



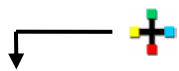
Conflict Over The Ecumenical Movement, By Ulrich Duchrow. Geneva: WCC, 1981.

1982

J.E. Lesslie Newbigin

*Ecumenical Review* 34, 4 (October): 428-430.

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This is the English translation of *Konflikt um die Okumene* which has already occasioned vigorous discussion in Germany. It raises very important and very controversial issues which certainly ought to be taken equally seriously in the English-speaking world.

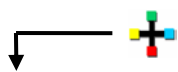
Ulrich Duchrow worked from 1970 to 1977 in the Study Department of the Lutheran World Federation. This experience led him to ask profound and disturbing questions about the institutional shape of the ecumenical movement and about the ecclesial character both of the World Council of Churches and of such "World Confessional Families" as the LWF. While his sharpest criticisms are directed to the LWF, he has critical questions which concern the whole direction and shape of the organized ecumenical movement. I can well imagine that the book has caused some anger, especially among those caught in Duchrow's direct fire. It is not comfortable reading for anyone. But it ought to be read.

From the time when a world organization of the churches was first mooted it was clear that there were strong differences of opinion about what its shape should be. J. H. Oldham had insisted that the International Missionary Council should only admit as member bodies the national councils of missions or churches. Thus local unity was built into the structure from the foundation. There were others, however, who saw the worldwide confessional bodies or communions as the natural units for a world organization. Behind this difference were different visions of the nature of the unity to be sought. Was the unity of the universal church to be seen as a gathering together of locally and regionally united churches, or as the cooperation of globally organized denominations? This conflict remained unresolved, and when the WCC was formed it was provided that its governing body - the Central Committee - should have a membership in which regional and confessional balance was maintained. This balanced position between two possibilities has remained characteristic of the structure of the WCC ever since.

At Toronto in 1950 an attempt was made to answer questions which had arisen about the ecclesial status of the WCC. This statement laid down a position which has not been changed, a position of ecclesiological neutrality. That is to say, membership in the Council does not commit member churches to any particular vision of the nature of the unity to be sought. The Council remains a forum where different views can meet and debate. The churches retain their total sovereignty and none of them surrenders its claim to be "the church".

In the ensuing decade efforts were made to break out of this neutralist position and to achieve some statement of the nature of the unity to which the member churches are committed. The outcome of this was the New Delhi statement which began by referring to unity in each place and then went on to speak of a unity which would bind all these local unities into one.

This way of stating the matter was naturally questioned by those whose primary commitment was to one of the "world confessional families", and of these the LWF was many times more powerful than any of the others. But the ensuing decade was to see the entry into the ecumenical discussion of a world body still more powerful, namely the Roman Catholic Church. This event radically changed the balance of forces in the



debate about the nature of unity. Rome is organized globally, and therefore its natural partners in dialogue were world confessional bodies, not national churches. The series of bilateral discussions between Rome and the world confessional families replaced the schemes for regional and national unions of churches in the centre of the stage.

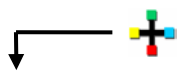
Duchrow's book sharply challenges this development. He asks whether there is any theologically defensible sense in which an ecclesial character can be ascribed to world confessional bodies, and he challenges the LWF to do what Lambeth and the World Alliance of Reformed Churches have already done - openly declare its own provisional character, its character as something which must disappear if the true character of the church is to be made visible.

But Duchrow carries the discussion beyond these purely ecclesiological issues. It is a long time now since the "pure" theology of Faith and Order discussions was sullied by the very diffident introduction of the matter of "non-theological factors", yet even today there are those who criticize the World Council for mixing up questions of church unity with the question of the unity of the human family. But if the church exists as a sign and foretaste of the universal reign of God, the question "Where is the true church?" cannot be separated from questions about the faithful witness of the church in contemporary secular issues. The church always and everywhere has a form and a style which either does or does not witness to the justice and mercy of God in the secular life of nations. During the birth-period of the WCC a decision had to be made about whether the official church or the Confessing Church was to be regarded as the true evangelical church of Germany. A similar issue arises today regarding the churches in South Africa on the matter of apartheid, and the LWF itself has declared that this matter is a confessional one, that is to say, a matter which divides the true church from a heretical body. Duchrow asks whether the problem of justice between the rich North and the struggling South on our planet has not now reached the status of a confessional issue. He draws attention to the fact that the LWF, which has an enormous preponderance of membership and of power in the North, is often unable because of this imbalance, to act and speak as a sign of God's justice, and he claims that the WCC, because of much stronger membership in the South, is more able to do so.

For readers in the Anglo-Saxon world this is a particularly important part of the book, for the WCC's Programme to Combat Racism has polarized much Christian thinking in Britain and North America. English speaking readers of Duchrow's book will be forced to ask themselves whether the ecumenical search for the manifestation of the true church has taken account of the

fact that the church cannot be true to its calling if it is not bearing witness to God's justice between peoples.

Finally Duchrow directs penetrating questions to the WCC itself. He takes up again the question put by Dietrich Bonhoeffer at the very beginning, whether the WCC was to be seen simply as an instrument of the existing churches, or as "a fellowship of churches on the way to becoming the one church of Christ". Up to this date the member churches have, on the whole, refused to allow the Council to be more than an instrument. The right of the Council to speak *to* the member churches, and to call in question their ecclesial status in the light and in the power of a truer ecclesial reality has not been allowed. The fear of being regarded as a "super-church" (whatever that might mean) has always been present and the leadership of the Council has generally been eager to insist that it was only a servant of the churches. Probably the WCC itself must ask some very searching questions about its own forms of existence and ways of working if the challenge of Duchrow is to be taken up. But there are even more searching questions to be put to the member churches. I vividly remember a sharp exchange between Arch-



bishop Michael Ramsey and Dr Philip Potter at the Anglican Consultative Council meeting in Limuru. The Archbishop wanted to remind the WCC that it was a servant of the churches and not their master. Potter replied by speaking of the role of the Servant of the Lord in the Old Testament, whose service was to say to Israel things which Israel did not wish to hear. Speaking from within the British context I would say that this discussion needs to be pursued much more openly and vigorously. Duchrow's book will be a powerful help to that end.

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