

RESEARCH ARTICLE

Dialogue or Confession? Ecumenical Responsibility and the War in Ukraine

Keith Clements

Former General Secretary, Conference of European Churches and Emeritus Board Member, International
Bonhoeffer Society

Email: keithclements128@gmail.com

(Received 21 June 2023; revised 3 July 2023; accepted 4 July 2023; first published online 26 July 2023)

Abstract

While the Russian invasion of Ukraine has been overwhelmingly condemned by the churches of the world, the support of the Russian Orthodox Church for the war poses difficult questions to the ecumenical community: in particular, whether that church's support for the war and the extreme nationalist policies of President Putin constitute grounds for suspending it from the World Council of Churches (WCC) and other ecumenical bodies. The current ecumenical emphasis upon 'dialogue' acts as a deterrent to such action, but the WCC describes itself as a fellowship of churches that confess Christ as God and Saviour and therefore supreme over all other authorities. There are parallels with previous challenges in ecumenical history, most particularly 1930s Germany and the stand of the Confessing Church. While dialogue has its own importance the prime ecumenical commitment in conflict situations is to confess Christ, whatever the risks of division that this incurs.

Keywords: Bonhoeffer; Confessing Church; dialogue; ecumenism; Russian Orthodox; Ukraine; war; WCC

The Russian invasion of Ukraine, which was launched on 24 February 2022, has inaugurated a war unmatched by any in Europe since World War II for its brutality and the extent of human suffering. While located in Europe, the conflict has global implications. By its evident disregard for international law and humanitarian obligations towards civilian populations the invasion is challenging the whole international community on its moral responsibility to counter aggression and to aid the victims of conflict, as may be seen from the immediate responses of the United Nations (UN) in the first few days of the conflict. Those responses comprised: the opening, by the prosecutor of the International Criminal Court, of an investigation for war crimes and crimes against humanity; a resolution by the UN General Assembly deploring the aggression committed by Russia against Ukraine (141 votes in favour, 5 against and 35 abstentions)¹ and a resolution adopted by the

¹Countries that voted against were the Russian Federation, Belarus, North Korea, Nicaragua and Syria. Those abstaining included China, South Africa, India, Pakistan, Bangladesh and Sri Lanka.



UN Human Rights Council calling for the swift and verifiable withdrawal of Russian troops and Russian-backed armed forces from the entire territory of Ukraine. The overall weight of world opinion is thus condemnatory of the Russian ‘special military operation’ and is in agreement on where the prime responsibility for the war lies. Votes against or abstentions were mostly located in the global south, and there are continuing debates about the historical factors and the wider geopolitical issues in the conflict. At present (May 2023) there is no sign of a resolution of the conflict, with both Ukraine and Russia determinedly seeking to strengthen their military capabilities.

The churches and ecumenical bodies at large, in line with the UN resolutions, have been notably united in deploring the invasion and its devastating consequences, and in responding to the humanitarian crisis, which has created over 5 million refugees in Europe. At the same time, the war presents a huge challenge to the conscience of the churches in their vocation to be agents of justice, peace and reconciliation. The challenge is made even greater by the perceived stance of the church, which is most closely related to the government and people of Russia, namely the Russian Orthodox Church (ROC). In the early stages of the war, the evident silence of its leadership and certain of its statements, drew the accusation of acquiescence and effective support for the war aims and policy of President Putin. Now (May 2023) support for the war by the head of the ROC, His Holiness Patriarch Kirill, has become declared and explicit. On 28 April he was reported as stating that dissent from the war should be regarded as treason. On 9 May, ‘Victory Day’ in Moscow, he publicly urged the Russian armed forces to continue their ‘war of defence’ in Ukraine, just as Ukrainian cities were being subjected to renewed aerial bombardment: ‘We are called to defend our country, and this alone should mobilise our spirit and strengthen love for our Fatherland, making us fearless, strong and capable like our ancestors.’ ‘Russia is one of the truly independent countries, and our armed forces must be invincible, so that we do not depend on anyone, remain free, and can arrange our lives according to our people’s will.’² He recalled the patriotic role the ROC had played during the 1940s in rallying the people to the defence of Russia against Nazi Germany, despite being persecuted by the communist state at the time. ‘Our prayer is for our Fatherland’s prosperity, for our President, the authorities, army and whole people, so the Lord will help keep us all in unanimity.’

Any attempts by the churches at large and the ecumenical fellowship to promote peace and reconciliation between Russia, Ukraine and the wider world requires that their relationship with the ROC must be examined with honesty, truthfulness and integrity, in faithfulness to the gospel of Christ. This paper seeks to understand what faithful obedience requires, especially in the present context where ‘dialogue’ is being promoted as the key element in the churches’ witness for peace.

Church and Ecumenical Responses

Almost immediately on the launch of the invasion, the WCC Acting General Secretary Professor Dr Ioan Sauca issued a statement:

²Quoted in article by Jonathan Luxmoore, *Church Times*, 12 May 2023.

The World Council of Churches denounces any and every use of deadly armed force to resolve disputes that could be resolved by dialogue. We firmly believe that dialogue – based on the principles of international law and respect for established international borders – was and is the proper path for the resolution of tensions surrounding Ukraine.³

The statement goes on to call for an immediate end to the armed hostilities, with protection for all affected by the violence, and all churches and people of goodwill around the world to pray for peace.

At its meeting in Brussels on 23 May 2022 the Governing Board of the Conference of European Churches (CEC) issued a statement condemning the Russian aggression and calling for peace and a strong alliance of Christian solidarity. It affirmed ‘the need for an immediate ceasefire, a diplomatic solution through international law, respect of borders, self-determination of people, respect for truth and the primacy of dialogue over violence’. The president of the CEC, Pastor Christian Krieger (who is also president of the Protestant Federation of France) had written to the head of the Russian Orthodox Church His Holiness Patriarch Kirill, appealing for a clear word against the Russian aggression: ‘I am disheartened by your daunting silence on the unprovoked war your country declared against another country, which is home to millions of Christians, including Orthodox Christians that belong to your flock.’⁴

The statement of the WCC Central Committee meeting in Geneva, 15–18 June 2022, repeats earlier condemnations of the war, drawing attention to the WCC 2011 document *Ecumenical Call for Just Peace* and, warning against any misuse of religious language to justify or support armed aggression, states that ‘A fresh and critical analysis of the Christian faith in its relation to politics, the nation and nationalism is urgently called for.’ It further states:

Especially from an ecumenical perspective, encounter and dialogue is of central importance in such a situation, and we underline the observation made by participants in the second roundtable meeting convened by the WCC on 10 June 2022, that, ‘the calling to dialogue, encounter, and the pursuit of mutual understanding is the very essence of ecumenism. Division and exclusion is the antithesis of the purpose of our movement.’ We acknowledge and welcome the commitment of the Moscow Patriarchate – representing the WCC’s constituency in both Russia and Ukraine – to engage in encounter and dialogue under the auspices of the WCC, though circumstances prevented them from taking part in either of the two roundtable meetings so far convened. However, dialogue remains an obvious urgent necessity to address such a critical situation for the people of Ukraine, for the future of the world, and for the ecumenical movement.⁵

³‘WCC Calls for an Immediate End to the Current Armed Hostilities’, WCC Press Release, 24 February 2022.

⁴‘CEC Governing Board Endorses Call for Peace with Justice in Ukraine’, CEC Press Release, 24 May 2022.

⁵‘Statement by the WCC Central Committee on the War in Ukraine’, WCC Press Release, 18 June 2022.

At the WCC 11th Assembly in Karlsruhe, Germany, in September 2022 there was an intensive plenary debate on the war in Ukraine. The resolution that was adopted included the following statements:

As the central committee meeting in June observed, the WCC has a critical role to play in accompanying its member churches in the region and as a platform and safe space for encounter and dialogue in order to address the many pressing issues for the world and for the ecumenical movement arising from this conflict. We *underline* this calling and the obligation of WCC members to seek unity and together serve the world.

The presence of church representatives from Ukraine and the delegation of the Russian Orthodox Church, together with delegates and participants from WCC member churches and ecumenical partners from elsewhere in Europe and from all regions of the world, has served as a practical opportunity for that encounter. We *commit* ourselves to an intensified dialogue on the issues that divide us – a core purpose of the WCC. For the issues raised by this conflict are indeed deep and fundamental, both for the ecumenical movement and for the wider world, and warrant intensive and sustained dialogue to address.

We *call* upon the WCC, together with its member churches, to continue its approach of clarity and dialogue, we encourage round tables and other formats which can contribute to finding solutions to the conflict and its repercussions.

We *commit ourselves* to holding one another accountable for maintaining the bond of unity in Christ. The WCC has a critical role to play in accompanying its member churches in the region and as a platform and safe space for encounter and dialogue in order to address the many pressing issues for the world and for the ecumenical movement arising from this conflict. We *underline* this calling and the obligation of WCC members to seek unity and together serve the world.⁶

On 17 May 2023, a WCC leadership team, including newly appointed General Secretary Dr Jerry Pillay, following consultation with both the Ukrainian Orthodox Church and the Orthodox Church of Ukraine, visited Moscow to discuss engagement with the ROC in dialogue processes convened by the WCC on consolidation and unity in Ukrainian society, and ‘to discuss engagement also by the Russian Orthodox Church in dialogue on the war and its consequences, including with regard to the deep divisions in the Orthodox family in this context’. The press report states that in his meeting with Patriarch Kirill, Dr Pillay identified four important reasons for the visit: the need to bring an end to the current war; to work for the unity of the Orthodox family; to discuss the role of the churches in peacebuilding, and ‘to propose an initial roundtable dialogue meeting to address these issues, with the participation of all parties concerned’.

⁶‘WCC Statement on War in Ukraine Deplores “Illegal and Unjustifiable” Invasion, Calls for Ceasefire’, WCC Press Release, 8 September 2022. Emphases in original text.

Reflecting on the meeting, Dr Pillay recognized the significant challenges that efforts for dialogue must overcome. 'It is clear that perspectives on the conflict, its causes, and the path towards a just peace remain highly polarized.' However, he concluded, 'this only underlines the critical importance of efforts to create safe spaces for dialogue, and for the WCC this must start with attempts to bridge the intra-Orthodox divide which mirrors the current geopolitical confrontation. This is the very essence of WCC's purpose and calling; said Pillay, 'to be an instrument of dialogue among the churches on the issues that divide us. We are committed to the Christian calling to be peacemakers, and faced with the situation in Ukraine and in the world today, the churches must struggle together to answer that calling'.⁷

Ecumenical bodies such as the WCC and CEC are thus clearly mindful of the immensity of the task of peacebuilding and the complexity of the situation

Dialogue Unconditional?

It is notable, however, that in these statements the promotion of 'dialogue' is repeatedly seen as both the method and goal of the ecumenical task, to the point of its being viewed as the *very essence of ecumenism*, division and exclusion being the antithesis of its purpose. Notwithstanding the high importance of dialogue in the ecumenical calling, however, it has to be asked whether dialogue is feasible in all circumstances, and moreover whether it truly is to be regarded as the very heart, the *esse*, of ecumenism. This question raises concerns not only about the war in Ukraine but about what kind of organizations, in their nature and purpose, are the WCC and other ecumenical bodies based on like principles. The actual basis of the WCC should be noted:

The World Council of Churches is a fellowship of churches which confess the Lord Jesus Christ as God and Saviour according to the scriptures and therefore seek to fulfil together their common calling to the glory of the one God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

The Conference of European Churches has the same stated basis, 'a fellowship of churches which confess the Lord Jesus Christ as God and Saviour according to the scriptures . . . '. The WCC constitution continues:

The primary purpose of the fellowship of churches in the World Council of Churches is to call one another to visible unity in on faith and in one eucharistic fellowship, expressed in worship and common life in Christ, through witness and service to the world, and to advance towards that unity in order that the world may believe.

⁷WCC General Secretary after the Visit to Moscow "WCC to Be an Instrument of Dialogue", WCC Press Release, 18 May 2023.

In seeking *koinonia* in faith and life, witness and service, the churches through the Council will:

- promote the prayerful search for forgiveness and reconciliation in a spirit of mutual accountability, the development of deeper relationships through theological dialogue, and the sharing of human, spiritual and material resources with one another;
- facilitate common witness in each place and in all places, and support each other in their work for mission and evangelism;
- express their commitment to *diakonia* in serving human need, breaking down barriers between people, promoting one human family in justice and peace, and upholding the integrity of creation, so that all may experience the fullness of life;
- nurture the growth of an ecumenical consciousness through processes of education and a vision of life in community rooted in each particular cultural context;
- assist each other in their relationships to and with people of other faith communities;
- foster renewal and growth in unity, worship, mission and service.

The WCC basis thus lists ‘theological dialogue’ in ‘mutual accountability’ as *one* of the means by which the primary purpose of the Council is fulfilled, along with activities promoting common witness, *diakonia*, the integrity of creation, and life in unity, mission and service. Doubtless it assumes that theological dialogue takes various forms and is embodied in specific programmes. Dialogue, unqualified, however, is not stated to be *the* essential or core purpose of the WCC’s existence, which is to seek unity *in the confession of Jesus Christ as God and Saviour*, and it is within that confessing act that mutual accountability is set. It is accountability in confessing that is crucial.

Confessing Christ

If ecumenical organizations are fellowships of churches which confess Jesus Christ as God and Saviour, then they are themselves confessing fellowships, and the confession of Christ supplies the basis and criterion for the validity and aims of all their enterprises. Every activity, including dialogue, must be assessed according to whether it serves and reflects the stated basis and core of the ecumenical enterprise, namely, to confess Jesus Christ as God and Saviour. Dialogue may indeed serve that purpose. Equally, it may serve as a means for evading or obscuring that purpose, most especially when regarded as a good end in itself.

The term ‘confess’ has its roots in the Greek New Testament verb *homologeîn*, which means ‘confess’ in the sense of ‘agreeing to’ or ‘promise to’ or ‘intentionally or avowedly’ adhere to a declaration; or, in the form *exomologeîn* – to ‘confess in full’ or even ‘praise’, ‘celebrate’:

... so that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue should confess [*exomologēsetai*] that Jesus Christ is Lord. (Phil. 2.10-11)

... if you confess [*homologēsēs*] with your lips that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved. (Rom. 10.9)

In both texts, it could even be argued that the actual order of words in the original Greek of 'Jesus Christ is Lord' suggests a certain emphasis: 'The one who is to be regarded as Lord is Jesus [Christ].' The confession of Jesus Christ is thus not just a formal assent to a doctrine, but an intentional, avowed commitment to his claims of lordship over oneself and all things. It is the baptismal vow of immersion into and identification with Christ, for life and for death. And because it is a full acknowledgment of Christ as *Lord* the confession is inherently polemical: *he, and no other*, is to be regarded as Lord: not Caesar, not the empire or any of its appointed sub-authorities, nor any of the powers – whether angelic, human or superhuman – to whom incense is offered to placate their anger or from whom guarantees of human well-being are sought. Confession requires a continual discernment of where the loyalty of the believing Christian and the Christian community lies, and where false demands for loyalty are being temptingly offered.

The calling to confess Christ has in fact for many years been stated to be central to the ecumenical movement. It came to full verbal expression at the 5th Assembly of the WCC in Nairobi in 1975 with the report of the Faith and Order study 'Confessing Christ Today' and the recommendations by the Assembly for its follow-up. The report affirms confession as an act of *conversion*, which leads us into discipleship in all its risk and cost, and into the search for authentic faith, albeit with diverse cultural expressions. Significantly, it warns against *structures in church and society*, which militate against the full confession of Christ. It affirms that confession is both intensely personal and essentially communal. Four paragraphs in particular may be read as still pertinent nearly fifty years later, and especially in the currently difficult ecumenical and world context:

34. Through word, sacrament and pastoral care [the Holy Spirit] transforms us, makes us grow, and leads us to the integration of worship and action. This power fills our weakness.

35. Confessing Christ *today* means that the Spirit makes us struggle with all the issues this Assembly has talked about: sin and forgiveness, power and powerlessness, exploitation and misery, the universal search for identity, the widespread loss of Christian motivation, and the spiritual longings of those who have not heard Christ's name.

36. It means that we are in a communion with the prophets who announced God's will and promise for humankind and society, with the martyrs who sealed their confession with suffering and death, and also with the doubtful who can only whisper their confession of the Name. The confession of Christ holds in one communion our divided churches and the many communities, new and old, within and round them.

37. When the Holy Spirit empowers us to confess Christ today, we are called to speak and act with concern and solidarity for the whole of God's creation. Concretely: when the powerful confess Christ, the suffering must be enabled to concur; when the exploited confess Christ, the rich should be enabled to hear in such confession their own freedom announced.⁸

The Confessing Church

The earliest versions of the basis of the WCC, inaugurated in 1948, spoke of a fellowship of churches which 'accept' Jesus Christ as God and Saviour. Along with other changes of wording the replacement of 'accept' by the much stronger 'confess' was adopted at the 3rd WCC Assembly in New Delhi in 1961 (at which, incidentally, the Russian Orthodox Church was accepted into membership). Among the influences behind this change was undoubtedly the story of the German churches under Nazism and the formation of the Confessing Church in 1934, in opposition to the attempt by the pro-Nazi 'German Christian' movement to impose upon the Evangelical (Protestant) Church an order and set of beliefs reflecting the Nazi racial ideology and form of leadership. Those opposed to these measures believed that the demands of the German Christians had brought about a crisis, which in historic Reformation terms amounted to a *status confessionis*, a situation in which the Gospel of Christ itself, no less, was at stake and was being threatened by heresy, and had to be confessed in resistance. This resulted in the formation of the Confessing Church in May 1934, with the promulgation of the Barmen Theological Declaration, largely the work of Karl Barth, with its famous first thesis:

Jesus Christ, as he is attested for us in Holy Scripture, is the one Word of God which we have to hear, and which we have to trust and obey in life and in death. We reject the false doctrine, as though the church could and would have to acknowledge as a source of its proclamation, apart from and besides this one Word of God, still other events and powers, figures and truths, as God's revelation.⁹

The Barmen Declaration and the stance of the Confessing Church (notwithstanding its place amid the complexities and ambiguities of the German scene at the time) was a major stimulus for the growing ecumenical movement of the 1930s and the formation of the WCC, and it has continued to resonate with churches witnessing in contexts of injustice and conflict, notably in South Africa where the issue of apartheid oppressively dividing both church and society as a *status confessionis* was highlighted from the 1960s onwards. This indeed resulted in a severance of relations between some major white-led churches and the WCC and some world confessional fellowships, until the fall of apartheid in the 1990s. In Latin America,

⁸Confessing Christ Today: Report and Recommendations of Section I', in H.-G. Link (ed.), *Apostolic Faith Today: A Handbook for Study* (Geneva: WCC, 1985), p. 127.

⁹From the English version of the Declaration translated by A.C. Cochrane, in Ferdinand Schlingensiepen, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer 1906–1945* (trans. Isabel Best; London: T. & T. Clark, 2010), p. 409.

North America, Asia as well as Europe the echoes of the German Struggle have continued to be heard.

The most stalwart and celebrated advocate of the Confessing Church, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, viewed the Barmen Declaration as the unequivocal challenge for the church in Germany to decide whether it was truly the church of Jesus Christ or, by allowing unchristian – indeed pagan – criteria for membership and practices, was the church of Anti-Christ: replacing the lordship of Christ with subservience to the forces of nationalism, racism and militarism. Equally he saw it as no less a challenge to the ecumenical movement: which church in Germany would it welcome to the international ecumenical table?¹⁰ It is not surprising that parallels can be drawn between the German church scene under Hitler and the situation of the Russian Church under the autocratic nationalist regime of President Putin. Confessing Church leaders and theologians like Bonhoeffer argued that by its effective denial of the lordship of Christ the official ‘Reich Church’ had no place in ecumenical fellowship, and that only the Confessing Church could be accepted as the true representative of Protestantism in Germany. So too, it is being argued today, it is the case with the Russian Orthodox Church under the leadership of His Holiness Patriarch Kirill, which by its stance on the war in Ukraine has made it hard to see the lordship of Christ and has thereby dismembered itself from ecumenical community. It is a very grave, but unavoidable, question. The case against Patriarch Kirill’s response to the Russian invasion of Ukraine is that in setting aside any considerations other than that of national self-interest as determined by President Putin, allowing the launch of a devastating war to go unchallenged and then unequivocally praised, the ROC leadership did not confess Christ as God and Saviour before the world, thereby sundering the fellowship of the WCC and other ecumenical bodies as a community of churches which are united in their confession of Jesus Christ. In April 2002 the former Archbishop of Canterbury Rowan Williams stated:

The case for expelling is a strong one, and I have a suspicion that some other Orthodox Churches would take the same view. Many in the Orthodox world feel that Orthodoxy itself is compromised . . . The riot act has to be read. When a Church is actively supporting a war of aggression, failing to condemn nakedly obvious breaches in any kind of ethical conduct in wartime, when other Churches have the right to raise the question and challenge it – to say, unless you can say something effective and recognisably Christian, we have to look again at your membership.¹¹

Unworthy Servants, Faithful Confessing

Immediately, however, objections are raised that such a response is overly judgmental: the ecumenical fellowship is not a court of judgment and blame; if there is a danger of Russian heresy, there is equally a danger of ecumenical hypocrisy; the

¹⁰See Keith Clements, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer’s Ecumenical Quest* (Geneva: World Council of Churches, 2015), pp. 165-74.

¹¹Report of BBC Radio interview, *Church Times*, 5 April 2022 (article by Jonathan Luxmoore).

primacy of dialogue must be maintained. For, which church can claim that it is without sin in its witness to Christ? Which church is not to some extent shamed by its compromises, evasions and failures especially when it comes to matters of justice, peace and war? To this it may be said that of course no church is innocent or angelically praiseworthy here. This can be conceded unreservedly, if painfully. But it is one thing when a church is stumbling fitfully in response to the call of its Lord. It is quite another when it appears to be rejecting or disregarding that call as such. While many churches and disciples will readily admit that 'we are unworthy servants' (Lk. 17.10) it is of quite another order in effect to say 'we have no ruler but Caesar' (Jn 19.15). That is the allegation against the ROC leadership in regard to the invasion of Ukraine, and it cannot be sidestepped simply by calling for 'dialogue' as if this was an unconditional good. If there *is* to be dialogue, it must be focused on what it means to confess Christ concretely in that situation. Otherwise, what is the point of dialogue? What will it be about? It cannot be allowed to evaporate into an endless exchange of theological principles and generalities about the wider context, about the iniquities of war and the need for peace in the world today, about church-state relations and deep-rooted sources of conflict, about nationalism, with endless ruminations about the proper role of the churches in relation to the state, and so on. There has been repeated discussion and writing on these matters for decades, more than enough already. Such endless dialogue is an evasion of the confession. Any meaningful exchange has to be about *this* war (or 'special military operation') and *its* consequences of devastation, suffering and death unleashed upon Ukraine and Russia, and about what peacebuilding and reconciliation entail in *this* case. It has to examine the ROC's perceived acquiescence on and after 24 February 2022, and Patriarch Kirill's latest pronouncements. Is this to relapse into self-righteous condemnation? Not if we recall St Paul's injunction: 'If anyone is detected in a transgression, you who have received the Spirit should restore such a one in a spirit of gentleness. Take care that you yourselves are not tempted. Bear one another's burdens, and in this way, you will fulfil the law of Christ' (Gal. 6.1-2). But first the fact of it being a burden needs to be *acknowledged* by the person or community bearing it. Until a response comes we must, if not actually breaking off relations, continue either in a waiting silence in hope of an eventual prophetic stance from the ROC. Or else enter into an intense and critical discussion with the ROC of the kind indicated above. Should not the ecumenical community be prepared to put itself in place of the ROC and say what it believes the ROC should be saying to Russia and the world? Or is this to risk sundering the ecumenical fellowship? But that fellowship is already at great risk thanks to the apparent refusal by one member to confess the lordship of Christ in its critical situation. Instead of talking only about the risk to the ecumenical fellowship, we should be talking about the *opportunity* presented by the crisis for the fellowship to find what it really stands for, beyond its own harmony and self-preservation, namely the truth in light of Christ.

The ecumenical movement has a significant record in daring to take this kind of risk. At crucial points it has survived and advanced precisely because churches and Christians either resisted dictatorship and nationalist, racist and militarist pressures, or acknowledged and repented of their mistakes in giving way to them. In 1919, the World Alliance for International Friendship Through the Churches, one of the organizations that engendered the WCC, held its first post-war meeting at Oud

Wassenaar in the Netherlands. Suspicion, bitterness and recrimination were still rife, especially between the French and the Germans. The meeting would have collapsed completely had not the Germans present issued a statement that they believed the invasion of Belgium in 1914 to have been morally wrong. Even more striking was the declaration by the German Protestant leaders at their meeting with representatives of the infant WCC at Stuttgart in October 1945, so soon after the defeat of Nazi Germany:

With great pain do we say: *through us* has endless suffering been brought to many people and countries. What we have often borne witness to before our congregations that we declare in the name of the whole church . . . *We accuse ourselves* for not witnessing more courageously¹²

The ‘us’ and ‘ourselves’ included even Confessing Church leaders, like Martin Niemöller who had been imprisoned by Hitler for seven years in a concentration camp. The Stuttgart Declaration was controversial both at the time (many Germans in the misery of defeat and chaos saw no particular guilt to be acknowledged) and afterwards (critics have pointed out how little it actually said about Nazi crimes especially against the Jews). But it signalled a readiness to confess the past and an openness for a new beginning, without which post-war reconciliation would not have advanced in the way it did. Added to this must be the examples of courageous prophets who publicly protested against the policies of their own governments. An outstanding example was the Anglican Bishop George Bell, who in 1944 caused great public controversy by speaking out against the British and American obliteration bombing of German cities. Bell, a leading ecumenist and a founding figure of the WCC, warned that although he was a bishop of the established church he did not wish to be regarded as simply a mouthpiece for the British government. Then there is the catalogue of churches repenting of their sinful complicity in racial oppression in apartheid South Africa or in social and economic oppression in Latin America. The churches of the ecumenical movement have a notable tradition of declaring against state injustice, from which encouragement can be drawn for this present challenge.

Prophetic Witness under Autocracy?

Is it, however, legitimate for the wider Christian fellowship to ask for a prophetic witness against the injustices committed by an autocratic regime when the likely cost of that witness will not fall directly on members of the outside community but on the ROC itself, or on prophetic figures within it?¹³ It may be argued that the Orthodox tradition of the ‘symphony’ between church and state allows no room for prophetic questioning or criticism of the state’s actions by the Church. There is

¹²W.A. Visser’t Hooft, *Memoirs* (London: SCM Press 1973, and Geneva: WCC, 1987), p. 192 (emphases mine).

¹³For an informed and disturbing account of the full extent of the oppressively nationalist and authoritarian regime of Vladimir Putin see Mikhail Shishkin, *My Russia: War or Peace?* (London: Riverrun/Quercus Publishing, 2023).

indeed a strong affirmation of patriotism and loyalty to the state in Orthodox teaching. But the careful wording in the *Bases of the Social Concept of the Russian Orthodox Church*, should be noted:

III.5. Given their different natures, Church and State use different means for attaining their goals. The state relies basically on material power including coercion and on respective secular ideological systems, whereas the Church has at her disposal religious and moral means to give spiritual guidance to the flock and to attract new children.

The Church infallibly preaches the Truth of Christ and teaches moral commandments which came from God Himself. Therefore, she has no power to change anything in her teaching. Nor has she the power to fall silent and to stop preaching the truth whatever other teachings may be prescribed or propagated by state bodies. In this respect, the Church is absolutely free from the state. For the sake of the unhindered and internally free preaching of the truth, the Church suffered persecution by the enemies of Christ not once in history. But the persecuted Church is also called to endure the persecution with patience, without refusing to be loyal to the state persecuting her. . . .

The Church remains loyal to the state, but God's commandment to fulfil the task of salvation in any situation and under any circumstances is above this loyalty.

If the authority forces Orthodox believers to apostatise from Christ and His Church and to commit sinful and spiritually harmful actions, the Church should refuse to obey the State. The Christian, following the will of his conscience, can refuse to fulfil the commands of state forcing him into a grave sin. If the Church and her holy authorities find it impossible to obey state laws and orders, after a due consideration of the problem, they may take the following action: enter into direct dialogue with authority on the problem, call upon the people to use the democratic mechanisms to change the legislation or review the authority's decision, apply to international bodies and the world public opinion and appeal to the faithful for peaceful civil disobedience.¹⁴

In the German case, ecumenical concern from outside could at least identify a community that had voluntarily taken the initiative to resist, namely, the Confessing Church, whereas in Russia currently there apparently is no such community. That should not in itself inhibit the ecumenical question, which can look with hopeful anticipation as it prays 'Come, Holy Spirit'. Moreover, there are already individuals of varying religious affiliation or none who are taking immense personal risks in declining to support the war, or actually to speak against it. These are the martyrs for truth and righteousness of whom Jesus says, 'Blessed are those who are persecuted for truth and righteousness' sake . . . ' (Mt. 5.10) and for whom the solidarity of the churches is surely called, in advance of any appeal by the church itself.

¹⁴'Bases of the Social Concept of the Russian Orthodox Church', Section III.5.

Dialogue at All Cost? The Primacy of Confession

It has not always been easy for the ecumenical movement to combine the role of peacemaker with that of prophetic voice for the truth. There is an instinctive, understandable desire not to 'take sides' in the interests of mediation,¹⁵ which can too readily become a search for a 'mutual understanding' that sacrifices the search for truth to neutrality and mutual affability, independent of the confession of Christ. As early as 1932, the young Bonhoeffer gave a warning to an ecumenical peace conference:

In the large and genuine sense, mutual understanding exists only through proclamation and theology that is fully in the present. There is an infinitely great danger that at the international conferences we become good friends and find good fellowship – and otherwise nothing. But 'pagans and tax collectors do this also'. Our concern is something else, a new knowledge and a new will. And any conference not aiming for this goal with complete seriousness is a lost and gossipy time. And everyone who has visited these international conferences with this goal in mind knows that this costs hard work and difficult struggles. But that is why such conferences exist.¹⁶

Eight years later, as Europe entered into war again, the newly appointed first General Secretary of the WCC in formation, the Dutchman W.A. Visser't Hooft, found himself disturbed by the attitudes of Christians to the war in its early stages, despite the full publicity given to the evil nature of the Nazi regime. There was, he wrote, 'such a fear of national self-righteousness and such a sense of the failure of all nations that very many refused to make up their minds about the basic issues of this war', and quoted the American Reinhold Niebuhr on the paradox that the revulsion against the moral simplifications of 1914–18 was now tempting people 'to abstain from moral discriminations which are justified and essential in the present situation'. Ecumenical leaders like himself, he felt, were partly responsible for this situation, for:

We had placed such an emphasis on the duty for the church to remain the truly ecumenical church that there was a danger that the church would be looked upon as a haven of refuge above the world and not give guidance to their decisions in this world. I came therefore to the following conclusion: 'The ecumenical movement dare not be silent at a time when various forms of nihilism tend to submerge large parts of Europe, and when the validity of such

¹⁵One thinks of the severe criticism by the 'Kairos' theologians of South Africa who in 1985 sharply rejected the 'church theology' that spoke too readily of 'reconciliation' instead of attending to the manifest injustices of apartheid.

¹⁶Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Works*. XI. *Ecumenical, Academic and Pastoral Work, 1931–1932* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2012), p. 368. In the context of this paper as a whole, one can hardly avoid referring also to Bonhoeffer's entry into the political resistance to Hitler, and to his confiding to ecumenical friends abroad that he was praying for the military defeat of his country – the ultimate level of true patriotism, *pace* Patriarch Kirill's labelling of dissent as 'treason'.

basic norms of human relationships as justice and freedom for the life of our whole civilization is at stake.¹⁷

What matters above all is that the ecumenical community maintains its loyalty to the confession of Christ as its identity, all other considerations including ‘dialogue’ being ancillary and dependent on that. The only meaningful dialogue is that which takes place under the proclamation and confession of Christ, which is not negotiable. It is vain to seek a way round in the hope of avoiding the painful struggle and risk of division. If the Russian Orthodox Church comes to believe that the ecumenical community as represented by the WCC is no longer a body with which it can identify, or if the ecumenical community, however painfully, adjudges the ROC to be a church that does not share in the unity of the confession, that indeed is cause for pain and sorrow.¹⁸ But at some point, if not (in Rowan Williams’ words) a reading of the riot act, at least a knot has to be tied, a stand taken for the sake of truthfulness. That point has surely now been reached. For the confessing community, faithfulness to the confession has the primacy.

But what will happen if such a major player on the ecumenical scene as the ROC should sever its connexion, or have that connexion suspended? The simple answer is that we do not know, but that is no reason for not making a clear decision. At the very least, what will result will be an unambiguous positioning of the ecumenical community on where it stands, its clarity made absolute by the risk it has taken. At a critical moment in 1934 for the ecumenical movement, facing the question of where it stood in relation to the German Church conflict, and when siren voices calling for neutrality were so strong for fear that the question of truth was too dangerous and divisive for a movement working for ‘unity’, Bonhoeffer spoke with an unmistakable resonance for today and our current crisis:

There is only one way for ecumenical work to be rescued, namely, that it courageously take up this question, as it has been posed and obediently leave the rest to the Lord of the Church. Who can say that the ecumenical movement will not emerge more strongly and more authoritatively precisely by this disruptive challenge? . . . Historical speculation ends at God’s commandment.¹⁹

¹⁷Visser’t Hooft, *Memoirs*, p. 114.

¹⁸The pain would certainly be felt by this writer, who during his ecumenical work cherished his close, fraternal and enriching contacts with the ROC at all levels.

¹⁹Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Works*. XIV. *Theological Education at Finkenwalde, 1935–1937* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2013), p. 400.