Struggle against Social Disorder

Generally speaking, during the first sixty-odd years of its existence the modern ecumenical movement - dating from the World Missionary Conference held in Edinburgh in 1910 - did not occupy itself with human rights in the contemporary sense of the concept. As the earlier ecumenical documents amply testify, the movement did engage regularly in strong criticism of the deleterious human consequences of certain Western colonial policies and practices in Africa and Asia. There were denunciations of forced and migrant labor and immigration policies, for example, and the Secretary of the International Missionary Council (IMC), J.H. Oldham, wrote an important book, entitled, Christianity and the Race Problem, which dealt with the question as to whether the „Church has any contributions to make to the solution of the problems involved in the contact of different races in the world“ (p. vii) and which went through no fewer than eight editions between 1924 and 1926. But these problems were viewed less as human rights issues than as instances of social disorder or evil that needed to be brought to light and ameliorated, as matters of „grave menace to the peace of the world and to the cooperation and progress of its peoples“ (p. vii).

In later years the IMC and particularly the Life and Work Movement and the World Council of Churches (from the very beginning of its process of formation in 1938) became deeply involved in reflection and action on a variety of issues and themes which years hence would be considered to be highly relevant to human rights, such as the threat of totalitarianism, peace among the nations, refugees, economic justice and political order in a world of human disorder, the responsible society, rapid social change, Christian responsibility in the modern world, the role of the Church in society and international relations, etc. At the 1937 Oxford Life and Work Conference the then Archbishop of York, William Temple, even anticipated a theme which would play a central role in much later ecumenical human rights discussions when he stated that the
forces of evil against which Christians have to contend are found not
only in the hearts of men as individuals, but have entered into and
infected the structure of society, and there must also be combatted.
(cited in Smit, 748)

Yet none of these issues, either, was at this time viewed from the
special perspective of human rights and duties, though Paul Abrecht
is surely right in contending that the contemporary ecumenical con-
cern with human rights flows from the pioneering work of the Life

There was one human rights issue, however, that did receive steady
and full attention within the ecumenical movement from the outset,
namely, freedom of religion, understood as an individually distinct
and separate problem area.

**Emphasis on Religious Liberty**

Initial ecumenical efforts on behalf of human rights consisted of
formal and informal representations made to colonial authorities who
were restricting freedom of missionary movement, particularly in
Moslem areas, for purposes of preserving the social and religious
status quo of the societies under their administration with a view to
the protection of Western political and commercial interests. There
were many instances of ecumenical missionary resistance to such pol-
icy in colonial territories. And in response to anti-mission attitudes
and actions on the part of civil authorities in various parts of the world
the 1910 Edinburgh Conference spent a day discussing the topic
*Missions and Governments* (cf. Gairdner, 154-77).

The issue of freedom of religion was explicitly raised for the first
time within the ecumenical movement at the 1928 Jerusalem Meeting
of the IMC. Jerusalem placed the matter of religious liberty within the
framework of church-state relations: the aims of efforts in this area
were understood „in terms of facilitating relationships with govern-
ments in order to enable the missionary enterprise to proceed unhin-
dered“ (*Study Paper*, 3). Calling for „a study of the relation of the
principle of religious freedom to the rights of minorities under State
systems of education“ (*ibid.*, 20), this conference roundly repudiated
„any attempt on the part of trade or of governments, openly or covert-
ly, to use the missionary cause for ulterior purposes“ (*ibid.*, 18). Jeru-
salem also articulated an important insight that would be echoed