

THEOLOGICAL TRENDS

Come, Holy Spirit—Renew the Whole Creation: Theological Issues Arising at the Seventh Assembly of the World Council of Churches

THE SEVENTH ASSEMBLY of the World Council of Churches which met in February 1991 in Canberra was an important ecclesial event. I was privileged to be present as an accredited visitor, a position which enabled me to participate in many of the Assembly's activities without the responsibilities of those who were delegates or official Catholic observers. My interest focused on the theological issues which were addressed by the Assembly, or which were implicit in the Assembly's deliberations and decisions.

The theme of the Assembly was expressed in the form of a prayer: 'Come, Holy Spirit—renew the whole creation'. As Krister Stendahl pointed out in his pre-assembly reflections, prayer is the language most authentic to the Church for it invites us to become co-creators with God in Christ.¹ It was in prayer that the various threads of the Assembly, some of them contradictory, came together. *Lex orandi, lex credendi*.

While some participants lamented the lack of theology at the Assembly, I found the total experience pregnant with deep theological implications which need to be explicated. Many theological questions surfaced which should be addressed not only by the WCC but by all the churches; for example: What is the role of culture within Christianity? If we acknowledge that western culture should not be normative for the rest of the world, what criteria are used to judge which aspects of any culture are compatible with Christian faith? Who makes these decisions? Is the concern for justice, peace and the integrity of creation a theological issue or does it belong primarily to the political and social agenda? What is the theological and ecclesiological significance of the actions which the WCC has undertaken to combat racism and sexism? Such questions point to deeper theological questions about our understanding of God, Christ and the Spirit, our perception of humankind and its relationship to the rest of creation, and our ecclesiology.

Among the many different theological threads which were woven throughout the Assembly I will consider five: the nature of theology itself, the doctrine of the Holy Spirit, the unity of the Church as *koinonia*, commitment to justice, peace and the integrity of creation, and emerging spiritualities. Beneath all of these issues lies the question of the relationship between Christian faith and culture. I will conclude with some reflections on Catholic participation in the Assembly.

The nature of theology

What is theology? Who does theology? How does one theologize? These questions were not addressed explicitly by the Assembly but they underlie

much of the tension which emerged during the gathering in Canberra. One of the exciting, and at times disturbing, theological trends observable at the Assembly was the changing method of theological reflection. Theology was not done by a few experts or professionals but emerged from the reflections of the participants. It was inductive, collective, and inclusive.²

The Assembly provided a forum for different theological voices to speak. For some this resembled Babel rather than Pentecost. The strong voices of the Orthodox theologians articulated the ancient theology of the eastern Churches. New voices spoke out of particular contexts, often contexts of oppression. At times the theology of the Orthodox was articulated over against contextual theologies emerging from Asia and Africa as well as from women and indigenous peoples. There were charges of syncretism as new voices sought to include their own cultural insights into their articulation of the Christian faith. As the various theologies interacted, the concern for the development of a 'vital and coherent theology' within the World Council of Churches, which was first expressed at the Vancouver Assembly in 1983, assumed greater urgency.³

The Assembly demonstrated in a dramatic way that one cannot presume that all Christians share a common theological foundation on which to build. The realization that there is no common theology but rather diverse theologies makes it imperative that these different theologies enter into dialogue. David Tracy has noted how difficult it is to listen actively and critically as the voices of the others multiply:

All the victims of our discourses and our history have begun to discover their own discourses in ways that our discourse finds difficult to hear, much less listen to.⁴

This was the experience of many during the Assembly, but in spite of the difficulties there was a commitment to continue the dialogue and to enter into the process of discernment and conversion which such dialogue demands.

The need to bring together the richness of the theological tradition of the past with present insights and concerns became evident. It is clear that the development of a 'vital and coherent theology' must be both/and, rather than either/or, but it is not adequate simply to place competing theologies side by side. There is a need for mutual correction and discernment which is only possible if all voices are allowed to speak and to be heard. As those involved in the Assembly discovered, this is not easy. It was not only the new voices, but the old voices as well, particularly the Orthodox and the evangelicals, who complained that they were not being heard.

Perhaps one of the greatest contributions that the Assembly made to the churches was in providing a *context* for creating wider solidarity in which different theologies could mutually correct or complement one another. This occurred in many different ways, both formal and informal. 'Women-

Space', a large tent where women from all over the world met, provided the opportunity to create wider solidarity among women. Here women were challenged to hear the healing voices of other cultures and to experience our connectedness. Similar opportunities were available to indigenous people, to young people, to differently-abled people, to people from different regions, to members of different traditions. Thus participants were able to listen to alternative voices, to clarify their own positions, and were prepared to enter into the larger theological discussions. Members from one of the sub-groups into which the delegates were divided summed up their experience of the process:

Each of us brought to this Assembly the presuppositions of our cultures and traditions. We have found that, through the working of the Holy Spirit, we have come to hear more clearly what others have been saying.⁵

Not only are new voices entering into the theological discourse but the way of engaging in the dialogue is also changing. This became evident in Canberra as formal papers were followed by dramatic presentations and case studies with theological reflection. It was an embodied theology which came through one's senses, a theology which spoke to the heart as well as to the head.

José Miguez Bonino in his reflections on theological coherence called upon the WCC 'to establish ways in which the several theological quests afoot in the WCC can interact, communicate, challenge and stimulate each other'. He suggested that it could already create and evidence 'a purposeful, explicit mutual interaction, accountability, enrichment and correction within our diversity, divergences, even contradictions and conflicts'.⁶ The Assembly endeavoured to do this. Much more work must be done both in social analysis and in theological reflection on the issues which were raised but those who were present in Canberra had a unique opportunity to experience some of the problems, demands and enrichment of doing theology in the 'world-church'.⁷

The doctrine of the Holy Spirit

The different theological approaches were dramatically presented in the opening reflections on the theme of the Assembly, 'Come, Holy Spirit—renew the whole creation'. Two different theologies, two different theological methods were presented and were reiterated throughout the Assembly: the Orthodox position introduced by Parthenios, Patriarch of Alexandria, and a position articulated by Dr Chung Hyun-Kyung arising from Asian women's theology.

Parthenios reminded the Assembly that to speak about the Holy Spirit is to enter into the mystery of the Holy Trinity. He emphasized that it is particularly in the sacraments that all things are sanctified by the Holy

Spirit. We must keep our world 'very good', as God created it, for over it hovers the Holy Spirit. This mystical vision of God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit dwelling with the Church and uniting the whole of creation in an invisible unity was followed immediately by another description of the Spirit's activity. Dr Chung Hyun-Kyung from South Korea invited the participants to call on the Spirit present in all creation but particularly among those who belong to the 'underside of history'. For her the image of the Holy Spirit came from the Goddess of compassion and wisdom venerated by East Asian women's popular religiosity.

Dr Chung represented the new voices based on experiences which have been excluded from the theological enterprise. There was a freshness in the presentation of the young Asian woman as she made use of music and dance by Australian Aborigines and Koreans to help each person listen to the spirit within. Reactions to the two approaches varied and found expression in the ongoing discussions on the doctrine of the Holy Spirit. For some the oppressed are the privileged locus of God's activity in our world. Their experience must be taken seriously if we are to know how the Holy Spirit is active in our world today. This is the new wine which will renew the Church. Others feared that pagan influences were being introduced which should not be confused with the Holy Spirit. There was no easy reconciliation of these views but the Assembly provided 'a process which respects diversity, does not hide disagreement but stresses mutual communication, joint reflection, and accountability'.⁸

By organizing the theme and sub-themes in the form of prayer to the Holy Spirit, the Assembly created the context for a practical theology that grounded programmatic issues around its theological affirmations about the Holy Spirit.⁹ Thus it prayed: 'Giver of life—sustain your creation! Spirit of Truth—set us free! Spirit of Unity—reconcile your people! Holy Spirit—transform and sanctify us!' It was within these four sub-themes that the Assembly addressed major issues concerning our world. As the Assembly listened 'to what the Spirit is saying to the churches', it entered into the painful task of discernment. Not every movement is of the Holy Spirit. The Assembly insisted that the primary criterion for discerning the Holy Spirit is that the Holy Spirit is the Spirit of Christ. But this insight was not developed. The way that pneumatology is related to Christology is one of the themes which requires further theological reflection.

The unity of the church as koinonia

The image of church as communion or *koinonia* characterized the ecclesiology of the Assembly.¹⁰ Communion includes our relationship to God who is a community of persons, to one another, and to the whole creation. The Church is a sign of that fulness of communion to which all human beings and the cosmos itself are called. The Assembly acknowledged with gratitude the *koinonia* already present while recognizing the painful reality that 'because of sin and the misunderstanding of the diverse gifts of

the Spirit, the churches are painfully divided'.¹¹ Such division damages the Church's credibility in witnessing to the world and contradicts the very nature of the Church itself as communion.

The Assembly was an expression of the very real *koinonia*, although imperfect and limited, that already exists among churches. It was particularly in worship that the participants experienced this unity we already have in Christ and in the Spirit, a unity which embraced differences of race, class, gender, age and culture as persons from every region of the world gathered in prayer. And it was also in worship that the imperfect and limited nature of the *koinonia* became painfully evident when the Assembly that proclaimed God's Word together was unable to enter into the Eucharist as one body. Even at the Lima liturgy, based on the theological convergence achieved in the Faith and Order statement, *Baptism, Eucharist, and ministry*, many were unable to communicate.¹² The Orthodox liturgy was an even stronger experience of our limited and imperfect communion. The WCC sees itself as a means by which churches can move toward full visible unity. This requires facing the divisions which prevent eucharistic sharing and the mutual recognition of ministry. At the Seventh Assembly the WCC recommitted itself to the goal of full visible communion, a goal which will be achieved when all the churches are able to recognize in one another the One, Holy, Catholic and Apostolic Church.

The moving ceremony welcoming the China Christian Council into the WCC after an absence of thirty-five years dramatically manifested the *koinonia* that already exists in a limited way between local church and universal Church. The church in China is struggling to live down its western image as 'a dot on the missionary map of other churches'. It is committed to being self-governing, self-supporting and self-propagating in order to be truly the church in China. Yet Chinese Christians are also aware that they belong to the universal Church, a reality which found expression in the warm welcome given to the Chinese bishops.

The Church as *koinonia* is a community of women and men, of young and old, a community which includes the differently-abled. Again the Assembly provided an experience of communion which exists imperfectly. Women, youth, differently-abled people had to struggle in order to be heard and to be represented on the Central Committee. The goal of the WCC to be 'a community of healing and sharing within the WCC and the member churches where women, men, young people and children, able and disabled, clergy and laity, *participate fully* and minister to one another' was not fully achieved at the Assembly, but the level of participation was impressive. Participation was based on the conviction that the nature of the Church as *koinonia* demands that the gifts of all the baptized be utilized within the Church.

A world-church in which all voices may speak and be heard does not exist. The WCC as a council of churches plays a prophetic role in imaging what such a church might be like. The honest facing of conflicts which occurred

during the Assembly offers hope in the possibility of reconciliation among different theologies and world-views. The Assembly provided an eschatological sign of the *koinonia* to which all Christians are called.

Commitment to justice, peace and the integrity of creation

The WCC Assembly interpreted the mission of the Church in terms of its commitment to justice, peace and the integrity of creation. It was suggested that a new type of mission is required today, not into foreign lands, but into 'foreign' structures, that is economic, social and political structures which are destructive and need conversion. As Christians we should confess our failure to recognize and to fulfil our responsibility toward creation. The Church as a redeemed community is called to be a sign of 'new creation' in Christ and has a crucial role in the renewal of creation. In this pluralistic age the Christian Church does this in dialogue with other religions and ideological faiths.

Since the Sixth Assembly in Vancouver the WCC has engaged member churches in a conciliar process of mutual commitment to justice, peace and the integrity of creation, recognizing that these three are interrelated.¹³ This threefold formula for an ethic of life has its basis in faith in the triune God who is the source of all life. The task of clarifying how the Church carries out its commitment to justice, peace and the integrity of creation is an on-going theological and pastoral concern. Meeting during the heat of the Gulf war created a strong sense of urgency and a realization that unity among peoples and with the environment is crucial for the survival of life itself.

The goal of visible unity and the commitment to justice, peace and the integrity of creation are sometimes seen as competing goals of the WCC. Yet the Assembly insisted that they cannot be separated, for the Church is called to be a sign of the unity of humanity and of all creation. The witness to justice, peace and the integrity of creation is required if the Church is to be true to its nature as a communion and to its mission to the world.

The need for a deeper theological understanding of creation which revives the biblical concept of service and stewardship became apparent. Humanity is both an integral part of the creation, and has a special responsibility for it. There was a call for repentance for the theology which supports and sanctions the domination and exploitation of nature. The Assembly committed itself anew to living as a community which cares for creation. It insisted that social justice for all people and eco-justice for all creation belong together and it called for an ethic of economy and ecology.

Emerging spiritualities

The changes necessary to save life on our planet demand a new spirituality, a spirituality based on global interdependence which recognizes the unity of all creation. Such a spirituality arises out of empowered local communities whose members are committed to the healing of creation and to justice and peace for all the human family. We need the dynamic power of the Spirit that integrates faith with daily life, worship with action.

By providing a context for solidarity among people from different theological traditions, the Assembly was enriched by diverse spiritualities which found expression in worship. From the opening ceremony, the Aborigines were visible calling the community together, inviting the participants to see with new eyes, to hear new sounds, to discern God's presence in new ways. As we entered into the worship tent, the music from diverse cultures drew us together and we raised our voices, struggling with the different languages, and yet united in faith. Different theologies, different spiritualities, one Spirit inviting a world in turmoil to listen to what she is saying to the churches. Here we experienced the already achieved unity in the Holy Spirit and committed ourselves to the task of continuing on the ecumenical journey toward full visible communion.

Faith and cultures

Robert Schreier calls the interaction between Christian faith and cultures today 'one of the most bewildering and vexing areas facing theology'.¹⁴ The Assembly presented this challenge in all its bewildering and vexing aspects. We saw how theologies clashed as different cultures articulated their understanding of faith. We experienced the richness of celebration in a multicultural church and recognized both the gift of *koinonia* and the call to become truly a communion of churches united in the Spirit of Christ. We saw new spiritualities emerging from different cultures. The interaction between faith and culture, exemplified in many different ways throughout the Assembly, has far-reaching theological implications which need to be explored.

Catholic participation

The Assembly called for a substantive review of the relationship between the Roman Catholic Church and the WCC. For more than twenty-five years the Roman Catholic Church has participated with the WCC through the Joint Working Group as well as through the Faith and Order Commission. In the light of the ecumenical progress made during these years many believe that a new framework is needed which recognizes the ecclesial character of the *koinonia* between the Roman Catholic Church and the fellowship of churches in the WCC. Closer relations between member churches and the Roman Catholic Church, internationally and nationally, would provide a stronger witness of unity to the world, a witness desperately needed in our divided world. At the same time both the WCC and the Roman Catholic Church would be mutually strengthened and enriched, particularly from a theological perspective.

A stronger Catholic involvement might help to bridge the gap between Orthodox theology on the one side and contextual theologies on the other side. Since the Catholic Church is not a member of the World Council of Churches, Catholic theological voices were not heard on the Assembly floor, although through the various subsections into which the Assembly was

divided Catholic observers had the opportunity for indirect influence. The pioneering work of Catholic theologians like Rahner, Lonergan, and Metz as well as the more recent work of David Tracy, Monika Hellwig, and others, particularly many feminist and liberation theologians, have attempted to bring together the wisdom of the tradition with a new sensitivity to context.

The theological issues raised during the Assembly are also issues within the Catholic Church. The same conflicts between different theologies exist among Catholics from different cultures and from different groups within the same culture. The context for dialogue among these different voices is difficult to find within the Catholic Church. Although the Catholic Church is spread throughout the world, we have yet to work out the implications of being a 'world church'. Catholics might learn a great deal about inclusion and participation through reflection on the struggles of the Seventh Assembly. While the WCC would be strengthened by a stronger Catholic presence, the Catholic Church might become more 'catholic' by allowing itself to learn from the WCC.

Johannes Hempel, a bishop from what was East Germany, in outlining his hopes for Canberra, referred to 'that miracle of ecumenical work in which people who never saw each other before and who come from different Christian traditions and cultures with different destinies and languages—and moreover from different and perhaps mutually hostile political situations—acknowledge and affirm each other as Christians in common worship and common work and come to trust each other naturally and freely'.¹⁵ While the Gulf war monopolized the media, this miracle was missed by the press in its search for a 'story'. Those who were privileged to be at Canberra were part of a miracle which provides a rich source for further theological reflection.

Ellen Leonard

NOTES

¹ Stendahl, Krister: *Energy for life: reflections on the theme 'Come Holy Spirit—renew the whole creation'* (Geneva, 1990), p 1.

² Dr Chung Hyun Kyung describes the new methodology not only of Asian women's theology but of all other forms of liberation theology in this way: *Struggle to be the sun again: introducing Asian women's theology* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, 1990), pp 103–4.

³ *Ecumenical review* vol 41, no 2 (April 1989) was entitled 'Towards a vital and coherent ecumenical theology'. See particularly José Miguez Bonino, 'The concern for a vital and coherent theology', pp 160–76.

⁴ Tracy, David: *Plurality and ambiguity: hermeneutics, religion, hope* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1987), p 79.

⁵ Final Report, Section II, 'Spirit of truth—set us free!'

⁶ Bonino, 'Concern for a vital and coherent theology', p 164.

⁷ I use this term in the way that Rahner used it when he challenged the Church to move from being a European or North American export to becoming a 'world-church'. 'Toward a fundamental interpretation of Vatican II', *Theological Studies* vol 40 (1979), pp 716-27; 'The abiding significance of Vatican II', *Theological Investigations* vol 20, translated by Edward Quinn (London: Darton, Longman & Todd, 1981), pp 90-102.

⁸ Bonino, 'Concern for a vital and coherent theology', p 174.

⁹ Two issues of *Ecumenical Review*, vol 41, no 3 (July 1989) and vol 42, no 2 (April 1990) were devoted to the theme of the Holy Spirit.

¹⁰ Communion ecclesiology may be found in Vatican II which described the Church as 'a sign and instrument, that is, of communion with God and of unity among all people' (*Lumen gentium* 1). It is characteristic of eastern ecclesiology with its emphasis on eucharistic community and has been the ecclesiology of the Anglican/Roman Catholic International Commission. See 'Church as communion', Report from ARCIC II, *Briefing* vol 21, no 2 (24 January 1991), pp 16-29.

¹¹ *The unity of the Church as koinonia: gift and calling*, prepared by Faith and Order and revised at Canberra.

¹² This statement, often referred to as *BEM*, was drawn up in Lima in 1982, the fruit of many years of work. The document has been presented to the churches for their reception.

¹³ A world convocation on 'Justice, peace and the integrity of creation' took place in Seoul, Korea, in March 1990. *Ecumenical Review* vol 41, no 4 (October 1989) was devoted to an exploration of issues of justice, peace and the integrity of creation in preparation for this event.

¹⁴ Schreiter, Robert J.: 'Faith and cultures: challenges to a world church', *Theological Studies* vol 50, no 4 (December 1989), pp 744-60.

¹⁵ Johannes W. Hempel, 'Hopes for Canberra 1991', *Ecumenical Review* vol 43, no 1 (January 1991), p 32.