Carte Blanche for 'Witness'
Developments in the Terminology and Theology within the World Council of Churches and the Roman Catholic Church

ARIE L. MOLENDIJK

"'Witness' is a fashionable theological word" (1).
R. Schippers 1938

"A frequent use of the word 'witness' and its derivatives belongs to the ecclesiastical and ecumenical fashion of today" (2).
Hendrikus Berkhof 1963

1. Introduction

If it is true that the witness terminology is fashionable, then it is also clear that the fashion trend is not quickly outdated (3). From the International Mission Conference in Tambaram in 1938 (The Witness of the Church) to the Sixth Assembly of the World Council of Churches in Vancouver in 1983 (Witnessing in a Divided World) the witness terminology plays a prominent role. The question could be asked if the frequent use of the terminology is a proper measure of its theological importance (4). The question we want to deal with here is in which documents of the WCC and the Vatican the witness terminology plays an important role theologically. Also we will indicate how the use of the witness terminology developed historically from 1948 to 1985. For details and general background I must refer the reader to my study Getuigen in Missionair en Oecumenisch Verband. Een studie over het begrip 'getuigen' in documenten van de Wereldraad van Kerken, de Rooms-katholieke Kerk en de Evangelicalen, in de periode 1948-1985, Leiden-Utrecht, 1986 (5), written on behalf of the Interuniversity Institute for Missiological and Ecumenical Research (Leiden-Utrecht, the Netherlands).

Even if the focus of the present article is determined by a theological interest, the method is literary-historical. I will concentrate on authoritative documents on a world level and analyze a number of passages with a view to the significance of the witness terminology, i.e. the words 'witness', 'witnessing', 'testimony', 'testify', etc., in those passages. The question is whether the specific possibilities of the terminology are employed, whatever the congruence with biblical usage. The guiding principle is whether the witness terminology is employed to say something that could not otherwise or not as clearly be said. If, for example, 'witness' is used as a synonym for 'mission', then it is evident that 'witness' is an important concept, but why should one speak of a 'theology of witness' instead of a 'theology of mission'? (6)

Arie L. Molendijk is a post-graduate student at the Theological Faculty of the State University of Leiden, the Netherlands. He was a research fellow at the Interuniversity Institute for Missiological and Ecumenical Research in Leiden from 1985 till 1986.
2. World Council of Churches

In the document *Christian Witness, Proselytism and Religious Liberty in the Setting of the World Council of Churches* (St. Andrews 1960) the word 'witness' comes for the first time into prominence within the World Council of Churches. It is contrasted to 'proselytism' that is understood to be a corruption of 'Christian witness'. The document states:


The word 'witness' is used to describe a true obedience to the Great Commission (Mt 28:19-20). A Christian should witness to Christ both personally and in the community in which he lives. "Witness in word and deed is the essential mission and responsibility of every Christian and of every Church" (§213). 'Witness' is in essence a missionary concept, used here in the context of a 'free mutual witness' between the member churches of the World Council of Churches. This document, that received approval at the Third Assembly in New Delhi in 1961, was also a factor in facilitating the membership of several large Eastern Orthodox churches in the World Council of Churches.

In the preparation for the Third Assembly in New Delhi Visser 't Hooft's study *The Pressure of Our Common Calling* (London 1959) played an important role. He attempts to provide 'witness' with a biblical foundation by appealing to κηρύσσειν, ευαγγελίζεσθαι and μαρτυρεῖν as three representative words describing the 'ministry of the word'. The influence of this study is partially evident in the documents of the assembly. A distinction is made between 'witness', 'service', and 'unity'. In the report of section I Witness (8) it is stated that the task of Christian witness is to point to Christ as the true light of the world. The church must be aware of the fact that she can only witness to him faithfully 'in penitence and in humble obedience to the voice of the living God" (§4). Witness is primarily understood to be the task of proclaiming the gospel. At the end of the document, however, it receives a broader meaning:

The command to witness to Christ is given to every member of his Church. It is a commission given to the whole Church to take the whole Gospel to the whole world (§28).

Mission cannot limit itself to one aspect, but requires a 'comprehensive approach':

The wholeness of the Gospel demands a corporate expression, since it concerns every aspect of men's lives (§29).

This entails an emphasis on the role of the laity in mission:

It is obvious that, if the Christian witness is to penetrate into all those areas where the work of the world is carried on, it must be carried there by laymen (§31).

In the first part of the report, however, 'witness' is used in a different, more theocentric sense. God is the real witness:

God is his own witness; that is to say, God has been and is at work authenticating his own message to men (§8).

The content of the testimony relates to all of God's activity in history, especially in Jesus Christ: