



The Dialogue of Gospel and Culture: Reflections on the Conference on World Mission and Evangelism, Salvador, Bahia, Brazil

1997

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The latest in a long series of world mission conferences dating back to Edinburgh 1910 was held at the end of 1996 in Salvador, Bahia, Brazil. I am grateful to have been present as an invited guest. The invitation was a generous gesture on the part of the World Council of Churches (WCC) and its Commission on World Mission and Evangelism, especially in light of the fact that I have been critical of the stance of the WCC in matters of world mission.

Even for a seasoned ecumeniac, world conferences can be very hard to grasp in a coherent way. The 600 participants represented a very wide range of ethnic, political, and theological backgrounds. In spite of the good-faith efforts of the conference organizers to include those with strong evangelical convictions, Pentecostal missions, which represent such a large proportion of the total Christian enterprise, were thinly represented. The strongest voices were from those who have been grievously hurt by the globalization of the free market and the power of the Western and Northern nations, and who see the modern missionary movement as deeply involved in oppression. Representatives of aboriginal peoples were particularly vocal. Some of the participants representing the traditional sending churches of the North and West, who had not had previous experiences of WCC meetings, found this threatening.

### **Worship and Repentance at a Slave Wharf**

Without question, the most moving moment in the whole conference was the Saturday morning service at the dockside where for centuries slaves exported from West Africa (at least those who had survived the passage) were unloaded and auctioned at the dockside. The service was conducted by representatives of the descendants of those slaves, with the deepest sensitivity and a real acknowledgment of the fact that we all share in the guilt. The impact of that service will, I think, make this event the longest remembered of the whole conference.

Throughout the Salvador conference I could not help thinking of the contrast between this gathering and that of 1910. Those who gathered in Edinburgh were those who were in charge of

the world mission. Except perhaps for the five-minute speech in which the young Vedanayagam Azariah voiced the aspiration of Indian Christians to be friends and not just objects of missionary strategy, the voice of the 1910 conference was that of those who were in charge of operations.

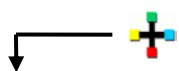
By contrast, the WCC seeks always to give a voice to the voiceless – to those who have been on the margins. This makes for a very different kind of meeting, one that brings its own problems. Those who have been deeply hurt, who feel that their integrity and the integrity of their native cultures have been pushed aside, have here an opportunity to voice their grievance on a world stage. The danger is that the meeting can become overwhelmed by these voices. God forbid that the marginalized should be suppressed; yet in a meeting designed to further the dialogue between Gospel and culture, it was almost inevitable that the claims of oppressed cultures to be recognized and not to be overridden by the claims of the Gospel should dominate the agenda.

Although the main emphasis was on culture rather than on the Gospel, I do not think enough attention was paid to the complex nature of culture. In any given society there are conservative and radical elements – there are those who welcome something new, and there are those who resist anything new. An example would be South India, where the Gospel came as a word of liberation to the Dalits but as a threat to the Brahmins.

In spite of some individual voices, and some scattered references through the documents, I must say that I missed very much the sense that we do have a Gospel – that we have good news, and that it has been entrusted to us as a precious treasure on behalf of the whole world. I do not mean to say that the tone of the conference was overwhelmingly negative. On the contrary, I was struck by the liveliness of the plenary sessions and the way in which members spontaneously applauded when something was said that touched their hearts. And all of us were greatly uplifted by the worship of the conference at the beginning of each day. Nevertheless, in the plenary discussions and in the findings there was hardly any reference to evangelism as a joyful exercise to which we are all invited.

### **Proselytism a Major Concern**

An important factor here was the anger generated among churches, particularly the Orthodox and those in the former Eastern bloc countries, about the aggressive and heavily financed efforts of Western missionary agents in their territories. The issue of proselytism was never far out of sight. I am bound to sympathize with those churches that have struggled to preserve a Christian witness during the long years of Marxist dominance and who now find themselves treated as though they were heathen people to whom the Gospel had never been preached. I have shared these feelings myself when, as the bishop of a South Indian diocese, I have met enthusiastic American missionaries who, not having the time to learn any Indian language that would enable them to reach the Hindu population, were proposing in their own words, "to evangelize the nominal Christians." It is against this background that one has to understand the many negative statements in the conference findings about aggressive and insensitive forms of preaching.



However, I think it is also necessary to challenge the Orthodox churches, especially the Russian Orthodox Church, which seems to be trying to preserve the old territorial principle that regards the presence on Russian soil of any form of Christianity other than its own as illegitimate. These issues of proselytism, Christian witness, and religious freedom were thrashed out thirty-five years ago at the time of the integration of the International Missionary Council (IMC) with the WCC. It would have been helpful if more use could have been made of this valuable material. This is surely one of the places where we must accept the obligation inherent in our membership of the WCC, namely, the obligation to receive correction from one another. Those of us in long-established and perhaps too complacent churches may need the challenge of missionaries from other churches in other lands. In the same way, those missionaries may need to learn from the

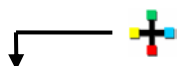
long, and sometimes very costly, experience of churches already established in the areas to which they go. This is one of the many areas in which it is vital that we attempt real dialogue between those churches that are members of the WCC and those churches and other Christian agencies that remain outside it.

### **Scripture – at the Conference, and in Mission**

One of the very good practices of the WCC is that each day of such a conference begins with Bible study in small groups. Salvador was no exception. I think there should have been more discussion in the various sections about the central role of the Bible in the relation between Gospel and culture. The fact that the Bible has now been translated into many hundreds of languages that previously had no written literature is surely of central importance to this whole discussion. Professor Lamin Sanneh has in many ways drawn our attention to the enormous consequences of this accomplishment in the revitalization and preservation of indigenous cultures. This positive aspect of the impact of the Gospel on cultures was not brought out at Salvador.

The other side of the equation is equally important. The translation of the Bible into a new language is a giant step, perhaps the most important step, toward the enculturation of the Gospel in the culture that that language embodies. Translators of the Bible must perforce use the words of that language that themselves resonate with meanings derived from a non-Christian culture. It is only as the story and the stories of the Bible are constantly told and retold that these words acquire a new meaning and become the vehicles of God's saving power.

In the course of the WCC's program on the Gospel and culture, much has been said and written about biblical interpretation. The point has rightly been made that the Bible has been interpreted by those who held the power in the church. It would have been helpful if reference could have been made to the role of the Bible as translated into many African languages in giving to the African Independent Churches the perspective from which to criticize the Christianity of the missionaries. I wish that there could have been effective representation of some of these African



Independent Churches at Salvador. It is, of course, right to say that the Bible can be read, and is read, from many different perspectives. The danger is in leaving the matter there, as though anyone's reading is as good as anyone else's. That would, for example, legitimate the Afrikaner reading of the Bible as validating apartheid. Thank God that particular reading has been corrected. All of our readings of the Bible need to be corrected as, on the one hand, we listen to one another's readings from different cultural perspectives and, on the other hand, we read the Bible as a whole with its central clue the incarnation, ministry, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. The Bible cannot be read simply as validating the authority of the churches as they are. Nor can it be read simply as validating protest against the status quo. We have to listen seriously to each other, and listen to the whole of Scripture, if we are to be guided into the truth.

I referred earlier to the fact that the Salvador conference was held as a fresh link in the continuous chain stretching back to Edinburgh 1910. This has been possible because at the time of the integration of the IMC with the WCC, provision was made for a distinct division of the WCC to carry on the specific concerns of world mission and evangelism. There is at the present time before the member churches of the WCC a document entitled "Towards a Common Understanding and Vision of the World Council of Churches." This proposes very important changes in the structure of the WCC that will come before the Eighth Assembly at Harare in 1998. The conference at Salvador took steps to ensure that during the further discussion of these proposals, the concern for world mission and evangelism should be adequately represented. This is a matter of real urgency. An earlier draft of the document appeared to display an almost total

amnesia regarding the missionary concern. In an account of the origins of the WCC, no mention was made either of Edinburgh 1910 or of the role of the International Missionary Council in the genesis of, and the later development of, the WCC. The present document does provide for the continuation of the work of the IMC among the responsibilities of the council. However, I must say that the document as a whole is almost exclusively concerned with the issues of visible church unity and of justice, peace, and the integrity of creation. References to world mission and evangelism are rare, and at no point highlighted.

### **Prospects for Linking with Evangelicals**

In the same document the authors plead for closer links with such evangelical bodies as the World Evangelical Fellowship, and they penitently acknowledge the extent to which the WCC is itself responsible for their absence. But I do not think that the desire here expressed will be fulfilled unless the WCC gives much more evidence of being filled with a longing to bring the Gospel to all peoples. It is right to stress that the responsibility for mission and evangelism lies primarily with each congregation in the place where it is. But it is necessary also to remember both that there are vast areas where there are no Christian congregations, and also that none of our local churches so fully reflect the glory of Christ that they do not need help from others.

The WCC has given courageous leadership in the struggle for peace and justice in the fight against racism and in concern for the integrity of creation. It has been the prime mover in the search for closer Christian unity. But in so powerfully challenging the churches on these issues it does seem to have lost the missionary passion that was the vital force that created the ecumenical movement in the closing years of the nineteenth and the opening years of the twentieth centuries. The demand for unity among the churches and the demand for justice and peace among the nations, if they are not rooted in what God has done for all the world in Jesus Christ, can themselves become new forms of domination. There cannot be any greater task, or any deeper joy, than to tell the world what God has done for us in Jesus Christ and to enable others to know, love, and serve him as Lord and Savior.

The World Council of Churches can only be what its member churches make it. As one who is a member of a member church, I cannot speak as a critic from outside. I can only pray and work and hope that God, who has so marvelously created and sustained the World Council of Churches throughout half a century, may grant it a deep renewal of joy in the Gospel, which may enable it to fulfill in a greater measure the desire of our Lord that those who believe in him may be one, that the world may believe.

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