortune to meet Söderblom. He was so impressed by this encounter at a small faculty luncheon that he accompanied Söderblom when he went on to give guest lectures on comparative religions at the University of Pennsylvania.¹⁹ Söderblom’s academic field was comparative religions, and he completed his PhD at Sorbonne. He was a so-called liberal theologian—a line of thinking important in the context of this essay.²⁰

This Söderblom, whom both Hammarskjöld and Nolde remembered with such admiration and respect, has been called the father of the ecumenical movement. He was co-founder of the ecumenical Life and Work movement, which in the interwar period called on the Protestant (Lutheran, Reformed and Anglican) Churches—as well as the Old Catholic and Orthodox Churches—to work together for peace and social reform. Throughout the First World War and beyond, Söderblom appealed to the churches to work together for a better social order, for justice, and to support the development of international law needed for the purpose of solving international conflicts and achieving lasting peace. It was God’s will that the churches help establish ‘a lawful order as between states, in order that their common life may be founded “on

in the work on the UDHR, see Linde Lindqvist, *Shrines and Souls: The Reinvention of Religious Liberty and the Genesis of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights* (Malmö: Boxbox, 2014).

¹⁷ Nolde, ‘Human Rights’, p. 395.

¹⁸ Hammarskjöld speaking at the Second Assembly of the WCC in Evanston 1954, as reproduced in David P. Gaines, *The World Council of Churches: A Study of Its Background and History* (Peterborough, NH: Richard R. Smith, Noone House, 1966), p. 650. Hammarskjöld thought that the churches and the UN shared a desire for peace and that the UN could be ‘an instrument of faith’ while at the same time not aligning itself with any particular confession. Gaines, *The World Council*, pp. 648-649.

¹⁹ Nolde, ‘Human Rights’.

²⁰ Nolde, ‘Human Rights’.

the principles of truth, justice, and love”²¹. In 1930, Söderblom was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize for his efforts.

Social ethics in liberal protestant clothes

Essentially, what Söderblom and others like him sought to do was to locate ‘the place of global matters in ordinary Christian discipleship’.²² Their broad focus was on so-called ‘social ethical matters of modern life’; the relations between Christian faith, the Church, and society; the State, the economic, and the international order; and the contribution of Christian faith with regard to these areas.

The Life and Work movement focused on lay Christians and the work they needed to carry out in the contemporary world. Two snapshots are offered. At the first major conference of the Life and Work movement in Stockholm in 1925, which simultaneously established the organisation as such, it was confirmed that the Gospel was to be applied ‘to all realms of human life—industrial, social, political and international’.²³ The human being had to be defended. The soul was not to be ‘subordinate to rights of property or to the mechanisms of industry’.²⁴ The conference reinterpreted a Christian understanding of life and vision of societal welfare in terms of public policy. Christian faith held broad relevance: ‘secular’ issues were seen as essentially ‘religious’, and social and political questions were identified as religious questions.

The meeting in Stockholm also gave its backing to the League of Nations and called on Christians to speak up for the League of Nations ‘and to serve as its “Christian Soul”’.²⁵

It became clear through the ecumenical discussions in the early 1930s that life as a whole did concern the Church and demanded a ‘total’ response by faith.²⁶ Through the critical discussion carried out it became obvious to some that when searching for solutions to the problems confronting the societies, the gaze had to shift to the international plane. Churches

²¹ Nils Karlström, ‘Movements for International Friendship and Life and Work 1910–1925’, in *A History of the Ecumenical Movement 1517–1948*, edited by Ruth Rouse and Stephen Charles Neill, 4th ed. (Geneva: World Council of Churches, 1993 [1954]), pp. 515, 532–533. This by no means meant that everyone within the ecumenical movement—nor in the Christian churches on a whole—were outright pacifists. See e.g. Peiponen, *Ecumenical Action*, pp. 32–33.

²² John S. Nurser, *For All Peoples and All Nations: The Ecumenical Church and Human Rights* (Washington, D.C.: Georgetown University Press, 2005), p. 71.

²³ G. K. A. Bell, *The Stockholm Conference: Official Report of the Universal Christian Conference on Life and Work* (London: Oxford University Press, 1926), pp. 711ff.

²⁴ Bell, *The Stockholm Conference*, pp. 711ff.

²⁵ Peiponen, *Ecumenical Action*, p. 43. See also e.g. Gaines, *The World Council*, pp. 49–53. Likewise, the League of Nations found almost complete support early on among leaders of liberal American Protestant churches. The FCC and its member churches, the American branch of the WA, and the so-called Church Peace Union likewise endorsed the League, considering it ‘the political expression of the Kingdom of God on earth emphasised by the Social Gospel movement’. Peiponen, *Ecumenical Action*, p. 39.

²⁶ See Preface to the Conference Report, *Die Kirche und das Staatsproblem in der Gegenwart* (Genf: Forschungsabteilung des Oekumenischen Rates für Praktisches Christentum, 1934, 2nd enlarged edition 1935).

had a contribution to make. The Christian message with regard to just life and peace was interpreted by many as requiring in the present day and age ‘transnational institutions that might (in the concluding words of the New Testament) be “for the healing of the nations”’.²⁷ Talk was of, for example, ‘a curative and creative United Nations’, and a moral world order that would seek to realise a global ethos as articulated, among other things, through human rights.²⁸

In July 1939, the Department of International Justice and Goodwill of the Federal Council of the Churches of Christ in America (FCC)—a council made up of so-called ‘modernist’, ‘liberal’ Protestants in the United States²⁹—organised a meeting in Geneva in cooperation with the Provisional Committee of the WCC—into which the Life and Work movement had by now developed—and an international ecumenical organisation called the World Alliance for Promoting International Friendship through the Churches (WA). The meeting on ‘The Churches and the International Crisis’ assembled 35 delegates from eleven countries, including a ‘high-powered’ American delegation which contained future U.S. Secretary of State John Foster Dulles (1888–1959). The delegates formulated a memorandum to the churches, in which the churches’ task in wartime was explicated as ‘the need for true Christian prayer and for preaching centred on the righteousness of the kingdom of God; the duty to maintain brotherly relations between the churches in spite of propaganda, and to work for a just and lasting peace; and the opportunities for ministering to prisoners, soldiers under arms, and the rapidly increasing number of refugees’.³⁰ The meeting called for recognition of essential rights to human beings, ‘an international court of justice, a successor organization to the League of Nation that would have teeth, a fair system of world trade, the winding up of European colonialism and of racial discrimination, and religious liberty’. John Nurser sees ‘a clear line’ between the meeting in Geneva and ‘the dramatic events of 1945 and 1948 in the life of the UN’—referring in this context also to a similar remark by Dulles.³¹

Thus matters of peace, social justice, and human rights became connected. Human rights and in particular religious liberty were a concern for the churches, and together the ecumenical

²⁷ Nurser, *For All Peoples*, p. 12. See also e.g. Jonas Jonson, *Gustaf Aulén: Biskop och motståndsmän* (Skellefteå: Artos & Norma bokförlag, 2011), p. 198. See also Hudson, *The Ecumenical Movement*, p. 43, who remarks in a clearer fashion that a Christian social ethic was now also explicitly conceptualised as an ethic for groups rather than in traditional Protestant fashion as an ethic of individuals and inter-personal relationships, and then in naïve fashion transposed onto the international plane. This was a clear change from the initiatives of Söderblom and others at the time of the First World War and the two following decades.

²⁸ John S. Nurser, ‘The “Ecumenical Movement” Churches, “Global Order,” and Human Rights: 1938-1948’, *Human Rights Quarterly* 25, no. 4 (2003): pp. 841-881.

²⁹ For the characterisation of the members of the FCC, see Peiponen, *Ecumenical Action*, p. 23.

³⁰ Gaines, *The World Council*, p. 173, 173 (fn 13); John Nurser, ‘A Human Rights “Soul” for a Secular World of “Faiths”: A Contradiction, or Just a Paradox?’, *Political Theology* 6, no. 1 (2005): p. 53.

³¹ *The Churches and the International Crisis (Geneva, 1939)*, Report of the WCC Conference, ‘The Churches and the International Crisis’, held at Geneva, July 1939. WCC Archives, Box X, pp. 12 ff; Nurser, ‘A Human Rights “Soul”’, p. 53 (fn 5).

bodies—including the American Joint Committee on Religious Liberty set up in 1943—pressed for adequate international provisions. Nolde became assigned specifically to this task in the time leading up to the San Francisco Conference in 1945, when the UN Charter was formulated.³² On behalf of the WCC and the International Missionary Council (IMC), Nolde took on the same assignment when the newly established Human Rights Commission commenced its work on an International Bill of Rights and the CCIA was granted advisory status at the UN.³³ In contrast to Milbank’s critique of the contemporary human rights phenomenon, the work of these ecumenical actors was clearly not void of any comprehensive understanding of justice. To phrase this differently, they did not themselves see human rights as ‘empty signifiers’, but rephrased in human rights language concerns of social justice, as well as spiritual freedom—and the freedom to spread the Christian gospel, of course.³⁴

The ‘soul’ of the international system—which under the League of Nations had been identified with the input of the Christian churches and ecumenical movement—was now identified under the UN in a more ‘inclusive’ fashion with ‘human rights’. The Christian link was, however, never far away, as the churches considered the UDHR to a great extent a result of Christian input and reflecting a Christian ethos.³⁵

These efforts on the part of the ecumenical movement with regard to social and international affairs were noticed, partially as a result of their lobbying in front of the League of Nations, and later the emerging UN. To take just two anecdotes regarding the impact of the ecumenical efforts: in April 1934, Max Huber (1874–1960), the former President of the World Court at the Hague and of the International Red Cross Committee, participated in a conference in Paris organised by the Life and Work on ‘The Church and the State of To-day’. Huber was struck by the optimism and enthusiasm of the meeting. Contrary to what had been the case for the more-than-27 years that he had participated in ‘conferences and commissions of international character—diplomatic, juridical, and scientific’, he ‘left without a feeling of having been disillusioned’ and ‘with a new confidence in the possibilities of international co-operation’.³⁶ The optimism that abounded in ecumenical circles also impressed Dulles when he attended the second major conference of the Life and Work on ‘Church, Community and State’ in Oxford in 1937. It stood in striking contrast with the cynicism that to his mind

³² See e.g. Nolde, *Free and Equal*, pp. 16–21.

³³ Nolde, *Free and Equal*, p. 35.

³⁴ For the observation regarding the spreading of the Gospel, see Linde Lindkvist, ‘The Politics of Article 18: Religious Liberty in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights’, *Humanity* 4, no. 3 (2013): pp. 443.

³⁵ Nolde, *For All Peoples*, pp. 172–173; Peiponen, *Ecumenical Action*, pp. 335–336.

³⁶ Nils Ehrenström, ‘Movements for International Friendship and Life and Work 1925–1948’, in *A History of the Ecumenical Movement*, edited by Ruth Rouse and Stephen Charles Neill, 4th ed. (Geneva: World Council of Churches, 1993 [1954]), p. 582.

permeated the work of the League of Nations. As a result, he came to support the founding of the WCC into which it was decided that the Life and Work would develop in 1938.³⁷

It is important to note that the ecumenical, social, and international activism during this time to a large extent took place with ‘secular overtones’, and was rephrased in programs of action that included suggestions that did not come across as exclusively Christian. Instead, they opened up to cooperation with organisations and actors of various kinds.

Within the ecumenical movement, there was also no unity in theological questions. Also here one took a pragmatic stance. In the attempt to unite around matters of social ethics, doctrinal diversity was often enough accepted and put aside, like in the Life and Work movement. But this did not, of course, mean that the Christian tradition did not remain a source of inspiration and authority.³⁸ The Stockholm meeting of the Life and Work in 1925 largely drew on visions about the Kingdom of God in the theological reflections on social action. In 1937, at the meeting of the Life and Work in Oxford, a theological shift in emphasis was recognisable to the extent that the idea of a united Church became a focal point for ecumenical efforts and reflection on the Christian contribution to international work. The situation in the German Church and the rise of totalitarianism was a great concern. The Church had to transcend distinctions of nation, class, race, and creed. The Church was universal and had to work for this unity. Moreover, it had to find out what was the specific Christian contribution to matters of conflict resolution, peace, and justice.³⁹

So no matter how pre-eminently framed in ‘secular’ terminology, this social and international activism was embedded in the religious and theological discourse of the time. What is more, it is important here to draw attention to the shift in focus and appreciate that Christian international activism at this point in time acquired to a large degree a particular theological and social ethical framing. That Christian and ecumenical initiatives through their international action would seek to safeguard the human ‘person’ is unsurprising. This was the obvious way for them to take issue with, on the one hand, a libertarian modern subject and, on the other, the sort of totalitarian society (and also existentialism) that subjugated the subject to the collective—or alternatively dissolved the subject altogether. It became a natural point of connection with ‘secular’ protection initiatives and efforts to promote human rights, although Milbank would strongly disagree in regards to the potential that these twentieth century Christian internationalists saw in human rights.

³⁷ See e.g. Peiponen, *Ecumenical Action*, pp. 67–68.

³⁸ Ehrenström, ‘Movements’, pp. 569–570, who notes that, in consequence, the Life and Work suited better persons with a ‘certain Protestant temper’ whose interpretation of the Christian tradition could be seen as liberal.

³⁹ Peiponen, *Ecumenical Action*, p. 51; Ehrenström, ‘Movements’, pp. 591–592; *Oxford Conference, Official Report*, by Joseph H. Oldham (Chicago/New York: Willett, Clark & Company, 1937), pp. 20–21, 38–41, 47–48.

The point that this essay wants to make, however, is that if we truly wish to understand the theological framing and the foundations for Christian discipleship and action in the international sphere at that time, attention must also be paid to the ideas about a God that creates, redeems, and calls man (the ‘person’) to follow.

John Nurser has observed, moreover, that the work that ecumenical actors carried out during the creation of the UN was work that expressed a specific tradition of Christendom.⁴⁰ The Church was called to more than strict mission. Persons working in the field of international politics rephrased (and broadened) the calling in more general terms of justice—which for some constituted a troubling downgrade of the classical missionary calling in an improper way. The new view of mission was policy oriented and aimed at establishing social structures that conveyed the Christian doctrine of humanity, to paraphrase Nurser. A Christian understanding of life and vision of societal welfare was reinterpreted in terms of public policies. A democratic lifestyle stood out as desirable.⁴¹ We encounter a vision that combined social engineering with personal Christian pilgrimage.

When interpreting the Christian message with regard to matters of peace and justice, a crucial question for champions of secular Christendom was whether what was at stake was only the transformation of personal life and relationships, or also social, economic, and political structures, and the relations between peoples. They clearly leant towards the latter. Christian faith was politically relevant. Christian faith had or should have political consequences.

There were also others for whom faith was first and foremost about individual salvation and man’s relationship with God, and not about politics or the formation of society—at least no more than in a very indirect and almost incidental sense.⁴² This position was socially more conservative. Christians and Christian churches could bear prophetic witness to another way of being in the world and of working for peace and justice. This too was a way to be ‘political’.

⁴⁰ Nurser, *For All Peoples*, p. 11.

⁴¹ Nurser, *For All Peoples*, pp. 16–17; Darril Hudson, *The Ecumenical Movement in World Affairs* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1969), pp. 44–55, 63.

⁴² See, e.g., Torsten Bohlin, *Den kristna gudsrikestanken – Under 1800-talet och i nutiden* (Lund: C. W. K. Gleerups förlag, 1928), pp. 205–209, 289, 329–330, for an analysis of such more individualistically framed understandings of Christian faith and its implications. Bohlin identifies two main directions in which theologians of late-nineteenth and early-twentieth century developed their reasoning regarding the Kingdom of God and its meaning in terms of this-worldly action, which he labels universalist and individualist approaches to the notion of the Kingdom of God. Universalists agreed that the Kingdom of God not only referred to the individual and her personal relations but ‘also and primary to collective societal entities, the relations of individuals to these entities as well as their relations among each other’. They put forward a ‘religious-social notion of the Kingdom of God’. Bohlin, *Den kristna gudsrikestanken*, pp. 339–340 (fn 1), 416–417, 419. It is this practically oriented movement that found also an outlet in Christian internationalism in the ecumenical movement. More socially conservative interpretations of the Kingdom of God held that possible processes of transformation of society and state could indirectly attest the activity of Christians and thus give proof of the ideal of love of the Christian community. However, the notion of the Kingdom of God remained a ‘purely spiritual-individualistic defined’ matter. Bohlin, *Den kristna gudsrikestanken*, pp. 205–209.

They should not, however, align themselves with any political ideology. The proponents of this way of thinking, often associated with Karl Barth (1886–1968), emphasised the unbridgeable gap between God and anything this-worldly and man-made—between spiritual and temporal power. Christian revelation was ‘not continuous with [the] world of reason, nature, and history’.⁴³

What united Christians of both camps was the assessment that a focus on nation and class should not distract from questions about truth and justice. Ideas about Christian social action with such a ‘narrow’ focus and scope were considered outmoded, and the accompanying theological theories and categories were regarded as at least partially inadequate in the new situation.

Yet both within and outwith the ecumenical movement people differed in how they saw Christian faith coming to have a bearing on life in community and society, and the extent to which they saw Christian faith (in the form of deduced social ethical principles) inspiring ‘direct’ political action or simply indirectly pointing at an alternative way of community (that resonates more with how we could read Milbank’s position today). It influenced the view of how—if at all—Christians and churches should co-operate with ‘man-made’ organisations, like the League of Nations or the UN.⁴⁴

Within the ecumenical movement in the first half of the twentieth century, the dividing lines were drawn largely between the more activist and pragmatic Americans and the more theologically focused and ‘otherworldly’ continental Europeans. The British positioned themselves somewhere in between.⁴⁵ It was predominantly American ecumenists who felt that church action in world affairs was in line with the churches’ social responsibility, requiring no additional theological justification, whereas European ecumenists considered such tasks foreign to the mission of the church.⁴⁶ Importantly, especially from 1937 onwards—and within the WCC particularly up until its First Assembly in 1948⁴⁷—ecumenical work was strongly influenced by American liberal Protestants.

⁴³ Peiponen, *Ecumenical Action*, pp. 49–50 (fn. 50); referring to William Richey Hogg, *Ecumenical Foundations: A History of the International Missionary Council And Its Nineteenth-Century Background* (New York: Harper & Brothers, Publishers, 1952), p. 295. See also e.g. Karl Barth, *Der Römerbrief*, 2nd ed. (München: Kaiser, 1923), p. XII, Bohlin, *Den kristna gudsrkestanken*, p. 307.

⁴⁴ For the last sentence, see Peiponen, *Ecumenical Action*, p. 50. Not all Barthians, for example the first secretary general of the WCC Willem Visser’t Hooft (1900–1985), feared outright that the Christian revelation would be compromised through involvement in international affairs. But they clearly held that the church should preserve its integrity and that, for example, a consultative status was the way in which the churches through the CCIA could relate to the UN. Peiponen, *Ecumenical Action*, pp. 104, 123.

⁴⁵ Ehrenström, ‘Movements’, pp. 551, 554–555.

⁴⁶ See e.g. Peiponen, *Ecumenical Action*, p. 119.

⁴⁷ Peiponen, *Ecumenical Action*, p. 358.

Theological framing

The turn of the gaze from the national to the international plane that took place in ecumenical circles in the context of peace and justice, firstly before the League of Nations and later the UN, had been anticipated and instigated by theologically versed individuals who conceptualised social ethical responsible action in a so-called non-pietistic sense. One important source can be found in liberal theology, not least in the form it took within American Protestantism in ‘social gospel’ thought.

However, these and other champions of international action within the ecumenical movement also, in turn, found their inspiration among other things in nineteenth century continental protestant theology. More specifically, a source of inspiration was a vein of liberal theological thinking that developed in the nineteenth century and whose early leading representatives were predominantly German—above all Albrecht Ritschl (1822–1889) and Adolf von Harnack (1851–1930). For these so-called “Ritschlians”, the nation still formed an important point of reference at that stage, even if there were openings pointing beyond the state.⁴⁸ Their mission was to carry out a liberal reform of the church and a social reform of society.⁴⁹ These two issues were related. In the attempt to articulate adequate answer to the societal challenges, certain theological positions were rejected and novel avenues explored.⁵⁰ The task of theology was linked to the object of religious knowledge: namely God, what was good, and the overall structure and goal of life. Ritschl refuted a theology that, in keeping with traditional confessional metaphysics, looked for realities ‘beyond’ the presentation of the God and Christ that could be found in Scripture and tradition. What we find here is a faith and a theology that emphasised morality and value judgements, and whose concept of knowledge was connected to these.⁵¹

Given the stress on faith as value judgement, it is unsurprising that Ritschl and others who followed placed emphasis on formation and vocation—in other words, discipleship. What did it mean to strive for the good and lead a just life as a servant of God and a follower of Christ? The freedom to which the Christian was delivered was a freedom that was envisioned within the framework and in relation to a life in a community (instituted by Jesus). It was not about

⁴⁸ It is the focus on the nation that eventually becomes a point at which German liberal protestant theology is severely criticised as, according to critics, liberal theology showed itself inept as a starting point for critique of totalitarianism. See, e.g., Arne Rasmusson, ‘Historiography and Theology: Theology in the Weimar Republic and the Beginning of the Third Reich’, *Kirchliche Zeitgeschichte* 20, no. 1 (2007): pp. 155–180.

⁴⁹ John E. Wilson, *Introduction to Modern Theology: Trajectories in the German Tradition* (Louisville, KY/London: Westminster John Knox Press, 2007), pp. 16–18.

⁵⁰ Helmut Thielicke, *Glauben und Denken in der Neuzeit: die großen Systeme der Theologie und Religionsphilosophie* (Tübingen: J. C. B. Mohr, 1983), p. 356.

⁵¹ Wilson, *Introduction*, pp. 126–128; Albrecht Ritschl, *Die christliche Lehre von der Rechtfertigung und der Versöhnung*, 3 vols, 4th ed. (Bonn: Adolph Marcus, 1895), Vol. 3, pp. 14–25, 194, 207–209. See also Thielicke, *Glauben und Denken*, p. 357.

individual freedom. Instead, the Christian was delivered to freedom in the service of the world and in the world and in the personal, societal and political contexts where he or she lived.⁵²

The freedom that faith offered the individual gave hope that change was possible even in a world increasingly explained with reference to ‘laws of nature’ and standards set by the emerging natural sciences as to what could count as objective knowledge. Faith offered freedom and independence, off-setting a ‘fusion’ of man with nature and society. It countered the risk of man being reduced to simply nature or, alternatively, being conceptualised solely as a product of society.⁵³

In the US, Walter Rauschenbusch (1861–1918) famously represented this line of theological thinking, which grew in influence especially after the 1890s. He was a father of the so-called social gospel movement with which, among many ecumenical dignitaries, the FCC would come to be identified, and for which it would be criticised for its supposed liberalism. Like Ritschl, Rauschenbusch disapproved of asceticism and other movements that in various respects withdrew from societal life. In view of the social crisis he urged people to abandon Christian individualism, which had ‘lost sight of the great idea of the kingdom of God’ and the church’s ‘larger mission to humanity’. Rauschenbusch identified the Kingdom of God with a truly humane society. By practicing Christian ethics, this kingdom could become a reality. Jesus was no social reformer, but Rauschenbusch found in his life the roots of a new social and political order.⁵⁴

This type of liberal interpretation of the Christian tradition came under critique in the early twentieth century.⁵⁵ It was considered too ethically-immanent, too overly optimistic about changing the world and believing humanity to be progressively developing into a humane society that could be likened to a Kingdom of God on earth. Moreover critics were, as already mentioned, wary of the ways in which Christians consequently engaged with international politics on a ‘secular basis’.

Still, in the Anglo-Saxon world, liberal optimistic theology with its faith in progress kept a longer hold on the population. ‘Christians bent their efforts to “hastening” the coming of the Kingdom of God. Some hailed the nascent world community, organized in the League of

⁵² Ritschl, *Die christliche Lehre*, Vol. 1, p. 555; Ritschl, *Die christliche Lehre*, Vol. 3, pp. 194–195; Wilson, *Introduction*, p. 128. See also Thieliicke, *Glauben und Denken*, pp. 371–372; Karl Barth, *Die protestantische Theologie im 19. Jahrhundert* (Zollikon/Zürich: Evangelischer Verlag, 1947), p. 604.

⁵³ Ritschl, *Die christliche Lehre*, Vol. 3, pp. 17, 198; Barth, *Die protestantische Theologie*, p. 604; Thieliicke, *Glauben und Denken*, pp. 360–362.

⁵⁴ Walter Rauschenbusch, *Christianity and the Social Crisis* (New York: Macmillan, 1907), pp. 59–60, 71, 91, 339–340; Wilson, *Introduction*, p. 138.

⁵⁵ Cf. Wilson, *Introduction*, pp. 16–7. For a severe critique of Ritschl, see e.g., Barth, *Die protestantische Theologie*, pp. 598–605.

Nations, as a new manifestation of its glorious advance.’⁵⁶ Liberal theology and social gospel theology continued to be influential into the 1930s, at which point criticism of these ideas grew in strength.⁵⁷

One attempt to temper the excesses was formulated by Reinhold Niebuhr (1892–1971). Niebuhr was influenced theologically, amongst other things, by ‘liberal theology, including American equivalents of Ritschlianism’, but also by dialectical theology and especially Emil Brunner.⁵⁸ He was skeptical of the naïve progression-optimism of liberal theologians who downplayed the sinfulness of man and overestimated the ability of human reason. Yet he still embraced the social-ethical ideals, in a so-called ‘Christian realist’ vein. The ideal of justice was an approximation of the Christian command for love, and could moreover be intelligent to people regardless of faith. Niebuhr, who would be involved in both the WCC and the CCIA—and supported human rights—held a realistic view of man and what could be politically accomplished in that time and age.⁵⁹

Moreover, despite the gradual tempering of an overly optimistic attitude regarding the possibility to change temporal conditions, twentieth century theologians and ecumenical leaders continued to share the view that one continuously needed to find ways to assert the contribution of the Christian narrative for understanding human history and agency as *history*. Over and against a mechanical understanding of the world, there was need of an inspirational vision. History had to be presented as creation by God and by man.⁶⁰ And as God’s co-workers, the churches had a mission that included social responsibilities.

This was the conceptual backdrop for much of the work for peace and a just world during the early twentieth century. It is within this framework, and of course elsewhere, that we encounter the likes of Nolde and Söderblom and others in the ecumenical movement, who held religious ideas that strongly affected them, but at the same time were able to recast their agendas in a language that was reasonable and feasible in terms of public policies and international politics. They took a pragmatic attitude to their work and relied on secular, ‘inclusive’ arguments.⁶¹ As Nolde notes, at the time ‘freedom demands a broader base than can be offered by religion alone’.⁶²

⁵⁶ Ehrenström, ‘Movements’, p. 569.

⁵⁷ Ehrenström, ‘Movements’, p. 569.

⁵⁸ Wilson, *Introduction*, pp. 228–229.

⁵⁹ Andrew Preston, *Sword of the Spirit, Shield of the Faith: Religion in American War and Diplomacy* (New York: Anchor Books, 2012), pp. 304–314; Peiponen, *Ecumenical Action*, p. 301; as well as e.g. Reinhold Niebuhr, *Moral Man and Immoral Society* (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1960 [1932]), pp. xx–xxi.

⁶⁰ See Nurser, *For All Peoples*, p. 55 for remarks on how the discussion went at the WCC Amsterdam Assembly in 1948.

⁶¹ Nurser, *For All Peoples*, pp. 97–98.

⁶² Nolde cited in David Little, ‘Foreword’, in Nurser, *For All Peoples*, p. xi.

The pragmatic or ‘practical’ attitude featured most prominently among American liberal ecumenists. To return to Nolde,⁶³ for him Ritschl—maybe the most famous of the liberal theologians—was one whom he credited for his theological thought, alongside, as mentioned, the liberal theologian Söderblom. Being a professor of religious education, it is easy to see that a theology focused on formation and vocation would have had obvious appeal to Nolde.⁶⁴ The following section will give a short account of Nolde’s thoughts regarding working towards justice, peace, and human rights, and the religious framing he gave this work.⁶⁵ He expressed his thoughts, among other things, in a speech given in the explicitly ‘religious’ setting of ecumenical conversations with representatives of the Roman Catholic Church. This gives an idea of the otherwise largely concealed theological framing of his ‘pragmatic’ work.

The ecumenists who came together in international action held different theological positions. The following is therefore a single in-depth example of how work for peace and human rights at the level of the international community was conceptualised concretely in relation to God’s redeeming and miraculous workings, at a time preceding large-scale official ecumenical human rights deliberations. The choice of Nolde is warranted as he has been credited as the key person at work for the CCIA and thus the ecumenical churches in the newly established UN.⁶⁶

Christian vocation and the work for peace and human rights

Reflecting in 1961 on the views that he had come to hold over the years working as a representative for the churches to the UN, Nolde concluded that he and CCIA, which he represented, viewed all humans as created in the image of God. This meant that they had equal worth and freedom, and was affirmed through the act of Christ through which God reconciled the world with Himself. Thus Nolde connected human rights both to creation and salvation. The rights were not given to men by governments, but were within men. God was their source. He recognised that Christians and non-Christians founded the rights differently, but what united all was the demand that the rights be realised.⁶⁷

⁶³ As leader of the CCIA, Nolde was renowned for standing in ‘the American activist tradition which always wanted “to do something” about a problem; and he did’. Darril Hudson, *The World Council of Churches in International Affairs* (Leighton Buzzard: The Faith Press, 1977), pp. 38–39.

⁶⁴ Peiponen characterises Nolde as ‘a child of liberal American Protestantism with a strong emphasis on civil commitment’ which took expression in his pragmatic approach to world politics. Peiponen, *Ecumenical Action*, p. 339.

⁶⁵ The analysis of Nolde’s reasoning is based on his own writings, which were partly written in retrospect, but also during the turbulent years when the UN was created and the UDHR was drafted, when Nolde represented the interests of churches and ecumenical actors. I limit myself to a few central ideas.

⁶⁶ Peiponen, *Ecumenical Action*, p. 234.

⁶⁷ O. Frederick Nolde, *Free and Equal: Human Rights in Ecumenical Perspective*. With reflections on the origin of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights by Charles Habib Malik (Geneva: World Council of Churches, 1968), p. 66. See also O. Frederick Nolde, *Power for Peace: The Way of the United Nations and The Will of*

Human rights work was therefore a Christian task as well. ‘Christian vocation, whatever lines it may follow, is the means through which the Christian responds to God and reflects God’s purpose for him with society.’ Christian vocation was centrally about action for a just society, which was a society where human rights were realised. This was the theological interpretation of human rights that CCIA and Nolde supported.⁶⁸ It mirrors the focus on vocation, moral action, and responsibility that was at the centre of the Ritschlian thinking Nolde considered himself indebted to,⁶⁹ and it shows how vocation in important respects is explicated in social-ethical terms.

Moreover, human rights are seen as facilitators of discipleship. Nolde conceptualised human rights not only as a task of Christians given to them by God: if men were guaranteed human rights, these rights would actually create conditions for discipleship. Nolde concluded that ‘[w]hile man has no claim to rights before God, the situation in human society is different. Here man’s rights are based upon the gifts which God and the duties which God calls upon him to fulfill’.⁷⁰ Nolde observed that ‘human rights can and ought to be recognized in society’, and when they ‘are recognized and observed, man is in a position more readily to fulfill his obligations to God and to his neighbor’.⁷¹ Thus, ultimately, Nolde gave the work for human rights a religious framing.

Moreover, this work included an international component, and so international work was given a theological foundation as well. Nolde talked about ‘religious liberty as a matter of international responsibility’⁷². In the same manner, he talked about work for ‘a peaceful and orderly world’ as the personal responsibility of every Christian.⁷³ Christians were not just supposed to have views about questions of central concern to the international community and the world order—they should also act to bring these views to fruition. If ecumenical bodies wanted to influence the decisions being made, they had to be present at the places and moments in time where international decisions were made. Concrete action was needed.⁷⁴ Nolde urged

Christian People (Philadelphia: Muhlenberg Press, 1946), pp. 62–63, referring also to the *Statement on Religious Liberty* by the Federal Council of the Churches of Christ in America, and the Foreign Mission Conference of North America in 1944, and O. Frederick Nolde, ‘Divine Compulsion’, *Ecumenical Review* 8, no. 4 (1956): p. 420. For Nolde, “religious liberty is in one sense basic to all other human rights, especially civil rights”, while simultaneously also “inseparably related to them”. Nolde, *Free and Equal*, p. 67.

⁶⁸ Nolde, *Free and Equal*, p. 66. See also Nolde, ‘Divine Compulsion’, p. 420, as well as e.g. Alf Tergel, *De mänskliga rättigheterna och Kyrkornas världsråd*, Tro & Tanke 1998: 5 (Uppsala: Svenska kyrkans forskningsråd, 1998), pp. 16–17.

⁶⁹ Nurser, *For All Peoples*, p. 36. Nolde’s dedication to education and vocation is visible for example in his book *Power for Peace* (1946), which was structured in a way that would be useful for students who wanted to learn about the UN.

⁷⁰ Nolde, *Free and Equal*, p. 65.

⁷¹ Nolde, *Free and Equal*, p. 66.

⁷² Nolde, *Free and Equal*, p. 65.

⁷³ Nolde, *Power for Peace*, pp. XIV, 3, 33. See also e.g. Nolde, ‘Divine Compulsion’, p. 419.

⁷⁴ Nolde, *Power for Peace*, p. XI.

churches and individual Christians to support the UN: '[T]he work of the world political organization [the UN] is, or should become, relevant to rightful objectives of the Christian citizen.' According to him, their input was in fact vital.⁷⁵

Talking at the Second Assembly of the WCC in 1954, Nolde visualised the work of his agency, the CCIA, in terms of peace, the understanding of which found its inspiration in the Christian message:

I venture to say that in this co-operative witness ... a new world peace movement is progressively developing, a movement which is rooted in the life of the churches and which seeks to express the meaning of the Christian faith for relations among nations. ... It is not yet, unfortunately, a popular movement but ultimately it must become so, for its success depends upon study and support by Christians in every walk of life.⁷⁶

Co-existence was a prerequisite for peace, meaning something more than 'a world divided into compartments with an apparent commitment that both parties will respect existing geographical and ideological boundaries'. Nolde denounced compartmentalisation on grounds of Christian fellowship being borderless,⁷⁷ echoing the central 1930s idea of the united church as a testimony to and vision for international fellowship.

Looking back at the first six years of the WCC in 1954, the CCIA itself noted that it had not attempted to examine and elucidate 'the theological presuppositions of the churches' witness in international affairs'. The CCIA was not equipped to carry out such a task either.⁷⁸ The influence of the pragmatist and practice-oriented attitude on part of American ecumenists, who very much initiated the creation of the CCIA, is visible in these statements.⁷⁹ Yet the CCIA did identify the following justification of its work: a Christian who has experienced the peace, righteousness, and freedom that God offers, must seek the same for his fellowmen.⁸⁰

In conclusion, Christian faith could and should express itself in political action, including human rights work. It was in keeping with—rather than breaking from—Christian tradition. In fact, even if it did not ultimately find its way into the list in Article 18 of the UDHR of ways religion can take expression, Nolde and the WCC did repeat in the years to come that part of

⁷⁵ Nolde, *Power for Peace*, pp. XI, XIV. International law, e.g., should conform to Christian moral principles. Nolde, *Power for Peace*, pp. 85–86.

⁷⁶ Reproduced in Gaines, *The World Council*, pp. 650–651.

⁷⁷ Gaines, *The World Council*, p. 651; and Nolde, 'Divine Compulsion', p. 421.

⁷⁸ *The First Six Years 1948-1954*, p. 101.

⁷⁹ See also e.g. Peiponen, *Ecumenical Action*, pp. 94–98, 119, 148–149.

⁸⁰ *The First Six Years 1948-1954*, p. 101.

this religious freedom was the ability to address ‘social, economic and political affairs, whether domestic or international’, according to one’s conscience.⁸¹

Concluding discussion

To sum up, liberal theological thought, with an optimistic outlook on man and history, a progression narrative, and an attempt to mediate between theology and the epistemological demands of the positive sciences—among other things through dismissal of traditional metaphysics and a turn to ‘ethics’/value judgments and ‘vocation’—formed the framework within which internationalist Christian action in the early twentieth century was to a large extent grounded. As said, it was very much about lay discipleship. Salvation was deliverance to freedom of service for the world and in the world in the personal, societal and political contexts where one lived, work on the progressive realisation of a moral Kingdom of God. Eschatology was not a religious border-concept but an immanently to-be-realised socio-ethical ideal. History was presented as a creation of God and man.

This laid the ground for the optimism and vision of international work as expressive of Christian discipleship and God’s vision for the world that impacted Huber and Dulles at a time when, after all, the progressive narrative had been shaken in its core. The idealistic belief in creating a world order with a moral core would soon enough be confronted and moderated by the realpolitik that impacted international relations following the Second World War. But the belief would not be lost completely.

However, as this essay has also emphasised, within the ecumenical movement and the WCC there was no consensus on political and economic matters, nor regarding the way to bring about social reform. Darril Hudson makes clear that diverging theological positions were present already at the meeting of Life and Work in Stockholm 1925, and would ‘come to life to plague the Ecumenical Movement as it found its place in international life’. Because people perceived of, for example, the relationship between the Kingdom of God and the world differently, they also differed in their views about the church and the world. Americans were denounced as naïve, non-theological, pragmatic, and activist.⁸²

However, with regard to those who did favour international action, and thought that Christians could give a contribution to a new world order with a moral core—in the main, Anglo-American ecumenists—their vision of a just social order combined a liberal project of rule of law with a favourable yet not uncritical stance to capitalism. Moreover, human rights (and international law more generally) became understood as a weapon in the defence of the

⁸¹ Nolde, *Free and Equal*, pp. 42, 67.

⁸² Ehrenström, ‘Movements’, pp. 554–555.

individual person against the totalitarian state and unlimited state power⁸³—contrary to Milbank, who, as seen, does not see human rights as safeguards against totalitarian regimes (like China or Russia), but rather as their ally.

At the first General Assembly of the WCC in Amsterdam in 1948, the delegates were clearly divided on both doctrinal matters and matters of peace and war. Caution was observed in view of the East-West rivalries on the world-political scene that were also making inroads into the ecumenical discussions.⁸⁴ The ‘anti-religious emphasis of the Soviet communism’ was, however, a major factor behind the support for human rights of the WCC and the CCIA at the time.⁸⁵ Regarding the understanding of human rights and religious freedom, their stance coincided with the American position of the time, and the Joint Declaration on Religious Liberty adopted by the WCC at the Assembly in Amsterdam and, at a later date, by the IMC is evidence to this. But as organisations, they abstained from taking definite sides between the East and West—or capitalism and communism—even if in particular Americans like Dulles would have wished for more. The Church should be likened with neither, and gather all Christians irrespective of national belonging.⁸⁶

For the ecumenical actors, the freedom that human rights granted was neither unlimited nor unconditioned. In this they once more differed from Milbank. Religious liberty, for example, had to be secured in order for people to be free to seek God. The fact that the ultimate foundation of the rights lay with God—as CCIA put it, governments had to *recognise* (as oppose to *grant*) man as possessing these rights ‘by virtue of his being and destiny’⁸⁷—meant that the perception of the rights fell back on comprehensive religiously-inspired ideas about the human person, about justice and just distribution, about society, and the goals of mankind. They may not have been in all respects explicitly theologically elaborated but, as seen, the framework was there, including ideas about ‘right’ and a transcendent moral order. Human rights were not seen—as Milbank would have it—as representations of an atomising metaphysic or authorisation of voluntarist thinking gone too far.

⁸³ At the WCC Amsterdam Assembly in 1948, human rights and fundamental freedoms were something the delegates did agree about. Peiponen, *Ecumenical Action*, p. 292.

⁸⁴ See e.g. Peiponen, *Ecumenical Action*, pp. 284–297.

⁸⁵ Peiponen, *Ecumenical Action*, pp. 328–329.

⁸⁶ Declaration on Religious Liberty, adopted by the World Council of Churches in Amsterdam and by the International Missionary Council in Oesgsteest, the Netherlands, in September 1948, reproduced e.g. in Report of Section IV, *The Church and the International Disorder*, reproduced in *The Church and International Disorder: An Ecumenical Study Prepared under the Auspices of the World Council of Churches* (London: SCM Press LTD, 1948), pp. 229–232; Peiponen, *Ecumenical Action*, pp. 291, 345–348, 358.

⁸⁷ Nolde, *Free and Equal*, p. 38. The CCIA connected religious liberty to other rights and freedoms, considering human rights interconnected and interdependent. Nolde, *Free and Equal*, pp. 38–39. This idea of interrelatedness of human rights clearly reflects the earlier step taken by Nolde in 1944 to convince the Protestant churches he then represented (the FCC) to support ‘a broad range of human rights as the path to follow in securing religious liberty’. Nurser, ‘A Human Rights “Soul”’, pp. 54–55.

Yet given Milbank's severe critique, were these early 'human rights activists' naïve? Nolde, the CCIA, and other ecumenical actors quickly became aware that the UN was not functioning optimally. National interests trumped other concerns in the name of state sovereignty. Ideological conflicts hampered the work, and the veto system was abused. The UN operated 'on the frontier of international anarchy'.⁸⁸ It became evident that expectations had been unrealistic, but that there was also no clear alternative but to seek to improve and reinforce the UN.⁸⁹ Also, despite this disillusionment, human rights remained a goal of the churches. In fact, the comprehensive elaboration of the churches' understanding, beyond central notions of human dignity, human freedom, equality, and perhaps a limited number of mainly 'classical' individual rights and freedoms still lay ahead. This work got off the ground in the 1960s.⁹⁰ Still, the time period was a different one than Milbank's twenty-first century. Human rights were only one vocabulary among others and were definitely not in wide circulation. The heydays of human rights were decades away. They had not yet colonised perceptions of human life and relationships to the extent that would later become the case.

⁸⁸ Statement of the CCIA in the report *The First Six Years*. The matter of how to relate to and view the UN was discussed at consecutive WCC Assemblies in Amsterdam 1948, Evanston 1954, and New Delhi 1961. The CCIA also produced two statements on the topic, 'Christian Look at the United Nations' (1953), and another in 1965. O. Frederick Nolde, 'Ecumenical Action in International Affairs', in *The Ecumenical Advance: A History of the Ecumenical Movement, volume 2, 1948–1968*, edited by Harold E. Fey, 3rd ed. with updated bibliography (Geneva: World Council of Churches, 1970), p. 283.

⁸⁹ Nolde, 'Ecumenical Action', p. 283.

⁹⁰ See e.g. Tergel, *De mänskliga rättigheterna*, pp. 13–15, 17, who offers an account of the view taken by the WCC at the beginning of its work in 1948 and up until 1961.

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