

## The World Council of Churches and the Afghanistan Crisis 1980-1984\*

by  
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### INTRODUCTION

It is well known that churches today have increasingly gone political. Major ecumenical church organizations like the National Council of Churches (NCC) in the United States or the World Council of Church (WCC) in Geneva have a long tradition of political pronouncements. For this, the churches, and various ecumenical church organizations, are increasingly under attack by those who feel that "church politics" so often is biased or one-sided.

After a survey of the WCC's statements on major international conflicts and from personal observation during many of the WCC's meetings and conferences, the author concluded that many of these complaints seem to be justified. This paper will be limited, however, to the WCC's handling of the Afghanistan crisis and will attempt to show how the WCC was forced by its member churches from Eastern Europe, particularly the Russian Orthodox Church, to come close to the official Soviet position.

The WCC is a complex organization. The most representative body of the WCC is its Assembly which convenes every seven or eight years. Between subsequent Assemblies the WCC's Central Committee meets annually to review the work done by the WCC and its staff, to approve the budget, and to launch and stimulate new programs. Its statements reflect the official policy of the WCC, since all its member churches are represented in the Central Committee. Statements made by the Executive Committee — a much smaller inner body of the WCC — are less representative of the WCC policy but certainly have authoritative status. Usually the Central Committee confirms the decisions taken by the Executive Committee. Finally, there are the "Officers" of the WCC, the General Secretary and various "spokespersons" of the WCC. They, too, can issue statements but their authority is usually limited, unless subsequently approved by a more representative body.

When in 1950 North Korea invaded South Korea, international peace and security were, for the first time since World War II, threatened by a direct act of aggression. Meeting in Toronto, in July 1950, the Central Committee of the World Council of Churches (CC/WCC) immediately recognized the seriousness of the situation and issued a special "Statement on the Korean Situation and World Order," saying, *inter alia*,

An act of aggression has been committed. The United Nations Commission in Korea, the most objective witness available, asserts that 'all evidence points to a

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calculated, coordinated attack prepared and launched with secrecy' by the North Korean troops.<sup>1</sup>

The statement was severely criticized by churches from Eastern bloc countries. The World Council of Churches was accused of being 'an agent of imperialism' or even 'an instrument of Wall Street,' among other things. One of the WCC's presidents, Dr. T.C. Chao from Communist China, withdrew from his position in the Council. Yet churches from Communist countries did not exert the amount of influence within the WCC they were to exert after 1961 when the powerful Russian Orthodox Church joined it.

### THREATS TO PEACE

It was in December 1979 when a new major threat to international peace and security presented itself in the Soviet invasion, or as the London *Times* called it, *annexation*, of Afghanistan. This time, however, it was a few months before the WCC, through its Executive Committee, meeting in Liebfrauenberg, France, took a stand on the issue. In a statement "Threats to Peace," "serious concern" was expressed about the military action by the USSR in Afghanistan as constituting the latest direct armed intervention in one country by another. This has heightened the tension especially in and around the area of development.<sup>2</sup>

On earlier occasions the WCC had been less slow in reacting to evident cases of armed intervention. When, for example, in August 1968 the Soviets crushed the Prague Spring movement by brute force, Officers of the WCC issued a statement the same month. It referred to "this ill-considered action by the USSR and its allies" and appealed "to the government of the USSR to reconsider the policy which dictated the military intervention, to remove all its troops from Czechoslovakia at the earliest possible moment, and to renounce the use of force or threat upon its allies."<sup>3</sup>

So strong and unambiguous a statement was not to be made by the WCC with respect to the Soviet intervention in Afghanistan. First of all, the WCC reaction to the invasion proved to be a political stumbling block within the WCC. Efforts to draft a separate public statement on Afghanistan failed until the WCC's Sixth Assembly met in Vancouver in August 1983. The Executive Committee yielded to the Soviet argument that the issue of Afghanistan was part of a variety of other issues and situations, since "no single event should be seen in isolation."<sup>4</sup>

Unlike the position taken by the Officers of the WCC in 1968 regarding the invasion of Czechoslovakia, the Soviet Union was now *not* asked to leave Afghanistan "at the earliest possible moment" nor to reconsider its policy of military intervention. Compared with what the WCC and/or its spokesmen had said on earlier occasions, the Executive Committee statement "Threats to Peace" was rather weak.

Nonetheless, what had happened in Afghanistan was of such dramatic importance and consequence that the WCC should at least have issued a separate statement condemning the Soviet invasion in more

emphatic terms. Simply to point to the deployment of more than 500 nuclear missiles by NATO and to ignore the fact that this decision had been forced upon NATO by massive deployment of Soviet SS-20 missiles, as did the Executive Committee Statement, was not a contribution to a balanced view of the peace and security problems involved in the Afghanistan crisis.

### **DIVERGING VIEWS WITHIN THE WCC EXECUTIVE COMMITTEE**

The Executive Committee had to reach a compromise in order to present a unanimous statement. The statement "Threats to Peace" which devoted only a few lines to what had happened to the Afghan people, was the result of concessions made between two political orientations. The first was represented by those who maintained that it was now time for the WCC to speak out on Afghanistan. In their view Afghanistan formed the main threat at the prevailing moment and needed, therefore, priority attention. The second view was held mainly by the Russian Orthodox Church represented in the Executive Committee by Archbishop Kirill of Leningrad. He contended that "Afghanistan" could not be seen in isolation from other events, particularly from the policies of the United States and NATO. There was a direct link between Afghanistan and NATO's decision in December 1979 to deploy intermediate range nuclear missiles in Western Europe. Kirill was willing to accept a statement which would emphasize the interrelatedness of the Afghanistan issues and other issues. Those who preferred to "single out" the Afghanistan issue were willing to agree if Afghanistan was listed ahead of the six other issues for which "serious concern" was to be expressed. Thus the draft text could be unanimously approved by the Executive Committee. Obviously, Archbishop Kirill had realized that a further weakening of the draft would be opposed and therefore he decided to accept the modified version.

Some church leaders in Eastern Europe blamed Kirill for not sufficiently resisting efforts to condemn the Soviet intervention. Through the State Council for Religious Affairs, a government agency in charge of overseeing religious bodies in the Soviet Union, pressure was exerted on the Moscow Patriarchate to take a more decided stand and to rebuke Kirill for his leniency. This is what happened when, on March 20, 1980, the Holy Synod of the Russian Orthodox Church discussed the Afghanistan issue and fully endorsed the "assistance" given by the Soviet government to the Afghan government:

We, churchmen, understand and accept the reasons which prompted the Soviet government to take such a step and we by no means recognise as justifiable the use of the Afghan events by the USA and other countries to forcefully intensify tension in the relations between the East and the West, between the USSR and some non-European countries.<sup>5</sup>

From now on, any attempt to encourage the WCC to condemn the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan would be seriously frustrated.

## THE DEBATE AT MELBOURNE — MAY 1980

The first major conference sponsored by the WCC after the Executive Committee meeting was the "World Conference on Mission and Evangelism" in Melbourne, Australia, May 12-15, 1980. Its major theme, *Your Kingdom Come*, provided ample opportunity for a political line of approach. Indeed, to some extent, "Melbourne" was a political event. A lengthy "Declaration on the situation in El Salvador and Latin America" was adopted. As ever, there were also various statements on South Africa.<sup>6</sup>

Many of the participants in Melbourne were proponents of "Liberation Theology" and consequently strongly sympathized with the Nicaraguan Sandinist revolution which had taken place a year before. The pro-revolutionary attitude prevailed in some of the draft texts which had to be modified after sometimes heated debates in plenary sessions.

The Melbourne conference's slogan was "Stop the repression in El Salvador!" However, it proved impossible to draft, let alone adopt, a single, similar statement on Afghanistan, a country which had fallen victim to a kind of repression far worse than that of El Salvador. The main reason for this was the decisiveness with which Russian Orthodox Church delegates opposed any inclusion of Afghanistan in the conference's papers. They found the Latin American bloc on their side. One theologian from Puerto Rico, Orlando Costas, reflected the Latin American mood when he told a press conference: "The world Church should look to what is happening in Latin America, one of the most crucial areas in the world today." In his opinion it was not Afghanistan but Central America which deserved foremost attention.

The second reason for Afghanistan's exclusion from the policy papers produced by the Melbourne conference was that American church delegations had, on their own initiative, arranged with the Russians not to allow the issue of Afghanistan to divide the conference. It had already become clear that Afghanistan could well develop into one of the most controversial political disputes within the WCC constituency. To prevent this from happening, American church delegates in Melbourne invited the Russians for a meeting on the evening of May 20, 1980, to discuss the role of the churches "as agents of reconciliation." At this meeting a decision was made to exclude the matter of Afghanistan from the conference's proceedings and to concentrate on other issues where divisions were less sharp, such as the churches' role in proclaiming peace.<sup>8</sup> Thus the Russians succeeded in effectively neutralizing most of the opposition to proposals to omit the Afghanistan issue from the final documents. It is likely that a similar agreement between the Russians and some of the Third World delegations was made. Church delegations from Latin America in particular were susceptible to Soviet pressure in this direction.

Nevertheless, it did not prove easy to avoid the Afghanistan issue and a number of delegates raised it in spite of all pressure not to do so. They pointed out that the draft text of the document on "The Kingdom of God and Human Struggles" mentioned specific regions and countries

where similar struggles were taken place. The Dutch delegate Anton Vos, for example, told the conference:

If Latin America is mentioned here, why not name what is the centre of the world's attention at the moment, namely the invasion of Afghanistan? If we don't mention Afghanistan here, the WCC will be in danger of not being taken seriously.<sup>9</sup>

The Norwegian delegate Gunnar Stolsett pointed out that the right of self-determination of the Afghan people had been restricted and that the WCC, in order to be credible, could not ignore this fact. His argument struck home in some of the Third World quarters and, when he pressed his point, the Russian delegates protested, claiming that if such an amendment to the draft text were adopted, the document itself would lose its value. Finally, it was decided not to mention any specific country and to speak only in general terms of certain situations. This compromise made the final document vague and weak.

Various other attempts to incorporate Afghanistan failed likewise. On the final day of the conference Pakistani delegate, the Rev. Michael Nazir-Ali, moved that the conference condemn Soviet military intervention and continued violation of human rights in Afghanistan. Russian Archbishop Makary thereupon indicated that

the aim of this conference is to unite us. I think we must stick to this aim. Please, understand the Russian Orthodox delegation. We represent millions of believers in the Soviet Union. Our people share the policy of our government which purports to give the Afghan government the assistance it asked for.<sup>10</sup>

Another Russian went as far as to threaten that, if anything would be said about Afghanistan, "our participation in the WCC would be subject to reconsideration."

Eventually, agreement was reached on the adoption of another resolution stating that there were more problem situations and countries than those specifically mentioned in the papers of this conference:

We wish to state that the mentioning of specific countries and situations in the resolutions of this conference is partly to be attributed to current events in those countries. We recognise, however, that there are other countries where foreign powers are intervening militarily, and governments which oppress, exploit, imprison and kill innocent people. We may be able to identify some of those countries and peoples. Others, however, we dare not identify for the simple reason that such a specific public identification by the Conference may endanger the position — even the lives — of many of our brothers and sisters, some of whom are participating in this Conference. We therefore confess our inability to be as prophetic as we ought to be, as that may, in some instances, entail imposing martyrdom on our fellow believers in

those countries — something we dare not do from a safe distance. We know that many of them suffer under different regimes for their faith in Jesus Christ and urge that freedom of conscience be respected as well as other human rights.

At the same time, we want to assure our unnamed brothers and sisters in many unnamed countries that we have not forgotten them; we identify strongly in their suffering for the Kingdom of God.<sup>11</sup>

The frankness of this statement cannot be denied.

### **THE CENTRAL COMMITTEE MEETING OF AUGUST 1980**

When the CC/WCC met in August 1980 in Geneva, much of the delegates' time was spent debating whether or not to endorse the Executive Committee's statement on "Threats to Peace" in which the Soviet intervention in Afghanistan was seen as one of those threats. The Rev. Johannes Langhoff from Denmark insisted on its formal endorsement by the Central Committee, but any proposal to that effect was resisted by Eastern bloc church delegates. In addition, Norwegian Bishop Per Lønning noted that there should be an "appeal of solidarity with the suffering people of Afghanistan as well as some words about Kampuchea" because of massive Khmer Rouge killings and Vietnamese invasion. After all, he said, the WCC in the past had also spoken strongly on Vietnam and it would therefore not be inappropriate to deal similarly with the Afghanistan issue.<sup>12</sup>

In the midst of the debate Archbishop Kirill pointed out that it had already been very difficult for him personally to go along with the text adopted by the Executive Committee last February. However,

This document was subsequently misused by Western media in such a way that in my situation special difficulties arose. Initially the paper was a basis for dialogue, but now the impression has been made that we had given in to political and inimical propaganda. Therefore, the paper became a point of division in my Church, which created many difficulties.<sup>13</sup>

In other words, Kirill admitted that he had been rebuked by the leadership of his Church for voting with the other members of the Executive Committee. As pointed out above, and evident from his statement, the Council for Religious Affairs had brought significant pressure to bear on the hierarchy to distance itself as much as possible from any statements condemning the Soviet intervention in Afghanistan.

The WCC's General Secretary, Dr. Philip Potter, in an interview confirmed to the author that the Executive Committee statement had indeed created some problems for the Russians:

I think the point about the attitude of the Russians is simply this. When the statement of the Executive Committee was announced and it was known that it was a

statement which was unanimously agreed upon, immediately various Western radio stations beamed to Russia stating that the WCC had spoken against the Afghanistat intervention and that the Russian representative [Kirill] had agreed. That was before they had the full statement in their hands. And, naturally, being placed in that situation, they had to express themselves, that a very unfair way of reporting the statement of the WCC had put them in an extremely difficult position *vis à vis* their own State.<sup>14</sup>

Finally, the Central Committee, on August 21, 1980, voted for a compromise which simply referred to the Executive Committee Statement without adopting a separate statement or resolution on Afghanistan, as is usually done in other cases which the WCC considers to be "public issues."

The Central Committee, *in the light of the statement "Threats to Peace"* adopted by the Executive Committee of the WCC in Liebfrauenberg, France, in February 1980, expresses its deep continuing concern regarding prevailing threats to peace, *including those mentioned in the Statement*, and urges that peaceful solutions be sought through negotiations involving the participation of all parties concerned and with all states observing the principles of sovereign equality, mutual security, territorial integrity, respect for the lawful interests of each party, and non-interference in the internal affairs of other countries.<sup>15</sup>

While not being able to condemn more emphatically the Soviet occupation of Afghanistan, the same Central Committee issued another statement "urging the United States government to halt all assistance to El Salvador and to guarantee that it will not intervene in order to determine the fate of the Salvadoran people."<sup>16</sup>

The United States had not even occupied El Salvador, and yet, it was the government of the United States which was singled out for severe criticism whereas the Soviet government that had virtually annexed a whole country was very mildly treated. The statement of the Central Committee, which only referred to a previous statement made by the Executive Committee, significantly differs from the much more courageous statement made by the CC/WCC thirty years before when North Korea had attacked the South. The WCC General Secretary was well aware of the difference and tried to justify it in the following manner:

In the first place we are dealing with quite different situations. Take, for example, Korea, where there was a strong Christian community and a strong Western position in the Central Committee which expressed itself. But in the case of Afghanistan, you have a situation where, first of all there is no Christian community; the country involved is strongly pagan. So one cannot refer to it in the same way.

The issue is not whether or not we spoke on Afghanistan — we did — but people only abstracted what had already been said by us about Afghanistan. The point is that what is happening in Afghanistan is related to many other events. It is related to the decisions made by NATO last December, to what is going on in the Middle East, the whole business of China and all the rest. It is related to all the tensions in our world. So we did not avoid mentioning Afghanistan, but we related Afghanistan to the many other issues that are threatening the peace of the world today.<sup>17</sup>

This seems even stranger when it is remembered that the WCC was taking a stand on political/military strategies. Such linkages, as NATO missiles and the invasion of Afghanistan, are debatable and subject to much discussion by strategists and Sovietologists. And yet, the WCC seemingly feels little concern over statements it makes on those subjects.

The view that the WCC should only speak on a certain issue when a country with a strong Christian community expressing itself is involved, is shared by other WCC policy makers, too. Indeed, the WCC appears to be very hesitant to chastize the human rights policies of Communist governments, even if individual Christians in the countries concerned request it to do so. The WCC usually does what its member churches want it to do. If, as is the case in most Communist countries, these member churches are State controlled, the WCC will express itself only very weakly against the policies of those States. Further, policy makers of the WCC appear to be very susceptible to the arguments employed by these State controlled churches and the government bodies operating behind them. A few days after the Central Committee meeting, a two-day consultation of the Prague-based Christian Peace Conference (CPC), a Soviet Communist Party front organization, was convened by its President Bishop Dr. Karoly Tóth. Bishop Tóth is a member of the CC/WCC. An important official of the WCC's Commission on International Affairs (CCIA), Professor Ninan Koshy, was present, as an observer, at the CPC consultation in Budapest. The main conclusion of the consultation was quite in line with what Dr. Philip Potter had already indicated previously: the events in Afghanistan should not be considered in isolation, but in relation to international developments threatening peace.<sup>18</sup>

Earlier in January, the CPC had even defended the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan, stating, *inter alia*, that the Soviet Union had "to honour the request" for help made by the Afghan government.<sup>19</sup> In 1981 and 1982 the issue of Afghanistan was not a topic of *public* discussion within the WCC and no statements pertaining to it were adopted by any WCC body or consultation.

### **THE VANCOUVER ASSEMBLY — JULY/AUGUST 1983**

When the WCC's Sixth Assembly met in Vancouver in July/August 1983, Afghanistan again became a dominant issue. Being the most

representative body within the WCC's structure, the Assembly could not afford to ignore the matter. After intensive consultations with and between member churches from East and West, it was decided to draft a carefully worded text on Afghanistan which would basically support the efforts of the Secretary General of the United Nations to find a formula for ending the conflict.<sup>20</sup> As the Soviet government had already given endorsement to these efforts, the draft text was acceptable to the Russian Orthodox Church, which, to a large extent, speaks for the other Eastern bloc churches when decisions on international issues have to be made at ecumenical gatherings. A few days before the draft text was debated in plenary, Archbishop Kirill had told a packed gathering in Christ Church Cathedral, downtown Vancouver, that "the future of Afghanistan should be decided by the Afghans themselves without outside interference."<sup>21</sup>

It is difficult to assess whether Kirill really meant what he said. It could also have been an attempt to appease those who wanted the Assembly to issue a strong statement on the issue. The Russians, at least, had conveyed the impression that such a condemnation would have grave consequences for their participation in the WCC.

There had been some debate in the Committee drafting the Afghanistan resolution, but there was no real opposition to the text proposed. Many delegates from Western countries felt relieved that eventually the WCC was going to pay attention to "Afghanistan." The draft text approved by the Drafting Committee did not affect the official Soviet position in the least. It favoured a peaceful resolution of the conflict, namely, negotiations among the parties concerned which would lead to a comprehensive settlement. In order to reach such a settlement the following conditions would have to be met:

1. an end to the supply of arms to the opposition groups from outside;
2. creation of a favourable climate for the return of the refugees;
3. guarantees of the settlement by the USSR, the United States, the People's Republic of China, and Pakistan; and,
4. withdrawal of Soviet troops from Afghanistan in the context of an overall political settlement, including agreement between Afghanistan and the USSR.<sup>22</sup>

Delegates from the Russian Orthodox Church described the draft text as "balanced and realistic" and left the Assembly in no doubt that any other text would be unacceptable to them. They were supported by the WCC's Commission on International Affairs where the Soviet position is usually given considerable weight, and also by General Secretary Potter. Therefore, the carefully worded draft text was not expected to meet serious opposition in the Assembly's plenary session on public issues, planned for one of the final days. It was repeatedly pointed out that the four conditions mentioned above, which, in fact, reflected the Soviet position entirely, were part of proposals made by the UN General Secretary who had offered his good services to help resolve the conflict.

Nevertheless, opposition to the draft resolution mounted when it came to the floor on the ninth of August, just before the adjournment of the Assembly. There were complaints that "this document has not much in it" and that "we are really trying to avoid mentioning what is happening there," a comment by South African delegate Simon Prins. Opposition to the draft text was particularly expressed by Bishop Alexander Malik from Pakistan, the country which has been more affected than other countries in the region of the rapid influx of unprecedented numbers of refugees. He moved that the document be sent back to the Drafting Committee for redrafting.

The drafters have selected the weakest possible language. If it had been any Western country, the WCC would have jumped on it and denounced the country in the strongest possible language.<sup>23</sup>

Bishop Malik's proposal was rejected and the debate continued; there was very little time for redrafting! Various amendments were proposed but they were all turned down by the moderator of the Drafting Committee, William P. Thompson. He had stressed earlier that the text presented to the Assembly was "the least that could be accepted by one side, the most that could be accepted by the other." Bishop David Preuss, a Lutheran from the U.S., proposed the most important amendment, namely, that the first condition (to end the supply of arms to the resistance) be deleted and that the fourth condition on withdrawal of Soviet troops be made first. Moreover, before the word "withdrawal" the word "immediate" should be inserted. Both suggestions were declined by the Russians, who adopted an "all or nothing" attitude. Russian Orthodox Metropolitan Yuvenali said that an unconditional withdrawal of Soviet troops was unacceptable and that the Soviet government would withdraw its troops when conditions would permit it to do so. Immediate withdrawal, he said, was not feasible at this moment. Archbishop Kirill stressed that "any changes in the text as accepted by the drafting Committee would be politically misused," and he "therefore [urged members] to accept it in the efficiency of our joint effort." Otherwise, Kirill threatened, "our loyalty to the ecumenical movement would be challenged."<sup>24</sup>

For the Russians, one of the main conditions to be met was that the supply of arms to the Afghan resistance be stopped. That, in their view, was the root of the problem. This position completely ignored the fact that there would be little or even no armed resistance in Afghanistan if the Russians had not invaded it in the first place. Therefore, the demand to put an end to armed support to the resistance movement was laying the blame on the wrong side. Secondly, the draft proposal allowed Soviet troops to stay in Afghanistan until an "overall political settlement" involving Soviet participation could be reached. In other words, the invader was allowed to set the terms of its own withdrawal — a clear acquiescence to a form of power politics so often condemned by the WCC when the aggressor or interventionist state is *not* the Soviet Union.

In defending the draft text, Mr. Thompson pointed out that the four

conditions laid down in the text were, in fact, a summary of the proposals by the UN General Secretary. But Mr. Thompson did not refer to various UN General Assembly Resolutions calling for the *immediate* withdrawal of the foreign troops from Afghanistan. The impression was incorrectly made that the draft text and UN statements on the issue were identical. This no doubt had some impact on the outcome of voting. Nevertheless, the vote was close. The Preuss amendment was rejected by a vote of 306 against and 278 in favour with 35 abstentions. Subsequently, most of the delegates decided to vote for the draft text on Afghanistan as it stood. Only 21 voted against, but there were 142 abstentions, leaving 479 in favour.

In the summer of 1984 the author had the opportunity to interview the newly elected WCC General Secretary Rev. Emilio Castro from Uruguay. He indicated to the author that there was no unified Afghan resistance to which the WCC could address itself. On the other hand he also defended WCC contacts with the PLO, which cannot be called an example of unity either. The Afghanistan issue was not on the agenda of the CC/WCC's meeting in Geneva in 1984.

### **CRITICAL COMMENT AND CONCLUDING OBSERVATIONS**

It should be noted first that the resolution on Afghanistan adopted by the WCC Assembly in Vancouver does not condemn Soviet atrocities and war crimes in Afghanistan nor does it point out that the Soviet invasion is the root cause of the whole problem. It only recalls "the concern regarding the Afghan situation expressed in earlier statements by the World Council of Churches."<sup>25</sup>

Second, to make a pre-condition that the supply of arms to the resistance movements be stopped suggests that the resistance is not fighting a just war. Never did the WCC make a similar condition when it dealt with the American intervention in Vietnam and the numerous "liberation movements" with whom solidarity was expressed. Their struggle was portrayed as "just" and consequently they received full ecumenical support. In justifying support to these liberation movements, WCC spokesmen repeatedly emphasized that the movements had taken recourse to armed violence as a last resort and that the WCC should be the last to condemn it. But no such understanding was and is shown for the Afghan resistance (*Mujahedeen*) facing the most brutal war methods history has ever seen. The same Assembly that showed so little understanding for the armed struggle of the Afghan people against an invading superpower, obsequiously referred to "the forces of historic change in El Salvador" which were resisted by the United States government.<sup>26</sup>

Simply because, as Dr. Potter indicated, Afghanistan is a "pagan country" the WCC does not deem it necessary to defend the pagan's cause. No general secretary of the WCC ever accused the Palestinians of being "pagan," although many of them do not belong to Christian communities. The word "pagan" often has racist overtones and it is therefore very strange that a WCC general secretary who claimed to be in

the forefront of the struggle against racism uses the word "pagan" when a whole people fights a war of liberation against a communist, that is, Soviet, aggressor. On the other hand, the Vancouver Assembly strongly endorsed the creation of a "sovereign Palestinian state," recognizing the PLO as a party to the conflict which should be involved in "negotiations for a comprehensive settlement in the Middle East."<sup>27</sup> Thus, while the WCC takes up the cause of the Palestinians, the issue of Afghanistan is treated as an issue between governments only, which have to reach a so-called "overall political settlement."

The WCC's clear preference for anti-Western "liberation movements" and its policy of distance towards pro-Western revolutionaries is a clear example of ecumenical inconsistency and political bias. It involves the very credibility of the WCC. Pakistani church leaders, for example, were deeply disappointed with the way the Afghanistan issue was handled by the WCC. The Bishop of Karachi (Church of Pakistan), the Rt. Rev. Arne Rudvin, who as a Norwegian missionary came to the country twenty-five years ago but is now a Pakistani citizen, expressed his feelings to the author as follows:

I have great difficulty in respecting the WCC. It seems to me that they have fully compromised with the Russian Church and that they are bending over backwards not to offend the Russians.

Imagine we would have a World Council of Churches being similarly pressurized by the so-called "German Christians" [pro-Nazi Christians] in the late Thirties and during the Second World War so that it could not condemn Hitler's actions in Europe. That would be a parallel to what the WCC has done in Vancouver.

It now has been shown that the WCC is not truly representing the Church of Christ, but is a political body. I cannot have any respect for their attitude.<sup>28</sup>

In defending the position of the WCC, Dr. Potter told a press conference in Vancouver that "if there is one thing the WCC will never do, it is to try to dodge issues."<sup>29</sup>

However, the main conclusion of the author's investigations and observations can only be that the WCC did dodge the real issues of the Afghanistan crisis and did everything it could to prevent embarrassment of those Eastern bloc member churches which support the Soviet line. The United Nations General Assembly's repeated resolutions on Afghanistan were much better phrased and more outspoken than what this religious body, claiming to pronounce Christian justice, had to say. This is one of the deepest tragedies of the contemporary ecumenical movement, which, in the Thirties so boldly denounced both Nazism and Communism but now seems to have fallen prey to political blackmail and issue dodging.

Footnotes

1. WCC/Central Committee, *Minutes and Records* (Toronto, 1950), p. 91.
2. *Ecumenical Press Service*, February 21, 1980.
3. *Ecumenical Press Service*, August 29, 1968.
4. See fn. 2.
5. *Journal of the Moscow Patriarchate*, no. 5 (1980), p. 5.
6. *Your Kingdom Come*. Report on the World Conference on Mission and Evangelism, Melbourne, May 1980 (Geneva: WCC/CWME, 1980), p. 242 ff.
7. Personal record from press conference, Melbourne, May 24, 1980.
8. Personal impressions from Melbourne conference during informal meetings and talks and based on information from delegates attending.
9. Personal record of plenary debate, Melbourne conference, May 23, 1980.
10. Personal record of plenary debate, Melbourne conference, May 24, 1980.
11. *Your Kingdom Come*, p. 247.
12. Personal record of plenary debate, Central Committee meeting WCC, Geneva, August 21, 1980.
13. *Ibid.*
14. Author's interview with Dr. Philip Potter, Geneva, August 22, 1980.
15. Text in: *The Churches in International Affairs, Reports 1979 - 1982* (WCC/CCIA, 1983), p. 45.
16. *Ibid.*, p. 127.
17. See fn. 14.
18. *Ecumenical Press Service*, September 4, 1980.
19. *Ibid.*
20. David M. Gill (ed.), *Gathered for Life*. Official Report, Sixth Assembly of the World Council of Churches, Vancouver (Geneva: WCC; and, Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1983), p. 161.
21. As reported in *The Sun* (Vancouver), August 5, 1983, p. B8.
22. World Council of Churches, *Sixth Assembly (Vancouver)*, Document No. 2-11, p. 10.
23. *Canvas* (WCC Assembly newspaper), August 10, 1983, p. 2, and personal record of plenary debate.
24. Translated from Russian. Personal record of plenary debate, Vancouver Assembly, August 9, 1983.
25. David M. Gill, p. 161.
26. *Ibid.*, p. 157.
27. *Ibid.*, pp. 148, 149. See also, J.A. Emerson Vermaat, "The World Council of Churches, Israel, and the PLO," *Midstream. A Jewish Monthly*, November 1984, p. 3 ff.
28. Author's interview with the Rt. Rev. Bishop Arne Rudvin, Karachi, November 30, 1983. Bishop Rudvin is an expert on Afghan affairs. He has served as an adviser to a number of international conferences and "tribunals" dealing with the Afghanistan issue.
29. Personal record of press conference after Vancouver Assembly, August 10, 1983.

## Appendix

### Text of "Afghanistan Resolution," World Council of Churches' Vancouver Assembly (1983)

The Sixth Assembly recalls the concern regarding the Afghan situation expressed in earlier statement by the World Council of Churches.

We note that the continuing fighting there has led to tremendous suffering for vast sections of the population, many of whom have become refugees. The UN estimates that there are more than three million Afghan refugees in Pakistan and Iran.

We note initiatives, including that of the non-aligned movement, for peaceful resolution of the conflict. We welcome specially the initiatives taken by the Secretary General of the United Nations for resolving the conflict, summarized as follows:

- an end to the supply of arms to the opposition groups from outside;
- creation of a favourable climate for the return of the refugees;
- guarantee of the settlement by the USSR, the USA, People's Republic of China, and Pakistan;
- withdrawal of Soviet troops from Afghanistan in the context of an overall political settlement, including agreement between Afghanistan and the USSR.

We support the Secretary General's current efforts and hope that the negotiations among the parties concerned will lead to a comprehensive settlement.

We believe that this would enable the Afghan people to follow freely their own path of development and to progress towards a more just society. We also believe that such an agreement would reduce tension in the region and also contribute to improvement of relations between the USA and USSR and of international relations in general.

Meanwhile, the WCC should continue to provide humanitarian assistance to the Afghan refugees.