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1

A Controversial and Politicized Issue: The World Council of Churches and Human Rights from the 1950s to 1989[1]

Katharina Kunter

Recent Debates in Historiography

The historiography of human rights in the 20th century has boomed over the past 10 years, due in part to the inspiring and widely received work of the American historian Samuel Moyn. His 2010 book *The Last Utopia: Human Rights in History*[2] is particularly worthy of mention here because it triggered the debate and question of how far Christianity was contributing to the formulation and declaration of human rights. The continuing interest and recent research motivated him to write another book in 2015, *Christian Human Rights*,[3] in which he specifically speaks of the relationship of Christianity to human rights. In the book, he argues that human rights first emerged in Europe in the 1930s and 1940s as a primarily conservative

1. The following reflections summarizes ideas from different previously published articles. See especially Katharina Kunter, "Christianity, Human Rights, and Socio-Ethical Reorientations," in *History of Global Christianity*, Vol. 3: 20th Century, ed. Jens Holger Schjorring Norman A. Hjelm, and Kevin Ward (Leiden: Brill, 2018), 127–46 (German edition: Katharina Kunter, "Christentum, Menschenrechte und sozialethische Neuorientierungen," in Jens Holger Schjorring, Norman A. Hjelm, Kevin Ward (Hg.), in *Geschichte des globalen Christentums*. Teil 3: 20. Jahrhundert (Stuttgart: Kohlhammer, 2018), 209–37). See also Katharina Kunter and Annegreth Schilling, eds, *Globalisierung der Kirchen. Der Ökumenische Rat der Kirchen und die Entdeckung der "Dritten Welt" in den 1960er und 1970er Jahren* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck and Ruprecht, 2014); Katharina Kunter, "Global Reach and Global Agenda: The World Council of Churches," in *The Changing World Religion Map: Sacred Places, Identities, Practices and Politics*, ed. Stanley D. Brunn (New York: Springer, 2015), 2909–23 (ch. 153); Katharina Kunter, "Die Schlussakte von Helsinki und die Diskussion im ÖRK um die Verletzung der Religionsfreiheit in Ost- und Mitteleuropa 1975-1977," *Ökumenische Rundschau* 49 (2000), 43–51; Katharina Kunter, *Die Kirchen im KSZE-Prozess 1968-1978* (Stuttgart: Kohlhammer, 2000). This footnote should not be numbered but marked with an asterisk *

2. Samuel Moyn, *The Last Utopia: Human Rights in History* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2010).

3. Samuel Moyn, *Christian Human Rights: Intellectual History of the Modern Age* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2015).

Christian project. This argument has been taken up and developed by other historians, such as Marco Duranti,[4] into the idea of a conservative human rights revolution, which after the Second World War would have contributed to the emergence of a conservative Cold War world order. These interpretations, however, experienced different clarifications as well as contradiction. One of the current research contributions to the debate was recently presented by Sarah Shortall and Daniel Steinmetz-Jenkins in *Christianity and Human Rights Reconsidered*.[5]

Without going too deeply and in too much detail into these new academic fields and research contributions, from the perspective of Protestant church historiography, however, one general direction is noteworthy: the contributions of the World Council of Churches (WCC) and the Commission of the Churches on International Affairs (CCIA) play only a marginal role in these debates. This may well be due to a lack of expertise as well as the fact that fewer Protestant historians overall are present in the ongoing discussions. Also, Nurser's book may have left the impression that the contributions of the ecumenical movement had already been explored.[6] The focus of the current debate is therefore mainly on the Catholic Church and Catholicism; a fulcrum centres on the French philosopher Jacques Maritain and his personalism in the 1940s. In this context, it is worth remembering that one of the sharpest critics of Maritain's personalism in the 1940s was later general secretary of the WCC, the Dutch Protestant Willem Visser 't Hooft, as Jurjen Zeilstra pointed out in his recently published academic biography about Visser 't Hooft.[7] Against this backdrop, it would be worthwhile to examine and analyze the human rights engagement of the WCC once again under the new questions—if only because this would remind researchers of the contributions and presence of the WCC in a current secular, historical research debate. In this context, it should be emphasized that the WCC is not a purely Protestant church body but also includes churches in the heritage of the Reformation, such as the Anglican Church and Orthodox churches.

4. Marco Duranti, The Conservative Human Rights Revolution: European Identity, Transnational Politics, and the Origins of the European Convention (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017).
5. Sarah Shortall and Daniel Steinmetz-Jenkins, eds., *Christianity and Human Rights Reconsidered* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2020).
6. John S. Nurser, *For All People and All Nations: The Ecumenical Church and Human Rights* (Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press: 2005).
7. Jurjen Zeilstra and Willem Adolf Visser 't Hooft, *Ein Leben für die Ökumene* (Leipzig: Evangelische Verlagsanstalt, 2020), 132.

Because of this denominational diversity, it is even more serious that, at the moment, the history of the WCC and the WCC as an historical actor are in danger of being forgotten in this field.

A Strong Stand on Religious Liberty in the 1950s and Early 1960s

Matti Peiponen has shown in his chapter[8] how the early WCC accompanied the human rights work of the United Nations from the very beginning through its Commission of the Churches on International Affairs, which was founded in 1946. The CCIA, especially under its first director, Frederik O. Nolde, gave considerable impetus to the early debates on the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) and the parts on religious liberty (Article 18). In line with this, the WCC strongly supported human rights at the 1st Assembly of the WCC in August 1948 in Amsterdam and passed a resolution on religious liberty.[9] The UDHR was issued soon after, on 10 December 1948. In the 15 following years, the implementation of religious liberty—and, in concrete terms, the work on behalf of the oppressed Protestant Christians and churches in communist Central and Eastern Europe, as well for Protestant minorities—became one of the key goals of the WCC. It was rooted in the overarching ecumenical idea of the social ethical concept of the responsible society that had marked the post-war period.[10] The 2nd Assembly of the WCC in New Delhi in 1961, where 40 percent of participants came from countries of Africa, Asia, and Latin America, also expressly declared its support for the principles of religious liberty in its section V.[11] At the same time, the assembly acknowledged the commitment of the CCIA to the dynamic further development of civil, political, economic, social, and cultural human rights. Even though the WCC in New Delhi was still moving within the post-war coordinates of the Third Way, the concept of

8. See the chapter by Matti Peiponen, "International Affairs in the Focus of Ecumenical Work: Human Rights and the WCC from 1948 Till Today," in this volume.
9. Willem Visser 't Hooft, ed., The First Assembly of the World Council of Churches, Held in Amsterdam, 22 August to 4 September 1948 (London: 1949), 78, 93f., 97f.
10. See Katharina Kunter and Annegreth Schilling, "Der Christ fürchtet den Umbruch nicht." Der Ökumenische Rat der Kirchen im Spannungsfeld von Dekolonisierung, Entwestlichung und Politisierung," in *Globalisierung der Kirchen. Der Ökumenische Rat der Kirchen und die Entdeckung der "Dritten Welt"*, ed. Katharina Kunter and Annegreth Schilling, (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck and Ruprecht, 2014), 19–74.
11. Willem Visser 't Hooft, ed, Neu-Delhi 1961. Dokumentarbericht über die Dritte Vollversammlung des Ökumenischen Rates der Kirchen (Stuttgart: Evang. Missionsverlag, 1962), 298ff.

the responsible society, and the emphasis on religious freedom, the immense social and geopolitical upheavals of the coming years, which were to be set in motion by decolonization, were already looming.

The increasing internationalization and globalization of the WCC and its member churches, which was set in motion during these years, eventually led to a gradual farewell to the Anglo-Saxon liberal interpretation of human rights, the "first-generation rights," dominant up to that point in the WCC. The time of the "second-generation rights" began. One consequence of this upheaval was that religious liberty was now interpreted as one single human right among other human rights and was no longer seen as one to be pursued as a priority for the WCC. As a result, work against infringements of religious liberty in communist Central and Eastern Europe lost importance. It was now seen as a Europe-centric concern for which the Conference of European Churches should take over responsibility.[12] This trend corresponded with international developments in the same period. The various United Nations organizations also followed the new path under the keyword "development."[13] The situation was similar in relation to the Human Rights Commission of the United Nations, in which the voices of decolonized countries were becoming more pressing after the Bandung Conference of 1955. For them, countries' right to self-determination and the resultant free economic disposal of their resources were a prime, central human right, which was at the same time expected to protect against any repetition of colonialism. With this concern, they were finally able to assert themselves in the Human Rights Commission of the United Nations, foremost in the International Covenant on Economic, Social, and Cultural Rights, which was made legally binding on 16 December 1966, then passed together with the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights.

Call for Social and Cultural Rights: The Late 1960s and 1970s

The international developments sketched here were also implemented in the WCC and contributed to the fact that from the late 1960s on, the call for social and cultural human rights—and, in this context, the church's advocacy

12. Kunter, Die Kirchen im KSZE-Prozess, 195.

13. See Katharina Kunter and Annegreth Schilling, "'Der Christ fürchtet den Umbruch nicht.' Der Ökumenische Rat der Kirchen im Spannungsfeld von Dekolonisierung, Entwestlichung und Politisierung," in *Globalisierung der Kirchen. Der Ökumenische Rat der Kirchen und die Entdeckung der "Dritten Welt"*, ed. Katharina Kunter and Annegreth Schilling (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck and Ruprecht, 2014), 19–74.

of social justice—was becoming increasingly significant at the WCC. Political influences from the Latin American networks Iglesia y Sociedad en América Latina and Comisión Evangélica Latinoamericana de Educación Cristiana on the one hand,[14] and the Afro-American civil rights movement around Martin Luther King on the other, played an important role. King was closely associated with the second general secretary of the WCC, Eugene Carson Blake of the United States, who took office in 1966, and King visited the Ecumenical Centre in Geneva in 1967.

How influential this connection was became apparent at the 4th Assembly of the WCC in Uppsala, Sweden, in July 1968. King had been expected to preach the opening sermon in Uppsala's cathedral. His murder three months earlier had deeply shaken the ecumenical representatives. A clear word from the WCC and the ecumenical movement against racism was urgent. Therefore, section IV now held that any form of racial discrimination was a "blatant denial of the Christian faith" and had to be seen as the most serious violation of human rights.[15] At the same time, reference was made to the two human rights treaties, observing that individual and collective human rights should not be regarded in isolation from each other. This interlinking of individual and collective human rights meant that the realization of individual human rights depended on the economic and social background in each case. Ecumenical commitment to human rights would therefore contribute to the dismantling of unjust structures and to efforts toward a better and fairer world.

Through the connection made between human rights and the struggle against unjust structures, human rights gained a new set of moral objectives in the ecumenical world.[16] Its new, mainly social human rights–oriented

14. Annegreth Schilling, Revolution, Exil und Befreiung. Der Boom des lateinamerikanischen Protestantismus in der internationalen Ökumene in den 1960er und 1970er Jahren (Göttingen: V&R Academic, 2016); Christian Albers, "Der ÖRK und die Menschenrechte im Kontext von Kaltem Krieg und Dekolonisierung," in Globalisierung der Kirchen. Der Ökumenische Rat der Kirchen und die Entdeckung der "Dritten Welt", ed. Katharina Kunter and Annegreth Schilling (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck and Ruprecht, 2014), 201.

15. Norman Goodall, ed., Bericht aus Uppsala 1968. Offizieller Bericht über die vierte Vollversammlung des Ökumenischen Rates der Kirchen, Uppsala 4.-20.7.1968 (Geneva: WCC, 1968), 66ff.

16. See, e.g., Moyn, Last Utopia; Samuel Moyn and Jan Eckel, eds, Moral für die Welt? Menschenrechtspolitik in den 1970er Jahren (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck and Ruprecht, 2012); Stefan Ludwig-Hofmann, ed., Moralpolitik. Geschichte der Menschenrechte im 20. Jahrhundert (Göttingen: Wallstein, 2010).

interpretation triggered controversies, however. A serious point of dispute was the extent to which human rights were a matter of Western norms which aided the continuation of colonial and capitalist structures, or whether the Western individual approach should be halted precisely by means of an anti-Western and anti-colonial reading. In the ecumenical world, in most cases the collective-social interpretation of human rights carried the day, having strong roots in Latin American liberation theology.[17] One result of this change of direction was that global discussion in the ecumenical world in the 1970s released the topic of human rights from the Western liberal understanding and the bipolarity of Eastern and Western Europe. This is clearly illustrated by the following quote from a meeting of the CCIA executive committee in 1971:

> This conception will necessarily move beyond the Western liberal interpretation that views individual rights as supreme, to give emphasis to collective rights of all men to act in the pursuit of dignity free from exploitation by their fellow-men whether this exploitation is political or economic in character.[18]

The implementation of human rights in an integrative ecumenical social ethics, however, remained a matter for the leading ecumenical elite. For the church base, on the other hand, the active struggle of the ecumenical world against racism was a much more challenging and mobilizing enterprise. After Uppsala, the Programme to Combat Racism (PCR) was established in 1969 as a binding WCC program of study and consultation.[19] It was directed primarily to the combating of and liberation from white and institutional racism, including within the ecumenical world. A key element of this program consisted in equipping minorities and disadvantaged groups to free themselves from unjust structures—with a special fund also supporting liberation movements, even if they were unwilling to draw the line at violence.

17. Schilling, Revolution, Exil und Befreiung.

18. Quoted by Christian Albers, "Der ÖRK und die Menschenrechte im Kontext von Kaltem Krieg und Dekolonisierung," in *Globalisierung der Kirchen. Der Ökumenische Rat der Kirchen und die Entdeckung der "Dritten Welt"*, ed. Katharina Kunter and Annegreth Schilling (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck and Ruprecht, 2014), 202.

19. Antti Laine, Ecumenical Attack against Racism: The Anti-Racist Programme of the World Council of Churches, 1968–1974 (Helsinki: Luther-Agricola-Gesellschaft, 2015).

This led in some cases to heavily controversial discussions in the member churches.[20]

The Year 1975 as a Crossroads

In a certain way, the two traditions in the WCC regarding human rights came together in 1975 as if in a magnifying glass through two decisive historical events:

1. The signing of the Helsinki Final Act in August 1975, with its principle VII in the catalogue of principles. Principle VII guaranteed the recognition of human rights and basic freedoms between signatory states and went hand in hand with the so-called Basket 3 of the Final Act, which regulated the concrete cooperation in humanitarian and other areas based on human rights.

2. The 5th Assembly of the WCC, which took place in December 1975 in Nairobi, Kenya. Here, the two members of the Russian Orthodox Church, Gleb Yakunin and Lev Regelson, had addressed an open letter to the WCC in which they asked the WCC to officially condemn the violation of religious freedom in the USSR.[21] The letter created a difficult situation: Should the WCC now take an official stand on the violation of religious freedom in Eastern Europe? The assembly sidestepped the conflict and finally only formulated that the alleged denial of religious freedom had been discussed. After the WCC's assembly in Nairobi, the CCIA organized an evaluation conference in Montreux (Switzerland) in 1976, in which the member churches should report restrictions on religious freedom that had been made so far.[22] But in the debate, which was strongly polarized by Cold War tensions, the clear

20. See, e.g., Sebastian Tripp, "Das Programm zur Bekämpfung des Rassismus und die 'Glokalisierung' der Kirchen," in *Globalisierung der Kirchen. Der Ökumenische Rat der Kirchen und die Entdeckung der "Dritten Welt"*, ed. Katharina Kunter and Annegreth Schilling Göttingen: Vandenhoeck and Ruprecht, 2014), 298–311.

21. A more detailed discussion is found in Katharina Kunter, "Die Schlussakte," 43–51.

22. In a memorandum of 28 May 1975, Dwain Epps emphasized: "It is indeed incredible how little attention people are giving in Europe, and if I may say so especially in Eastern Europe, to some of the broader world-wide dimensions of the current steps towards Security and Cooperation in Europe. The Third World does not take this as a gift given to them by generous Northerners." (Archive of the CCIA / Helsinki Colloquium Background Materials pre-1976.) See further Ninan Koshy, *Religious Freedom in a Changing World* (Geneva: WCC, 1992).

> words of the WCC that mainly Western media representatives hoped for failed to materialize.

In this context, the 1975 assembly meant the end of the dominance of religious liberty and thus the individual human rights within the WCC. One result of this change of direction was that global discussion in the ecumenical world in the 1970s released the topic of human rights from the bipolarity of East and West.

All these developments happened at the same time, as Christians and oppositional groups to Christians first turned to individual human rights in Central and Eastern Europe, in accordance with the Helsinki Final Act. Part of this was the Czech citizens' rights movement Charta 77, founded in 1977, and the initiative for peace and human rights founded in the German Democratic Republic as late as 1986. In many cases, committed members of these groups included Protestant Christians, both pastors and laity. In their commitment to human and citizens' rights, they generally stood opposed to the state and their own church leadership—another dilemma for the WCC, whose member churches of Central and Eastern Europe were in almost all cases very close to the official politics of the communist states.

A Global Turning Point: 1989–90

The collapse of the communist states in Central and Eastern Europe in 1989–90 brought a definitive end to the post-war order and world politics characterized by the East–West divide and the Cold War.[23] This had various far-reaching effects for the WCC; it could be seen as a winner as well as a loser at the same time. On one hand, the ecumenical movement lost its significance in Central and Eastern Europe, where numerous Christians had campaigned—individually, in parishes, or in oppositional groups—for democracy and for the validity of the liberal and individual human rights and felt let down here by the official ecumenical movement. On the other hand, the apartheid system in South Africa was brought to an end in February 1990, and in 1994 Nelson Mandela, supported by the ecumenical world, was elected the first Black president of South Africa. Here, too, the struggle against the apartheid regime was naturally a result of the struggle for human rights.

23. Further, see Klaus Koschorke, ed., Falling Walls: The Year 1989/90 as a Turning Point in the History of World Christianity / Einstürzende Mauern.Das Jahr 1989/90 als Epochenjahr in der Geschichte des Weltchristentums (Wiesbaden: Harrasowitz Verlag, 2009).

At the same time, the end of the Cold War brought new shocks because it turned out that the Cold War had also "civilized" church and political conflicts to the extent that they were often not pursued in the open. The civil wars in Europe that broke out after the end of the Cold War, the new authoritarian systems emerging across the world, the genocides, as well as the strengthening of militant Islamism once again brought the issue of human rights violations back onto the political agenda.

If one surveys the WCC's involvement in human rights in the second half of the 20th century, it is evident that after 1945, human rights stimulated intercultural discussions in the Christian churches and the ecumenical movement and called attention to globally experienced injustices. Through worldwide links between the various churches and ecumenical communication, human rights experienced global remoulding in the direction of collective and social human rights. The importance of individual human rights, which also became clear after the Cold War, did not diminish as a result. This also shows that human rights are not a fixed dogma but that their subjects are determined again and again in disputes and discussions. They are expandable, as can be seen in the current debates and implementations of the third generation of human rights.