
A New Crisis? Analysis and Reflections Concerning Worship at the Ninth Assembly of the World Council of Churches

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INTRODUCTION

In February 2006, the Ninth General Assembly of the World Council of Churches (WCC) was held in Porto Alegre, Brazil. In this article, I will first sketch the tradition of worship at the WCC, as it has developed in the last fifty years. This tradition received severe criticism in the Final Report of the Special Commission on Orthodox Participation in the WCC, which was submitted to the central committee in 2002. After reviewing this critique I will examine the worship at the Porto Alegre Assembly as the meeting place of two frontiers: the experimental WCC tradition and the critical Special Commission. I will focus my attention on a selected number of evening prayers at the Porto Alegre Assembly, which function as case studies. This overall perspective will not stop me from making personal theological and/or practical remarks on certain features of the worship, and how this mirrors general currents in the WCC. One example of this is the relationship between the North and the South as expressed in the Assembly's prayer life.

BACKGROUND

Worship as a problem

In its initial phases, the ecumenical movement that would eventually form the WCC did not address worship as a major part of their agenda. Records from the First World Conference on Faith and Order (Lausanne, 1927) do not treat worship in any significant way. The first attempt to do so from an ecumenical perspective, *Ways of Worship* (1951), took a descriptive and comparative approach. Its focus on dividing issues and practices met a clear need for different churches within the movement to learn more about each other and about the difficult nature of the ecumenical task. As the Third World Conference on Faith and Order (Lund, 1952) noted, in worship "disunity becomes explicit and the sense of separation most acute."¹ Worship tended to be seen as stumbling block for unity rather than as the cornerstone upon which the ecumenical community should be built. Common worship at most ecumenical events consisted of a rotation of

1. Quoted in Teresa Berger, *Dictionary of the Ecumenical Movement*, eds. Nicholas Lossky et al., (Geneva: WCC Publications 1991), s.v. "Worship in the Ecumenical Movement," 1107.

confessional liturgies.²

Worship as a possibility

Gradually, the appreciation of worship started to change in the ecumenical tradition of the WCC. Instead of being a place of experienced disunity, it came to be described as a uniting force. In worship, participants experienced a feeling of being one that went beyond the theological difficulties expressed in the documents. This suggests a paradigmatic shift rooted in praxis and illustrates some inadequacies with theoretical approaches like that of Lund 1952 that prioritize dogmatic reasoning over lived spirituality. This shift was articulated most clearly at the Fourth World Conference on Faith and Order (Montreal, 1963). Its description of worship as *the* central act of the life of the church presented a more radical formulation than the earlier Lund statement describing worship as an act *no less important* than faith and order.³ Montreal furthermore spelled out the ecclesiological significance of worship:

Christian worship... is an act formative of Christian community—an act, moreover, which is conducted within the context of the whole Church, and which represents the one, catholic Church.⁴

Writing in 1991, Berger asks “whether subsequent ecumenical discussions have ever taken these statements seriously enough.”⁵ As we shall see, the Orthodox may have been the first to really do so, but did not arrive at the conclusions Berger seems to desire.

Vancouver breakthrough and the formation of an ecumenical worship tradition in the WCC

The Sixth Assembly of the WCC (Vancouver, 1983) marks another significant development in the role and appreciation of worship in WCC. According to Eden Grace, “ecumenical worship was enacted in breathtakingly exciting ways.”⁶ In evaluations afterwards, 90 percent of the delegates mentioned worship as the

2. Eden Grace, “Worship in the World Council of Churches: the tradition of ‘ecumenical worship’ in light of recent Orthodox critique,” *Ecumenical Review*, 54, no.1 (January-April, 2002): 3–27. Also available online at <http://www.edengrace.org/ecumenicalworship.html> (accessed December 1, 2006).

3. Berger, “Worship in the Ecumenical Movement,” 1108.

4. “Report of Section IV: Worship and the Oneness of Christ’s Church,” in *The Ecumenical Movement – An Anthology of Key Texts and Voices*, eds. Michael Kinnamon and Brian Cope (Geneva: WCC Publications 1997), 508.

5. Berger, “Worship in the Ecumenical Movement,” 1109.

6. Grace, “Worship in the World Council of Churches.”

most significant aspect at the Assembly.⁷ The Lima liturgy with its Eucharistic celebration was one of the high points of the Assembly.⁸ But with a tone of hesitation, Berger remarks: "Maybe here, too, reflection on worship was overtaken by the actual experience of worship by the participants."⁹ The step from praxis to theory, from experience to dogmatic conclusions, still awaited. However, with this Assembly came a significant and far-reaching recognition of the importance of worship.

The Vancouver Assembly exhibited features that emerged as a distinctive WCC approach to worship. The first feature of this "WCC worship tradition" is a willingness to use not only a variety of confessional traditions, but also traditions of other religious communities, especially indigenous people-groups. The second is a desire to minimize the use of spoken words. Since spoken languages require translation, they tend to decrease participation and increase a sense of divisiveness. Creative symbols, music and silence, on the other hand, can be understood more broadly by participants from different geographical and cultural background. Third, there is an emphasis on lay participation and elements that engage the entire congregation.¹⁰ Fourth, the Vancouver Assembly introduced the worship tent as a space designated entirely to worship. Prior Assemblies had conducted worship in the main meeting space or local churches. The tent provided a confessionally neutral place and reminded worshipers that they are a "pilgrim people."¹¹

To some extent these changes in WCC worship reflected a wider realization of the western world in the twentieth century: The world not only is bigger than we once thought, but also filled with diverse cultures that can enrich our experience. African drums are as appropriate as an organ for singing the Lord's praise. Restrictions on the major symbolic elements—the bread and the wine of the Eucharist—demand a new kind of creativity,¹² so that the holistic way traditional liturgy engages multiple senses is expressed in different and sometimes more modern ways. The final important factor in the Vancouver breakthrough was the decision to move with determination from confessional to interconfessional worship. This decision demonstrated profound commitment to worshipping as an ecumenical body in a way that reflected the multitudes of traditions present by

7. Per Harling, *Worshipping Ecumenically: Orders of Service from Global Meetings With Suggestions for Local Use* (Geneva: WCC Publications 1995), 7.

8. Teresa Berger, *Dictionary of the Ecumenical Movement*, eds. Nicholas Lossky et al., (Geneva: WCC Publications 1991), s.v. "Lima liturgy," 616.

9. Berger, "Worship in the Ecumenical Movement," 1111.

10. Harling, *Worshipping Ecumenically*, 2-10 and Grace, "Worship in the World Council of Churches."

11. Harling, *Worshipping Ecumenically*, 7.

12. With the exception of the Lima liturgy of 1983, the Eucharist has not been celebrated at any official worship in the WCC Assemblies.

forming something from the shared history and longing of WCC member-churches that was new but not mere eclecticism.

Thus from Vancouver emerged the definitive elements of a WCC worship tradition created within a specific ecumenical context. Among its main characteristics are attentiveness to local traditions, a hesitance towards spoken language in favor of symbolic expressions, emphasis on participation, and designation of a unique worship space.

ORTHODOX CONCERNS REGARDING THE WCC AND ECUMENICAL WORSHIP

The Orthodox were involved in the WCC from its inception. Orthodox theologians and diaspora church leaders such as Anthony Bloom, Vladimir Lossky and John Meyendorff had an important role in the dialogue with the western churches. As communism and church-persecution spread in Eastern Europe, WCC-meetings became something of a refuge for many Orthodox.¹³ However, with the fall of the Berlin wall, the situation changed dramatically for these churches, and their relationship to the WCC and the conditions for their participation in the ecumenical work has to be reconsidered.

At the Eighth Assembly (Harare, 1998), a crisis regarding Orthodox participation in the WCC became apparent. The Orthodox felt trapped in an institution dominated by liberal Protestantism, and found it hard to make their voice heard or stop decisions they disliked. To address this crisis, a "Special Commission on Orthodox Participation in the WCC" was formed.

The issue of ecumenical worship received particular attention in the Special Commissions report. The report echoes the attitude of Lund 1952 in stating, "it is in common prayer that the pain of Christian division is most acutely experienced."¹⁴

The Commission approached the issue of worship with two goals. First, it sought to differentiate interconfessional prayer at WCC gatherings from worship conducted by an ecclesial body. Second, it sought to make practical recommendations for common prayer at these gatherings to reduce the chances of causing spiritual, theological or ecclesiological offence. By addressing the ecclesiological aspects of worship at the WCC, the Commission finally drew attention to the experience of unity at these gatherings. But the discovery of the experience of unity in worship despite doctrinal differences resulted in recommendations for changes of praxis (worship) instead of changes in the underlying theory (dogmatics).

13. J. Jonsson, *Vänner kallar jag er - En resa till Ekumene* (Örebro: Cordia, 2004), 36.

14. World Council of Churches Central Committee, *Final Report of the Special Commission on Orthodox Participation in the WCC*, §40, <http://www2.wcc-coe.org/ccdocuments.nsf/index/gen-5-en.html> (accessed December 1, 2006).

The Commission report describes the term “ecumenical worship” as a source of confusion concerning the ecclesial character of the worship, suggesting that the terms “confessional common prayer” and “interconfessional common prayer” should be used instead. The first phrase designates an event where one hosting church invites the others to participate in a prayer from its tradition. The second designates an event that does not emerge out of a single ecclesial tradition, but is prepared for a specific ecumenical context by an *ad hoc* committee that has no ecclesial status.¹⁵

The report displays a hesitant attitude towards prayers of experimental character¹⁶ and the use of symbols and symbolic actions in the services. When symbols are used, they should be used in a way so that everybody can understand them, and insensitiveness to other traditions or opinions is avoided.¹⁷ Use of rites and symbols from outside the Christian tradition is not encouraged out of deference for those who regard such practices as “syncretism” rather than “inculturation.”¹⁸ In regard to spoken language, the Commission affirms inclusive language when addressing people, but is more hesitant when it comes to talk of the divine. When naming God in common prayer, the Commission states, “the revealed and biblical names for God – Father, Son and Holy Spirit – should be used”.¹⁹ Finally, the report warns against including social and political issues in common prayer in ways that offend: “We are called to pray for justice and peace, yet we can distinguish between thematic prayer and prayer used to divide us further on social and political issues over which we have deep disagreement. Our common prayer is addressed to God, and is an invitation to listen to what God is trying to teach us.”²⁰

This last remark should be understood against the background of suspicion that the WCC seeks to further political agendas. In the chapter on “Social and political issues”, the report states:

Specifically, there has been a perception that churches are coerced into treating issues they deem as either foreign to their life or inappropriate for a worldwide forum. There has also been a perception that the WCC has on occasion sought to “preach” to the churches rather than be the instrument of their common reflection.²¹

15. WCC Central Committee, *Final Report of the Special Commission on Orthodox Participation in the WCC*, “Appendix A: A Framework for Common Prayer at WCC Gatherings,” §15, <http://www2.wcc-coe.org/ccdocuments.nsf/index/gen-5-en.html> (accessed December 1, 2006).

16. *Ibid.*, §21.

17. *Ibid.*, §27.

18. *Ibid.*, §28.

19. *Ibid.*, §35.

20. *Ibid.*, §32.

21. WCC Central Committee, *Final Report of the Special Commission on Orthodox Participation in the WCC*, §26, <http://www2.wcc-coe.org/ccdocuments.nsf/index/gen-5-en.html> (accessed

Taken together, these statements seem to imply that in some instances worship at WCC gatherings has not simply focused on God but has also taken the form of “preaching” to the delegates. The following analysis of specific prayers will assess whether this was the case at Porto Alegre, and if so, the content of such preaching.

PRAYERS AT PORTO ALEGRE - THREE CASES

With both the historical development and the recent criticism in mind, we now turn our attention to Porto Alegre and the worship there. I have selected three prayers that reflect the breadth of the worship at the Assembly: an interconfessional prayer service arranged by the WCC,²² that opened the Assembly, an evening prayer arranged by the Episcopal Anglican Church of Brazil,²³ and finally the Pentecostal evening prayer.²⁴ This combination of confessional prayers from an older tradition with a long established relationship to the WCC and a younger tradition with limited involvement in the WCC along with the opening interconfessional service provide a substantial but concise corpus of materials. The analysis is based on the written agendas for the services supplemented by personal impressions in the form of notes and memories. Each case-study includes a brief summary of the specific prayer followed by reflections on points of particular interest. All the prayer services took place in the designated tent that has been the space for Assembly worship since Vancouver. The front area of the tent had room for a large choir to the left and an elevated platform with microphones for others contributing to services on the right. These case-studies of specific services lead into discussion of some general features of the prayers at Porto Alegre.

Opening Prayer

The opening prayer service that initiated the Assembly highlighted creation as God’s gracious gift to mankind and called participants to commit to love and justice. It consisted of seven parts:

- Gathering

Participants are invited to greet one another. They sing the Assembly theme song, “God in your grace (transform the world).” Bishop Adriel de Souza Maia, President of the National Council of Christian Churches in Brazil welcomes the Assembly. All stand to sing “Santus et Benedictus” while a procession carries a Bible to the main podium. The refrain of this song includes a wordless, non-linguistic expression of joy, “le lo le lo lay lo...”

December 1, 2006).

22. The opening prayer of the Assembly, February 14, 2006.

23. Used February 17, 2006.

24. Used February 18, 2006.

- Gifts of Grace

Representatives from each region of the world present symbolic gifts to the Assembly and explain their meanings. The choir sings Psalm 204, a song praising God and God's creation that includes a sung congregational response.

- Cries of the World

A prayer from each part of the world is said, followed by a sung response from the congregation, "Hear us, O Lord."

- Listening to the Word of God

As individuals read passages from the Bible (Is. 64:1-5a, Eph. 4:1-6, 11-16, and Jh. 20:10-18) the congregation responds in song. Archbishop Anastasios of Tirana preaches a sermon.

- Our Calling as Churches

The congregation recites the Nicene Creed together. Then they read a litany of commitment to love and justice followed by a sung response.

- Words of Promise and Hope

Someone reads Revelation 21:1-5a and the congregation responds with a song based on the text.

- Blessing

After the blessing is pronounced, the congregation responds with a reprise of "God in your grace, transform the world." As people leave the tent, they are offered literal fruit of God's creation to share as a common meal.

The presentation of gifts to the Assembly continued the tradition of symbolic actions in WCC-services. The gifts reminded participants of the richness of the world through God's grace as well as the richness present in the gathering itself insofar as it drew together people from cultures all over the world. As the Special Commission recommended, the meaning of each symbol was carefully explained. For example:

From the Caribbean - sugar cane, source of numerous products in the islands, ranging from popular dishes and drinks to fibers and sources of energy. It is offered as representation of the strength, the resilience and the sweetness of the Caribbean people.²⁵

The discovery of the global perspective and the turn away from a Eurocentric perspective is an important part of the WCC journey the last fifty years (and one that by no means is over). With the European legacy of imperialism, racism, and world dominance, the celebration of cultural diversity as richness serves as an important antidote against arrogance. As the opportunity for oppressed people to express how they can be a blessing to the world, such actions should not be underestimated, but at the same time, too strong an identification with any particular nation, race or culture may be theologically problematic. We should

25. The person handing over the gift also explained its meaning to the congregation. These words were did not appear in the agendas but were printed in the Assembly newspaper the next day. "Gifts from the regions: Symbolic gifts offered in opening prayer," *Transforma mundo*, 15 February 2006, 7, www.wcc-assembly.info/fileadmin/files/wccassembly/newspaper/15feb_o_mundo.pdf.

not deny our place in the creation and the blessings of our culture: these are a gift from God. But since, as Christians, our true homeland is the Kingdom of God, we should be careful in allying ourselves with earthly regimes or accepting worldly boundaries such as race and ethnicity. History is full of examples where alliances of this kind have produced horrific results. It would be an overreaction to deem a celebration of this kind as “wrong” or even “theologically suspect” in itself. The question is rather if this indicates a general and problematic trend towards differentiation in the WCC.

The Special Commission addressed the issue of sensitivity towards other traditions. The gift presented from Africa is an interesting case to approach from this perspective:

From Africa—a stone brought from the Turkana regions of eastern Kenya, considered by anthropologists and genetics to be the cradle of humanity. It represents God’s grace in creation and providence through the development of humankind.

The apparent reference to and acceptance of the theory of evolution in the context of a service would doubtless shock some Christians. This is a sensitive issue among Evangelicals and, to some extent, also among Pentecostals. In the “cultural clash” between liberals and conservatives that shaped much of Evangelical identity in the early twentieth century, response to the theory of evolution was one of the most burning issues. For many communities, this question has not disappeared from the agenda but continues to feature prominently in discussions of school curricula and apologetics.

What degree of theological sensitivity is possible or even desirable in a gathering of this kind? To many, perhaps the majority of Christians, evolution is a non-issue that calls to mind unwelcome associations with “unscientific” anti-evolutionists. Though alluding to the issue in only passing might serve to de-charge the question or protest against tendencies to reduce Christianity to two or three issues, it has the potential to alienate some of the people present. In worship, the “we” of the assembled congregation is defined. This symbolic action defined the “we” of the Porto Alegre Assembly as “people who accept the theory of evolution.” If the WCC wants to include more Pentecostal and Evangelical churches, greater awareness of issues sensitive to these traditions is needed.

The example also shows how difficult it is to avoid provocative issues. It is impossible to be aware of all “sore toes” present or to control the interpretation of every public remark or action. Rather than excluding the risk of provocation (which is impossible and perhaps not even desirable), the goal should be to avoid making any group feel particularly “harassed” by a pattern of provocations. An ongoing experience of provocation creates a defensive mood, increases suspicion, limits generosity and makes ecumenical dialogue near impossible. The problem in much ecumenical dialogue today, official and private, is that many

different, even opposite, groups feel "oppressed" at the same time. While some conservative groups feel that the WCC is governed by a "liberal" agenda, others are disturbed by an Orthodox influence that they regard as "out of proportion." While some worry about the "moral laxity" exported from the West (for example concerning issues of homosexuality and birth-control), others are alarmed at the expansion of "fundamentalist" Christian groups in many regions of the world. This wide-spread sense of being the harassed group makes difficult ecumenical dialogue, and stands as a great challenge in the continuing conversation.

An additional challenge is apparent in the representation of Europe and North America in symbolic action:

From Europe - a reindeer calfskin, a gift of the Sami herders, an indigenous people in the northern parts of Norway, Sweden, Finland and Russian. It represents the Sami's grateful pride in their own identity as their culture finally is affirmed by churches.

Few of the representations were more politically motivated than this. The Sami people are virtually unknown despite being in one sense the only indigenous people of Europe and having endured persecutions from both church and state. Similarly, a representative of the First Nations in North America presented sweetgrass, wheat, and corn. Though such representation before the whole world at the WCC Assembly provided recognition of great importance for these groups, it is worth asking whether it does not also indicate a particular ambivalence in the WCC towards Europe and the western world at large. After decades of dominance, it is reasonable that the West takes a step back, but new discrimination will not redeem earlier wrongdoings. It must be possible to be proud of your heritage and home also as a westerner. At the plenary presentation of the different regions, the presentation of the European delegates was met with less enthusiasm and even occasional booing from the rest of the plenary. This grieved many of the participants, particularly in light of the way Western regions were represented in the opening service, and left some wondering: Is there no gift from the mainstream of western cultures? This is a problem that the WCC will have to address, a problem that perhaps can be associated with the issue of identification with earthly kingdoms touched upon earlier.

The third part of the service, "Cries of the world", included prayers in connection to each region of the world. In these prayers, the world is clearly divided into victims and perpetrators. In the prayers from regions in the southern hemisphere the tendency is to ask God for protection from foreign oppressors:

Africa: We have come, a people not broken by centuries of exploitation, oppression, enslavement, poverty, disease and misrule, but held up by the great resilience, strength of spirit and mutual love with which you have so richly endowed us.

Carribbean: We come with our frustrations, and with our problems of pollution resulting from an exploitative tourism industry.

South America: We cry out for an end to all forms of violence. Violence which—often organized—is a response to foreign political and economic interests which pay no regard to our peoples' pain, suffering and rights... So often our water falls into the hands of foreign groups and interests. So often we have to breathe air polluted by foreign-owned industries... We cry out for... fair trade, without having to be subjected unilaterally to the interests of large corporations or the countries reckoned to be great.

Only the prayers from western regions included unconditional confession of sins.

Europe: We come aware of our rich heritage of civilization, culture, knowledge and spirituality—a tradition of life: liberty, democracy and human advancement; but also are fully aware that we carry a tradition of death: wars, conquest, exploitation, racism and genocide.

North America: We confess that we have trampled heavily on the earth; we have exploited its resources. We whose ancestors come from nations afar have not loved the First Nations as we love our self, nor have we respected any other ethnicity as we respect our own. We have been content to share in profits from the legacies of slavery and oppression. We have dominated others through religion, language, mass communications, economics, as well as by force of arms. Free us, Lord, from the sin of racism. Free us from our compulsion to despoil the earth. Free us from our thirst for violence. Free us from the hunger for revenge. Free us from our lust for empire. Free us from the scourge of war. Free us from self-satisfaction, and self-adoration.

The prayer from the Pacific stands out as the only southern region where the perpetrators are—at least in part—found within the community of speakers:²⁶

Pacific: We come before you in shame, O Lord. We are not good stewards of your islands nor dutiful keepers of your seas. We have desecrated and threatened your Creation.

Listening to these prayers produced an odd feeling of being in a classroom hearing a lecture about the state of the world that includes lengthy explanations about why things are the way they are, and made clear which parties are to blame. Who is addressed in such prayers? Is it God who needs to be enlightened or are the prayers utilized as a means to instruct the Assembly how to correctly interpret the world? This instrumentalization of worship brings to mind the critique of the Special Commission cited earlier:

26. This may simply be the result of the identification of countries within the region such as Australia and New Zealand as "western."

We are called to pray for justice and peace, yet we can distinguish between thematic prayer and prayer used to divide us further on social and political issues over which we have deep disagreement. Our common prayer is addressed to God, and is an invitation to listen to what God is trying to teach us. Among the concerns of the commission was also the tendency to “preach” to the Assembly on social and political issues. Apparently, this remark did not stop the WCC from continuing the preaching at Porto Alegre.

But let us move from these general remarks to a more specific critique of the theology of the prayers quoted above. While no one can deny the fact that the western countries to a large extent have exploited the rest of the world, we have to ask if the line between good and evil can really be drawn geographically. *Simul iustus et peccator*, both sinner and justified, said Luther. Does this not apply to all people? In these prayers, once again, the individual is categorized according to his/her nation/region/culture.

Furthermore, even if the world can be simplistically divided into victims and perpetrators, is region vs. region the right way to do it? Is it more reasonable that a minimum-wage worker at a large company in the USA apologizes for the damages he causes the world than a Brazilian farmer who cuts down rainforest to be able to feed his family? Is it not true that wars and exploitation take place without the involvement of the western world? Who apologizes for local African war-lords, South American dictators, and Arabian *muhajjin* warriors? In short, isn't the world a lot more complicated than the rhetoric of these prayers disclose? Orthodox theologian Emmanuel Clapsis criticizes the WCC for this tendency to simplify complicated political issues:

Christian declarations on political issues often have a degree of certainty. A modicum of caution is appropriate in looking at these, because political judgments in modern society are extraordinary ambiguous in nature. They can rarely be grasped in terms of simple, straightforward judgments.²⁷

There must be room for a “prophetic” voice within the WCC, a possibility for the organization to challenge the world (and though this departs from Orthodox recommendations, possibly even its member churches). The church should not be passive when injustice and atrocities are committed. But the prophetic spirit lies close to the sectarian spirit, and to over-simplify complicated issues in an attempt to describe the world in black and white is more akin to the latter!

The problem of alienation of Christians who feel differently about these issues also plays a part here. A harsh and one-sided assignment of blame will cause bitterness and lock people into their positions, leaving little opening for changes of mind.

In summary, the interconfessional opening prayer contained significant political content with a regionalistic flavor. This is problematic for a number of

27. Emmanuel Clapsis, *Orthodoxy in Conversation* (Geneva: WCC Publications, 2000), 222.

reasons. Does this suggest that a Christian should identify him or herself with a region/nation prior to identification with the kingdom of God? Is it pastorally responsible to divide a worshipping community into victims and perpetrators? It is of course possible to imagine times when this would be an appropriate prophetic stand, but awareness of globalization suggests that the line between exploiter and exploited ought to be drawn with more nuance.

The Anglican evening prayer

The worship instructions for the evening prayer on February 17 noted that this was “adapted from the Book of Common Prayer of the Episcopal Anglican Church of Brazil.” The service included the following elements:

- Introductory sentences on the joy of coming together to worship
- Confession of Sins
- Invitatory
- Psalm 100 (sung)
- Reading of Is. 61:1-4
- The Magnificat (sung)
- Reading of Rev. 22:1-5
- *Nunc Dimittis* (sung)
- Recitation of the Apostles Creed
- Intercessory Prayer for world leaders, Christian people, those who suffer, and the Assembly
- The Lord’s Prayer
- Hymn: “The Day Thou Gavest”
- Blessing: Prayer of St. Chrysostom

One notable element in the regular prayer services at the Assembly was that most of them included a significant number of readings. In this Anglican service, it was particularly obvious. Rather than one or two Bible verses to meditate on, it included whole passages and long, elaborately worded prayers. In many instances the main language of a service was unknown to many participants, requiring them to focus on the handouts available in the official languages of the Council.

The services did not seem to bear the mark of “a desire to avoid language,” already noted as a goal within the WCC worship tradition. This might be the result of the Orthodox criticism of symbolic actions and services of an “experimental character.” The return to confessional prayers might also have resulted in services of a sort not specifically adapted to the context of a WCC Assembly. As noted, one reason to avoid spoken or written language is the need for translation. Other forms of expression do not alienate in the same way and therefore encourage a feeling of oneness. Another reason is that with an Assembly schedule, evening prayers are held after a day of often tiring plenary sessions and negotiations. The abundance of words during the day makes reading through a long written agenda a rather unappealing endeavor. Also, since the songs in many cases are entirely

new, they don't provide the space for rest they might within a familiar tradition but require full focus on text and melody.

It is interesting to note that the two readings are taken from the same books of the Bible as two of the readings in the Opening prayer. In addition, Isaiah appeared twice in morning Bible studies (61:1-4, 65:17-25) and Revelations was used at least once more in an evening service and as the text for the closing sermon. As favorite texts of the Assembly, Isaiah (notably within chapters 56-66) and Revelations seem to function as a kind of "canon within the canon," especially concerning their prophetic words of a coming kingdom of joy.

The readings in the Anglican service (Is. 61:1-4 and Rev. 22:1-5) echo earlier references to "a new heavens and a new earth." The intercessory prayer refers back to these passages and offers an interpretation:

The prophet Isaiah foresaw the rebuilding of the land, and the recreation of a new society under God's rule. We pray to the Almighty Father that he may guide the nations upon earth into the ways of justice and peace... The Book of Revelation set before the Church a vision of God's Kingdom where the leaves of the tree of eternal life are for the healing of the nations. Let us pray that all Christian people may be bearers of God's light in the world, and agents of healing and reconciliation.

Historically, the unfortunate distinction between post- and pre-millennialism has resulted in two different distortions. One distortion is a passive or destructive attitude towards creation excused by the conviction that this will all perish when God's Kingdom is restored. The other is an over-optimistic view of what human nature and institutions can achieve that is often coupled with a materialistic inner-worldly perspective of the Kingdom of God. Generally, the WCC seems to strive for a sound middle-way between these two extremes; what is sometimes called a realized eschatology. According to this perspective, the Kingdom of God has started to break into the world, and it is our task to make it visible in us and in the world. It will not, however, be completed by our activity—only by Christ's return to the world in the last days. Both the Anglican-service readings can be interpreted in this way. But the WCC as whole can be accused of being a bit too inner-worldly when it comes to the proclamation of the Kingdom of God. The Kingdom of God is indeed justice, peace, food, and health-care for all, but this alone does not constitute the Kingdom of God. It is also the presence of God in the hearts of the people, the only thing that gives peace. While the lack of material resources is in many respects the greatest need in parts of the South, it is the spiritual poverty that is most alarming in the western world. This poverty is reflected in, among other things, skyrocketing sales numbers for anti-depressive medicine. This problem of the spiritually impoverished western world did not seem to be addressed in any significant way at the Porto Alegre Assembly.

In conclusion, this prayer service could not be described as exhibiting “a desire to avoid language,” though it may represent improvement in comparison with earlier Assemblies. Also, though many of the readings were connected to the biblical vision of a “new heaven and a new earth,” the general tendency of the WCC appears to approach reform primarily in a materialistic way.

The Pentecostal evening prayer

The Pentecostal service had a different choir and a different worship leader than the other prayers.²⁸ It included the following elements:

- Opening Music
- Words of Welcome (affective and informal)
- Song and Short Chant (repeated multiple times)
- Prayer for Forgiveness
- Song (repeated multiple times)
- “How Great Thou Art” (a choir performance familiar enough for many in the congregation to join in singing)
- Sermon
- Bible Readings (Rev. 2:19, Jh. 17:23, Jh. 13:34-35 and Rom. 14:17-18)
- Prayer (participants invited to pray aloud in groups of three or four)
- Blessing

This evening prayer service differed from the others in many respects. For one thing, the congregation read less texts (prayers, creeds, etc.) together. This reflects Pentecostal skepticism towards fixed agendas and written prayers that are sometimes viewed as a hindrance to the “free wind of the Spirit.” Also, the readings from the Bible were limited to one or two verses instead of lengthier passages common in the other services.

The Pentecostal prayer was the only evening prayer (aside from the opening and closing prayer) that included a sermon. Pastor Héctor Petrecca from Argentina gave the sermon in Spanish. As participants attempted to follow the distributed translation, his deviation from the written manuscript demonstrated another typical Pentecostal characteristic: spontaneity. The sermon included a mixture of deductive reasoning, examples in the form of stories and anecdotes, and even a few jokes.²⁹

The particular flavor of the South American Pentecostal movement characterized the whole service. While the Pentecostal movement in the USA has not been known for a strong social perspective, this is an important feature in the Pentecostal movement of South America. Early on in his sermon, Petrecca said: “The Gospel cannot be divided into social and spiritual.” In emphasizing the holistic character of the Gospel he countered one of the greatest theological

28. The worship leader was pastor Jorge Vaccaro.

29. For example: “Jesus did not only heal the sick and raise the dead, but he also blessed the children, defended the defenceless... and even did the cooking when the opportunity arose!”

deficiencies of much Pentecostal spirituality: the tendency to give priority to the spiritual in a way that completely ignores a theology of creation.

The service also included a prayer for forgiveness with two characteristics worth mentioning. First, when it expressed areas of lack, it did not simply say “we have not” but added the word “always” to make it “we have not *always*... been at one with others... shared our bread with the hungry,”³⁰ This seemingly minor difference significantly expresses the fact that even if our deeds are not complete, we should not deny the good things that we actually do. While perceiving the darkness in one’s own soul demands a certain strength, another kind of strength is needed to recognize goodness in oneself. The official message of the Assembly expresses the same sense with the words “We have *often* failed to take decisive action against environmental destruction, poverty, racism, caste-ism, war, and genocide.”³¹

The second thing to be noted in the prayer for forgiveness relates to the perspective of the prayer: Who are “we” who ask of forgiveness?

We ask your forgiveness for our ancestors who seized the resources of our original peoples and imposed the Gospel by force rather than by love. Forgive us the times when we have been part of the destruction of your creation, this earth of ours that you have placed in our care.

In this prayer, there is no depiction of North against South or division of the Assembly into perpetrators and victims. It is a common confession and a common cry for forgiveness. Further, the prayer of forgiveness comes from the church. This is a service of the Pentecostals from South America. They have a double reason to alienate themselves from the evils connected with the early European missionaries: they are of different nationality (they are South American, not Europeans), and they belong to a different church tradition than the ones who by force took Christianity to these parts of the world. Furthermore, the church that is most strongly associated with missionary activity in South America—the Roman Catholic Church—continues to be the dominant church of the region. Tensions between this powerful, established church and the young, expanding Pentecostal movement have at times been severe. At the same time, the possessive “our” is not used only in reference to the “violent ancestors” (thus implying that Christianity is European by nature), but also in reference to the “original people.” These formulations in the prayer for forgiveness indicate

30. Emphasis added.

31. Emphasis added. World Council of Churches Ninth Assembly, “‘God, in your Grace, Transform the World’ - Message of the 9th Assembly of the World Council of Churches: An Invitation to Prayer,” <http://www.wcc-assembly.info/en/theme-issues/Assembly-documents/1-statements-documents-adopted/christian-unity-and-message-to-the-churches/message-as-adopted.html> (accessed December 1, 2006). It is worth noting that the word “often” was added following a suggestion from one of the delegates during plenary discussions that was motivated by thoughts similar to those expressed in this article.

that the strongest identification of the worshippers is with the Kingdom of God (as found in the church) and not with a certain nation or culture. Finally, the church is understood not as a particular tradition, but as the whole body of Christ, all Christians everywhere. We take part in the good and the bad deeds of all the saints through the ages. Therefore we confess our sins together, not as discreet traditions. This strong affirmation of unity exemplifies how the praxis of the worship can go farther than the theory expressed in negotiations and documents.

At the end of the service, the participants were "invited to pray aloud in groups of three or four." This was the only time when an interactive element was included in a prayer at the Porto Alegre Assembly. Many services included singing and sung responses, and also a handing out of symbolic items (fruit to eat, sunflowers, etc.), but aside from this there was very little opportunity for active participation in the service or interaction between the worshippers. As noted earlier, both participation and interaction between worshippers have been distinctive marks of the WCC-worship tradition in the past.

The Pentecostal evening prayer service included some unique features that were not part of other prayer services at the Porto Alegre Assembly. The "sound" of the service took on an informal, affective tone and included far fewer readings. This might have served the needs of those who were tired from long negotiations better than a set of liturgical readings that were unfamiliar to most of the participants. Furthermore, the prayer for forgiveness did not explicitly put blame on any specific group so that the gathering's foremost identity as a Christian community was maintained.

General remarks concerning the worship at Porto Alegre

It may be helpful to offer some concluding remarks regarding the "clash" of the WCC worship tradition and the critique voiced by the Special Commission though I have alluded to some of them already (i.e. the issue of politics and instrumentalization of worship).

The use of symbols has been an important feature in the services at WCC gatherings. The Special Commission however leveled some critique of this praxis, pointing to the need to be clear about the meaning of the symbols and also not including symbols that could be perceived as expressions of syncretism. At the Porto Alegre Assembly, most symbols used were general and did not connect to non-Christian religions. The symbols were also clearly explained at all times. Every day had a certain symbol, and these were carefully presented in the worship book. For example:

Sunflower. For some indigenous peoples in Latin America the sunflower has become a symbol of resurrection. Rising from the ground, this flower turns towards the source of light in the heavens. Its bold colours and simple elegance testify to the original beauty of creation. Despite a long history of human transgression

that has sullied the planet and threatens the world entrusted to our care, the growth and flowering of each young plant reminds us of the potential for rebirth, renewal and, through the Creator's grace, the coming of a new heaven and a new earth (*Is. 65; Rev. 21*).

This appears to be the only reference to non-Christian religious tradition in the worship material, and it is done so mildly and in such a general way that it is hard to imagine anyone being offended. Nevertheless, though such long and explicit explanations go a long way in preventing misunderstandings, they are not entirely unproblematic. Christians, especially in the Orthodox tradition, have long been aware of the shortcomings of spoken language. Symbolic and artistic expressions have often functioned as ways to refer to the divine without implying that they expressed the mystery of God exhaustively. Master iconographers and poets such as Ephrem the Syrian and John Damascene are outstanding examples. Symbols possess an unspoken, perhaps even unspeakable, dimension that connects with our imagination and creativity. If we try to express the full meaning of a symbol, however, we close the door to this dimension and the thing is transformed from a symbol to a sign.³² It loses the peculiar characteristic that made it most valuable: its ability to speak to us about the unspeakable. Therefore, attempts to explain the meaning of a symbol fully actually reduce its efficaciousness.

Special Commission recommendations restricting the use of symbols and experimental worship may in fact be detrimental to the spiritual life of the WCC. The value of symbols in the life of Christian worship is apparent in the central action of the Eucharist. Words conceptualize reality in a way that is foreign to human understanding. Symbols can often express paradoxes much better than mere words, since a word always is defined by its opposite—what it is not. This difference becomes especially important in relation to the divine. Symbols and symbolic actions is a way of creating an integrated and holistic presentation of reality, and our place in it. But if one attempts to translate symbols exhaustively into words and explanations, these dimensions are lost. Christian worship needs symbolic language, and until a common Eucharist is possible, creative and experimental modes of engagement are sorely needed.

The WCC worship tradition encourages participation from clergy and lay leaders as well as from the congregation. During the services, people participated from the podium by reading texts, praying, presenting a symbol, preaching, and singing. These included both lay and ordained, both men and women, and a variety of age ranges. Here, the WCC tradition was preserved. Participation from the congregation, however, was generally restricted to sung responses. This differed from previous WCC gatherings that encouraged congregational participation in symbolic actions such as hammering small notes on wooden crosses.

32. Rudolf Otto has elaborated on the differences between sign and symbol.

The reason for this change is not clear. There is nothing explicit against congregational participation in the report from the Special Commission. It may be that the recommendation that services should not be “of experimental character” and the shift to confessional prayers had an unexpected consequence. Many of the older church traditions have heritages of clerical orientation with relatively little room for active participation aside from sharing in the Eucharist (which, of course, is not yet possible in WCC services). It hardly seems coincidental that the most clearly interactive element in these case studies came from a younger spiritual tradition, namely Pentecostalism.

Criticism from the Special Commission regarding the use of inclusive language in reference to God are similar to the guidelines for worship at the Seventh Assembly (Canberra, 1991). The difference is a matter of emphasis rather than content. The Canberra guidelines advise worship leaders to avoid “personal pronouns in reference to the persons of the Trinity whenever possible” while at the same time warning against substitutions for the Trinitarian formula such as Creator, Redeemer, Sanctifier.³³ The Special Commission warns against gender-inclusive language but at the same time encourages more attentiveness to the “feminine” images of God found in the Bible.³⁴ It also makes a critical distinction between the image of God and the name of God based on an earlier Faith and Order Paper, *Confessing One Faith*.³⁵ Images of God proliferate in descriptions of divine activity in history and include a wide variety of acceptable metaphors. But when referring to the name of God, “the revealed and biblical names for God—Father, Son and Holy Spirit—should be used”.³⁶ This recommendation seems to address the need felt by some for linguistic renewal while avoiding distortion of the tradition.

The official prayer services at Porto Alegre tended to use traditional language for speaking about God. At a prayer in the chapel at the campus, however, I was blessed in the name of the “Creator, Redeemer and Sanctifier.” Services in this chapel were not a part of the official program and thus were not subject to the same restrictions. Occasions such as this indicate that some of the delegates at Porto Alegre do prefer more inclusive language.

33. Harling, *Worshipping Ecumenically*, 3.

34. WCC Central Committee, *Final Report of the Special Commission on Orthodox Participation*, “Appendix A,” §33-35, <http://www2.wcc-coe.org/ccdocuments.nsf/index/gen-5-en.html> (accessed December 1, 2006).

35. WCC Faith and Order Paper No. 153, *Confessing the One Faith : An Ecumenical Explication of the Apostolic Faith as it is Confessed in the Nicene-Constantinopolitan Creed (381)* (Geneva: WCC, 1991), §50-52

36. WCC Central Committee, *Final Report of the Special Commission on Orthodox Participation*, “Appendix A,” §34.

SUMMARY

The worship at the WCC General Assembly in Porto Alegre, from the perspective of this Pentecostal observer, did not live up to the reputation of vitality and innovative creativity of the WCC worship tradition expressed most clearly at Vancouver 1983. While Harling could note how the worship tent at Canberra 1991 brought more and more people each day,³⁷ the opposite seemed true to me at Porto Alegre.

The crisis of regarding Orthodox participation that surfaced at Harare 1998 identified the issue of worship as a major concern. The two points I have described as most problematic about the worship at Porto Alegre relate to the Special Commission in different ways. The first one could have been avoided if the recommendations from the Special Commission were followed more carefully, while the second stems from adherence to the recommendations. First, I side with the critique of the Special Commission that the inclusion of political and social issues in the services is unwise and tends to oversimplify. This is not to say that this aspect should be excluded from the worship completely, but rather that it should be handled with greater care. I submit that the Pentecostal evening service provides a positive example in this regard. Second, I disagree with the Special Commission's attempt to restrain the use of symbolic actions and experimental worship forms in the common prayer life of the WCC. Symbolic elements are vital to Christian worship—and so also to ecumenical worship—and may further unity by encouraging the creation of and common participation in new symbols and forms.

If I have correctly assessed this crisis, what is the way forward for the WCC worship tradition? One option is to draw more extensively from existing ecumenical grassroots movements³⁸ instead of specific confessional traditions. These grassroots movements provide vital forms of worship (therein lies the key to their apparent success), forms developed with particular attention to our present context and often ecumenical by nature. These movements typically do not belong to any one tradition, but gather people and inspiration from different church traditions. This approach would also provide the WCC with better connections to ecumenical grassroots movements across the board.

It is surely no coincidence that it was the highly praxis-oriented Orthodox who remarked that the worship at the WCC as an action actually expressed a higher degree of unity than what was achieved through the negotiations. Harmony between dogma and liturgy is essential—*lex orandi, lex credendi* (as the prayer

37. Harling, *Worshipping Ecumenically*, 8.

38. Taizé, Iona, Focolare, the "emerging church movement," etc.

so is the faith). Some of the changes in worship at Porto Alegre were intended to resolve perceived disharmony by adjusting liturgical practice to cohere with dogmatic assertions. Might it be possible to move in the other direction, allowing experiences of unity in worship to inform dogma and allowing ecumenical praxis to be the source of ecumenical theory?