

Theology on the Web.org.uk

Making Biblical Scholarship Accessible

This document was supplied for free educational purposes. Unless it is in the public domain, it may not be sold for profit or hosted on a webserver without the permission of the copyright holder.

If you find it of help to you and would like to support the ministry of Theology on the Web, please consider using the links below:



Buy me a coffee

<https://www.buymeacoffee.com/theology>



PATREON

<https://patreon.com/theologyontheweb>

PayPal

<https://paypal.me/robbradshaw>

A table of contents for *Canadian Journal of Theology* can be found here:

https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles_canadian-journal.php

The Third Assembly of the World Council of Churches

GEORGE JOHNSTON

I

WHEN WE WERE FLYING over the Alps on the return journey from the Assembly of the World Council of Churches at New Delhi, India, our Italian pilot advised us that we were about to see Mont Blanc, the highest mountain in Europe. I was occupied, like a Roman Catholic priest from central Africa and others, in taking all the colour photographs possible of the superb panorama of the famous mountains. They glittered in radiant sunshine, mile upon mile of them, and we were duly awestruck and uplifted. It proved to be impossible to pick out Mont Blanc, but that did not matter. The entire Alpine range was magnificent.

The effort of writing about the Third Assembly is almost as difficult as finding that mountain peak. For at New Delhi we gloried in the delights of warm sunshine every day (in November and December), though it was quite cold at night; and we were surrounded by a glittering array of costumes: saris on the street, and in our ecclesiastical circles purple Anglican cassocks, the black robes of the Eastern Orthodox and a few others, the bright dress of the Mar Thoma dignitaries, not to mention a variegated assortment of hats, beards, and long hair down the back—all making the sober Europeans and Americans in business suits appear most un-photogenic.

There were undoubtedly certain high moments. Surely no one has failed to note the event of integration when the International Missionary Council died and its concerns were brought within the organization and programme of the World Council. This took place on Sunday, November 19, 1961, between 4 and 5 p.m., after quite excellent speeches by Bishop Lesslie Newbigin and Dr. W. A. Visser 't Hooft. Thereupon the new delegates, appointed in view of the expected merger, were declared to be duly seated. They had in fact been sitting in their places all the time! I may not have been the only one who wished that there had been a brave procession of the I.M.C. representatives into the Vigyan Bhavan (the Hall of Science where we met), to be greeted by the whole company and then to be happily integrated and seated. For this event has very important consequences for the World Council. Mission is the very life of the Church, we were told. All the commissions, the divisions, and the secretariat must now be seized with the missionary obligation in a fresh way, and it is just possible that the Council and the Churches may find themselves not fully agreed about the scope and manner of the initiative that the new Division of World Mission

and Evangelism may wish to exercise. At the same time, Dr. Coventry Smith reminded the Assembly that I.M.C. had given special attention to Asia, Africa, and Latin America. The new Division cannot afford to be so selective, for the Council must look at the world situation.

Another high point was the admission to membership of twenty-three Churches, some of them quite small. Most of them are from Africa, two are *Pentecostal* Churches of Chile (an interesting development), and even the Pacific Islands are now represented. But popular interest was focused on the Bulgarian, Romanian, and Russian Orthodox Churches, whose incoming has altered the whole complexion of the Council dramatically. There are now 198 member churches (a few South African denominations have withdrawn), and they make up virtually the whole non-Roman-Catholic Christian constituency. The Eastern Orthodox hold almost a dominating position and they are not shy about stating the view that the Oecumenical Movement began with the issue of a document in 1921 from Constantinople! The Russians were extremely eirenic, and their concern for unity goes back at least to 1871. In fellowship with these ancient Churches are the Old Catholics, and the other daughter communions of what was once the undivided Church of the West with its centre in Rome—the Lutheran, the Anglican, and the Reformed. (It is odd, by the way, that the Anglicans should claim and receive separate “listing” as though they did not belong to this Western group.) All this means that there are now two blocs in world Christianity, the Roman and the non-Roman, so that the Vatican has to take with utmost seriousness the new situation of the World Council of Churches since the New Delhi Assembly.

A moving and hopeful highlight was the Communion Service held on November 26, an Anglican celebration that was opened “to all present who are baptized communicant members of their Churches.” On the evening before, Dr. Douglas Horton preached a penetrating sermon of preparation, and the Eucharist itself was a genuine act of thanksgiving and a powerful advertisement of our unity. There were other services of worship, some more helpful than others, but the other Communion services were not all open to the persons attending the Assembly (the Evangelical Lutheran was; the Syrian Orthodox of Malabar and the Greek Orthodox rites were not). So the scandal remains, and the youth members protested. They were polite but vigorous, with Philip Potter as their spokesman. It was agreed by the Assembly that the time has arrived to reconsider the Lund (1952) proposals on Intercommunion and occasional open Communion services.

There were astonishingly few great speeches and equally few rousing debates. Probably there were some fireworks in section and subsection meetings. (I believe there were some in the Witness Section, and I know there were warm but good-humoured exchanges in the subsection on Rapid Social Change.) The proposal to send an address or complaint to the government of Portugal on the subject of Angolan atrocities led to a first-rate discussion at one plenary session, with the result that the original statement was modified; and there was a stirring debate on the *Appeal* to all governments

and peoples on war and disarmament. On the latter issue the opposition to the committee draft was led by Professor C. A. Coulson, nuclear scientist and noted Methodist lay preacher from England. When the final debate took place on an amended resolution, after a "hearing" at which Coulson's proposals were presented and in part accepted, the professor in my judgment blotted his copybook. At a late stage in the Assembly, and rather late in the day of the debate, Dr. Coulson wanted the committee's revised text to be scrapped entirely in favour of his own twelve-sentence version. Naturally the Assembly refused to be stampeded by this, even if a substantial minority view was represented in the alternative short text. One man should not try to dominate a democratic body.

A single social event stands out—the Reception by the Vice-President of India, Dr. Radhakrishnan, in a setting that reminded one of all the glories of the British Imperial Raj. And one visitor to the Assembly must be mentioned, not Billy Graham but Mr. Nehru, the Prime Minister, who received a standing ovation of exceptional cordiality. Nehru spoke almost "off the cuff," about the folly of the cold-war approach to world problems and the need for a peaceful and friendly attitude. Saints, he said, often become martyrs but politicians usually do not; for politicians have to learn the art of compromise and realism. "Most of the realists in the world today are quite unrealistic!"

II

New Delhi was certainly not all sweetness and light. There are Alpine valleys as well as peaks of majesty! To take the lesser matters of brother body first: the quality of the food left much to be desired, unless one could eat Indian dishes. The quality of the tea served at "breaks" in the Vigyan Bhavan was poor, in a land of wonderful tea; and at times the crowded conditions in the main dining area allowed dignitaries to push their way past patient queue-ers, or (on one occasion that involved the writer) let two bishops quietly occupy our seats! Some of the delegates, and all the youth participants, had to put up with accommodation that was in all charity much worse than they had any right to expect, with the result that "Delhi belly" was a common complaint. The singing by the Assembly was mostly thin, quavering, and badly led; what we could have done with a Billy Graham type of choir and conductor! It would seem that the hymnal used, *Cantate Domino*, was unfamiliar to most of those attending. There was one evening meeting in a tent (the "Shamiana") outdoors on November 23, devoted to the great topic of international affairs. It was intolerably long, the night was terribly cold, and the main speech by Sir Francis Ibiem (an abbreviated version of it, read by his wife, but longer than most other speeches) irritated many by its irresponsible charges against Great Britain, which he accused as the country to blame for South Africa's policy of apartheid. It would be foolish to conceal the existence of the irritations and divergences that appeared. At one stage, for example, one felt like insisting that the Assembly could not be divided into people from the (political) East

and West, but that we were all Christian. All this simply means that there was genuine oecumenical "encounter," and that we all have to learn tolerance.

Again, one might remark on the relative scarcity of pastors (e.g., in the case of The United Church of Canada), and also of the so-called laity, among the delegates. Fewer than fifty women found places in official delegations, though Canada did better in that respect than most countries. (The total delegate attendance was 577, since 31, including all the East Germans, could not attend or were forbidden to come. Besides these, there were, I think, 105 advisers, 100 youth delegates, 120 guests, and 45 observers, including the five Roman Catholics who were never to my knowledge visible in the session.) Women have received surprisingly poor representation on the new Central Committee (five out of a hundred members) and the new Faith and Order Commission (a solitary Englishwoman among one hundred and nineteen males).

III

The Assembly convened in the Vigyan Bhavan on Sunday afternoon, November 19, after a morning service where we rejoiced to hear lovely Indian lyrics and tunes sung by an Indian choir while we stood for an enormously long procession to file into place. Several kinds of Assembly meetings may be noted. Initially there were plenary sessions, first to accomplish the business of integration with the I.M.C. and to admit the new member Churches; then to hear addresses on the Assembly theme, "Jesus Christ, the Light of the World" (Bishop Noth) and the three related topics of Witness (Dr. Devanandan), Service (Prof. Takenaka), and Unity (Prof. Sittler). These were solid and good, with Dr. Sittler doing some fancy aerobatics in the rarefied atmosphere of cosmic Christology before parachuting for a landing on this planet where the Christian bodies still live. He did not really communicate well to many of his audience, and the press told him so quite bluntly. Takenaka was outstanding, and Devanandan followed close behind.

From November 21 to November 28 there were section and subsection meetings to discuss unity, witness, and service, and those assigned to them had to write their reports soon after they had started to talk. The "Annotated Agendas" had prepared the way for reports, but did they prepare too thoroughly? Overlapping with these busy meetings were those of the committees that had to consider the policies and programmes of the Council's Divisions and Departments. They too had to scramble a bit in order to have their reports ready in time. In the evenings there were other plenary gatherings (some open to the public) on the subjects of the Laity, International Affairs, Faith and Order, Inter-Church Aid, Refugee and World Service (a magnificent and very moving presentation that deserves far more space than I can devote to it here), Social Change, Evangelism (a panel statement on "Why We Must Speak" with D. T. Niles taking a major role), and finally a useful session on "The Bible and the Churches' Task," with good addresses

from Dr. Donald Coggan, the new Archbishop of York, and Dr. A. E. Inbanathan of the Indian Bible Society. By the time we reached St. Andrew's Day, the sections and committees had managed to complete their assignments (with the aid of typists who must have worked long hours of overtime). Deliberative and business sessions occupied the final days, from November 30 to December 5.

It will be obvious that the New Delhi Assembly was anything but a pleasant holiday in the romantic East for all who had duties at it. It was a *working* Assembly, the results of which will be decisive in working out the policy and programme of the Council in all its departments from now until the Fourth Assembly in 1966 or 1967 (either in Addis Ababa or Melbourne, it would appear). It was to some extent also a rather clumsy Assembly, very complex and demanding. The Moderator of a small European Church expressed the view privately that he had found the business taxing (he was a one-man delegation), since there were so many drafts and revised versions of documents to be read in a hurry and digested without enough time for reflection. Dr. Charles Ranson complained in the Assembly near its close that its sovereign rights had been curtailed by the pressures of departmental committee reports—not a very reasonable assessment of the value to the Geneva staff of these reports nor of the labour put into them. He also felt that there had been too much overlapping, and that the structure of the Assembly (or did he mean the Council?) ought to follow function. So large a body, that meets but once every five or six years, is bound to have its trials and problems. Some of the delegates were certainly not expert on the oecumenical precedents, talks, and policies of recent years. Others were very much the experts, the executive heads of Church Synods, Councils, and Assemblies. Is it adequate to suggest, as one report did, that member Churches should name their delegates two years in advance of the next Assembly? Who ought to be delegates: executives and bureaucrats, or parish ministers and priests from widely scattered areas? It may be that there is need for a bi-cameral Assembly, or (as the NATO countries have found) for an occasional *Consultative* Assembly designed to inform and inspire, and a *Legislative* Assembly meeting more regularly to do the Council's business on the basis of expert reports and executive discussions. At any rate, the structure of the World Council is likely to undergo changes in the next few years. Meanwhile, it is just as important that in all parts of the world there should be renewed and intelligent interest in the work and service of the Council among the men and women who, along with bishops and clergy, constitute the wholeness of the Church.

IV

It is high time that some of the theological issues raised at New Delhi should be laid before the readers of the *Journal*.

We may begin by listing the projects recommended by the Assembly's Faith and Order committee for study by regional groups. These represent

a mature judgment about the major problems of our time, and they may prove to be prophetic.

(a) In *Europe, Great Britain, and also Australia and New Zealand* the following areas seem to require intensive study: the drift of society to materialistic secularism and sophisticated nihilism; the problem of theological discourse; and the ordination of women.

(b) In *North America* such issues as these should be examined: the problem of theological language; how to help local congregations to understand the various interpretations of Baptism and the Eucharist; the demands of the urban and scientific culture of North America.

(c) In *Asia* some of the pressing problems are these: the place of the laity in the Church; the forces that undermine congregational unity; the process by which indigenous Churches grow to maturity; and the tensions within United Churches, leading either to institutional hardening of the arteries or openness to further unions.

(d) In *Africa* attention should be given to these questions: united witness in the face of Islam; the conflict of loyalties (Church, race, and culture); challenges from new sects to the historical Churches; the uniting of African and European cultures within a Church.

(e) In *Latin America*, consultations "in specific areas" are needed. (This phrase presumably has geographical as well as theological reference.)

(f) In the *Near East*, urgent problems include: the mutual relationships between various Orthodox Churches, and the relations of the Orthodox with the Evangelicals; how to reach the secularized, educated intellectual; and how to reach the world of Islam.

It was agreed that conversations should be encouraged between theologians of the Orthodox and those of the non-Orthodox Churches, and between Roman Catholic theologians and others from the member Churches of the World Council. A special programme on the problems of the language used by theologians has been recommended to the Division of Studies. On the ordination of women (if the Faith and Order commission is ready to accept the proposal—and that is dubious) there ought to be consultations far beyond Europe and Britain, and these should include representatives from the Department on the Co-operation of Men and Women in Church, Family, and Society.

Other issues that should be noted are the following.

(a) The new *Basis of Membership*. This now states that members of the Council fellowship "confess" (not, "accept") the Lord Jesus Christ "as God and Saviour according to the Scriptures." The Churches seek to fulfil their common calling to the glory of the One God, the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. There were 383 votes cast in favour of the new *Basis*, and 36 against; 7 abstentions were recorded. Apart from the fact that it is longer than the Amsterdam version, there were two main objections to the formula:

(i) On the whole, the New Testament teaches that Jesus Christ is Lord and Saviour, not God and Saviour. Evidence for the latter formulation is

extremely weak outside the Johannine writings (and perhaps the narratives of the miraculous conception). (ii) The new *Basis* is just as Christocentric as the original one. The Dutch Arminians and some American Baptists were really unhappy about the formula, and the present writer shares their reservations. Apparently the member Churches made up their minds some months ago not to oppose the amended *Basis*, since it has a quite limited purpose and use.

(b) The Assembly was urged to encourage the statement of a theology of nature, so that the mind of the Churches might be clarified on the place of science and the dangers of technology (as well as its advantages). What does the "world" mean to a Christian?

(c) Perennial questions of war and peace remain, with all the added urgency of the age of atomic energy and space exploration. Can there be a just war in this new situation?

(d) What is the Christian doctrine of death? Professor Roger Mehl was not happy with one report on this subject, and neither was Dr. Rostan, the Waldensian from Rome. Is death a real end or merely a new beginning? Surely the sacramental "death" of faith and Baptism does not alter the fact of biological decease. This doctrine is important for pastors and teachers, and for all Christian people.

(e) Para. 16 of the section report on Witness produced a flutter.—Can we assert that Christ, the Light of the World, has "preceded" the preachers of his Gospel into even the darkest places? Or is it the Spirit of God that is at work to prepare men to hear the evangel? Is it true that "we in the Churches have but little understanding of the wisdom, love and power which God has given to men of other faiths and of no faith"? The German and Finnish Lutherans had plenty of difficulty with such ideas, since they missed the note of "encounter" between the holy, living God and those who are confronted with judgment and grace in the Gospel of Christ. Does not the evangelist go forth with divine authority behind him? In that case he must not be wrongly identified with hearers as yet unconverted to God in faith and repentance. Dr. Martin Niemöller persuaded the Assembly to say simply that "God has not left himself without witness even among men who do not yet know Christ." Professor Schlink denied that there is New Testament evidence for the view that the Light of Christ has preceded Gospel-proclamation. If we say that it has, what happens to the Johannine teaching about the "world," the "darkness," and the "power of the evil one" that holds the world in sway? If God grants wisdom, love, and power (three primary gifts of the Holy and Christlike Spirit) to men of other faiths or of no faith, can there be any "darkest places"? Here is an issue that affects the whole missionary strategy. The "broader" view seems to do less than justice to the Incarnation, and yet it has the merit of recognizing that other faiths are living and helpful to their adherents. Is there a version of the *filioque* controversy underlying the difficulty? Nowhere else did the Third Assembly seem to get to grips with the implications of its own

decision to meet in a city where it would be surrounded by Hindus, Buddhists, Moslems, and others, and to announce its theme as "Jesus Christ, the Light of the World." This theme was asserted all right, sometimes dogmatically. Bishops Meyer and Noth argued that other faiths should not be judged; Jesus never brought himself to do that sort of thing. (Did they forget what their own theological position should accept, namely, the Christ of John 10?) Dr. Paul Devanandan quoted D. T. Niles to this effect: "The Christian witness does not grasp the true inwardness of his work where he does not see that God is previous to him in the life of the person whom he is seeking to win for the Gospel, and also previous to him in whatever area of life he is seeking to make the Gospel effective," and he went on to say that the non-Christian faiths have to be reckoned with as "dynamic faiths expressed in the lives of people." We must try to understand them sympathetically. This latter view seems to hold more promise of dialogue than that of some Europeans and their followers. It has a long and honourable history in the Church, from the time of Justin Martyr at least.

Perhaps not unrelated to this point is the statement in the Section report on Service (para. 40 c): "The Christian must always recognize that Jesus Christ is the Lord of History and he is at work today in every nation of the world in spite of, and through the ambiguous political, economic or social structures and actions in any given country." One may enquire whether this preserves a truly Christian critique of nationalist policies in Africa, Asia, or Latin America today, or indeed of the Communists' programme. No doubt the words "in spite of" are some sort of safeguard. Christians do not have to be 100 per cent pro-Nehru, or pro-Sukarno, or pro-Castro, or pro-Kenyatta. The Church cannot support either East or West unreservedly, nor can it approve extremist cold-war attitudes.

(f) If we hold a proper view of the laity as the People of God, elected to service, this should affect the shape of the witnessing community. At home or abroad, in their work and pleasures, in the silent witness of church attendance (a point overstressed by the Eastern Orthodox), Christian men and women cannot help bearing some sort of testimony to the faith that is in them. Yet local congregations by their divided and unbrotherly state prevent the laity from being effective spokesmen for Christ. They must therefore devise ways and means to demonstrate their unity, for example, by joint meetings on a regular basis as a "congregation of congregations"—without waiting for the day of organic union on the world scale.

(g) Inevitably we have come back to the subject of Unity. With no one dissenting, the Assembly adopted this important statement on the Unity we seek:

We believe that the unity which is both God's will and his gift to his Church is being made visible as all in each place who are baptized into Jesus Christ and confess him as Lord and Saviour are brought by the Holy Spirit into one fully committed fellowship, holding the one apostolic faith, preaching the one Gospel, breaking the one bread, joining in common prayer, and having a corporate life

reaching out in witness and service to all and who at the same time are united with the whole Christian fellowship in all places and all ages in such wise that ministry and members are accepted by all, and that all can act and speak together as occasion requires for the tasks to which God calls his people.

The committee report on this subject proceeds to offer a detailed commentary on that definition, but readers must find it for themselves in the Official Report. They will doubtless agree that the unanimous adoption of the definition was indeed a high point in the Assembly. It is, however, for us and our fellow-Christians in each place (beginning in Montreal, Canada, or wherever we live) to put flesh on the fine words and let the One Christ be commended to the world in the wholeness of his Church.

v

These impressions do not begin to exhaust what was said and done at New Delhi. No mention has been made of the steep rise in the Council's budget (by more than 47 per cent), or of the cost of this Assembly (\$325,000), which has all been met. The Council is now erecting a new Headquarters in Geneva. It is concerned with the other world bodies that are alliances or conferences of great Confessions (Lutheran, Reformed, and so on). It looks eagerly toward Churches still outside its ranks. We should notice that of the six new Presidents, one is again an Indian (Principal Moses), and two are laymen (a Nigerian and an American). The Indian Christians gave the Council a warm welcome and must feel much encouraged by all the visits paid by delegates, advisers, young people, and others. Everyone felt moved by the gifts from the Indian Churches to the Assembly participants. And yet it is not certain that the mass of public opinion in India was touched by the event at all. There was without doubt "a massive act of witness," especially through press and television, and the effects will be felt as delegates tell and re-tell the story by word, by colour slide, by sermons and articles. But one's main impression is that New Delhi was a hard-working, legislative Assembly and one that has initiated a new era in the Oecumenical Movement. Given goodwill and patience, given distinguished recruits to places of leadership and service, given a continual sense of urgency and a surging wave of support from the total membership of the Churches, the years ahead may well prove, in God's grace, to be decisive for the future of the Church—and the world of mankind.