

## The Society for Ecumenical Studies

### The Open Secret For The Open Society

Unity, Mission and Social Responsibility as inescapably inter-related challenges

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I

#### **An Epistle from the Cape of Good Hope**

This article is being written in the city of Cape Town. As long ago as 1806 William Carey suggested this place as the appropriate venue for 'a meeting of all denominations of Christians' in which it would be possible to 'understand each other better in two days than in two years of correspondence'. (2) That letter, even if it met no ready agreement in the Baptist Missionary Society, sowed a seed that was eventually to lead to the World Missionary Conference of Edinburgh 1910 and the International Missionary Council of which Lesslie Newbigin was General Secretary when it was 'taken up' into the World Council of Churches. What more appropriate place to be writing a contribution to his 'Unfinished Agenda' ?

All the more appropriate at present for being one of the home cities of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, established by the new, democratic government of South Africa, and chaired by emeritus Archbishop Desmond Tutu. (3) The as yet unfinished story of its work over two and a half years surely represents one of the most striking efforts in our time to incorporate into the 'public arena' two of the central themes of the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

#### ***Challenges for an Assembly dedicated to the virtues of hope***

This is being written also in the immediate run-up to the 8<sup>th</sup> Assembly and 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the World Council of Churches, to be held in Harare,

Zimbabwe, in December 1998. In personal preparation for that, my wife and I are currently spending six months in Southern Africa listening in to what Christians are discovering to be the key fields for witness. Can the Harare Assembly with its theme 'Turn to God. Rejoice in Hope' succeed in re—awakening for Christians around the world a sense of hope comparable to that which in the aftermath of World War II encouraged many to see in the ecumenical movement a promising instrument for a radically renewed church serving a new world ?

To do so it will need to win through to a quite new sense of the power of God confronting, for instance, the current global economic (dis)order, the spread of the HIV/AIDS virus, and the relentless exhaustion and pollution of the natural resources of the planet at the hands of humanity. At the same time, the Assembly will have to face what is often referred to as the 'ecumenical winter', the way in which promising beginnings in moving beyond church divisions into more united and hope—filled churches have dried up in recent decades. There is a crying lack at present of practicable models for steps towards unity. All the more need for a new quality of imaginative initiative and of persevering in commitment on the part of the member churches, let alone that of their sister churches outside the Council.

### ***A dismaying decision***

In particular, the Harare Assembly will have to respond to the recent decision of the Orthodox Churches in communion with the Ecumenical Patriarch, all long—standing member churches of the WCC , that their delegates should attend the Harare Assembly without voting, except on matters of direct concern to their church, and without leading any public worship. This decision is not altogether surprising. For these churches have been restive for some years about their membership in the Council, having found it hard to agree with the thinking and advice of those in own communities who have taken leading roles in the thinking and acting of the WCC.(4) But it undoubtedly witnesses to a profound rejection of the ways in which the Council currently pursues world-wide partnership.

The background to that decision, briefly, lies in the massive shock experienced by churches in Romania, Bulgaria, Greece, Serbia and above all Russia, as these Orthodox heartlands, now released from Communist control, have been invaded by hundreds of 'missionaries' from foreign agencies and fellowships. Bad enough to have to deal with Hindu gurus from India and New-Age enthusiasts from Switzerland. Worse still to have to cope with fundamentalist/evangelical and pentecostal Protestants from Germany, South Korea and the USA. Still more galling, I suspect, has been to find their sister great church of the Patriarchate of Rome encouraging back into existence the long—resented Uniate Churches suppressed by Stalin, and establishing new congregations and bishoprics under the Vatican's supervision.

The Orthodox have found this 'flock of vultures' - many of them with more by way of 'modern communications' and of readily available money than the local church leaders — personally humiliating and in terms of church relations nothing less than disgraceful.

As leaders of churches that have suffered for centuries under the pressures of militant Islam, and now still more painfully for 50 years under those of an aggressively atheistic, totalitarian rule, why – they feel — should their witness to the Gospel have to come under competition from these brash 'apostles' of what they cannot recognise as the faith once entrusted to the early Christian Church ? Their people are in any case having to cope with virtual anarchy after the collapse of government, as with financial chaos arising from the failure of their economic system – in brief, with the loss of almost all the old certainties. Is not even the Church, which tried to maintain at least the old way of worship through the storms of communism, to be left to lick its wounds in peace in the new era of 'freedom' ? Why have their WCC partners from the other traditions of Christianity proved so weak, indeed feckless, in not restraining their own fellow-countrymen?

The words are often rough, the emotions raw. Recent gatherings of the WCC, including the Faith and Order Conference at Santiago de Compostela, Spain, in 1994 and the World Mission Conference at Salvador de Bahia, Brazil, in

1996, have heard these cries and have found it impossible to make any significantly helpful response. Can the Harare Assembly find, in its words and in its worship, fresh winds of hope?

### ***A similar shock***

I start towards a response, both to the particular challenge thrown out by the Orthodox and to the wider, underlying questions about the prospects for new and good hope, from what may seem an even more limited experience. On our very first stop in this continent, on the Copperbelt in Zambia, Ruth and I learned of a situation by no means dissimilar, in cause and in effect. We expected to meet there friends and partners both from the Protestant churches grouped in the Zambia Christian Council (ZCC) and among the Roman Catholics who have a long and valuable record of partnership in social responsibility with their sister churches.<sup>(5)</sup> We had not expected to learn of a constituency of 'new', separatist and proselytising churches that have arrived, mostly from countries in Western Europe and the USA – quite apart from the large and diverse constituency of 'African Initiated Churches' – let alone that the new President of Zambia, F.J.Chiluba, is a committed member of one of these 'new evangelical' churches.

Still more, we were shocked to hear from the Catholic Bishop of Ndola that the partnership between the Christian Council and the Conference of RC Bishops that produced an impressive succession of study papers and Calls from the Church Leaders during the struggle for more genuine democracy in Zambia, has in recent years 'collapsed'. This happened, he told us, because the Evangelical Fellowship of Zambia (EFZ) was unwilling to take any part in such a partnership. Moreover, because at least some of the member churches of the ZCC contain people sympathetic to these 'new' churches, the ZCC had found it impossible to stand out against the wishes of the EFZ. We did not hear quite the same wailings about an 'invasion' that visitors will meet in Russia or Greece, but the results are dismayingly similar, whether in terms of fragmentation of the Christian witness, of near despair about meaningful advance in respect of Christian unity, or of the severe weakening of Christian leadership in social obedience and nation-building.

Here in Cape Town, the sheer number of church buildings and the enormous range of their titles, betraying a multiplicity of background cultures, languages and worship styles, is striking even on a first look round. We hear much also of the unwillingness of churches to take new initiatives in regard to the urgent needs of the society, and of a severe case of 'ecumenical winter'. The city of the Cape of Good Hope is clearly no longer – as it was on occasion in the struggle against apartheid — a pioneer in united and socially responsible Christian witness.

## II

### **Learning to handle God's 'open secret'**

At the immediate level, my first suggestion towards responding to this situation is simply to recall that it is nothing new. Ever since the earliest disciples found people of doubtful motivation crowding in on their activities (e.g. *Acts* 8: 9—13, and 16: 16—18), the Church has had to discover appropriate disciplines, both for letting new persons participate in its life before any evaluation of their potential can be reached, and for discerning when a request for baptism is genuine and when not.

Moreover Christians are by no means alone in having to contend with dismaying and confusing differences in their own ranks. The Jewish community has to struggle with its own orthodox, conservative, reformed and liberal 'wings', and finds it particularly hard to do so within its 'own' state of Israel. For centuries the House of Islam has had to face up to an estrangement between the Sunni and Shia communities, let alone in recent times to the very different political aims of, say, the wealthy elite of Saudi Arabia, the Taliban of Afghanistan, the changing governments in Iran, or the educational tradition of the Al Azhar university in Cairo. It is indeed part of the human condition that we are an infinitely diverse species.

More profoundly, I suggest all Christians need to dig more deeply into the meaning of Lesslie Newbigin's memorable choice of the apparently simple

phrase 'open secret' (6) to sum up the central faith of the Church. God has taken the initiative, in the context of the earlier covenant with the Jewish people through Abraham, to make his purposes 'open' to humanity in Jesus of Nazareth. In that one person, in that unique life, death and rising again, Christians believe we have been offered by God a window onto the love, truth, justice and hope that is promised for the entire creation by its creator.

It is 'open' in the further sense that Christians believe ourselves to have been met by a call of God that is intended for the entire family of humankind. It is not a secret for which a person has to qualify to gain access to by some exclusive rite or privilege. For it is a secret which is commending itself to people of every background, and becoming more convincing as they variously explore and grow into it in their own ways. The New Testament is there, ready to be translated into each new tongue, re—interpreted by each new culture, and re—assessed for each new generation. Jesus' command to 'go into all the world' is not an empty rhetorical one, but a standing invitation to human beings to serve God's purposes by sharing with ever—widening circles of people.

Yet in vital ways it remains a 'secret'. First and foremost, it is a 'secret' because it has to do with the — by definition — unknowable God who is always beyond the grasp of mortal human beings. We may know what God has revealed in Jesus, but may never claim by that to be entrusted with 'full' knowledge of who God is and what God intends. Rather, Christians are those being led by God the Holy Spirit into a life—long adventure of living and praying our way into the truth and love we have seen in Jesus. Among much else, that will involve exploring with considerable difficulty what came as it were naturally to Jesus, namely to see the affairs of this world in the light of *God's* promises and intentions, not in the categories of current human debates.

It is also a 'secret' because, while we are entrusted with the record of the New Testament, the 'Word' spoken by God in the life of Jesus cannot be directly 'copied' into other contexts. It was as much a matter of one specific time and

place as is any other life, while for once also bearing the definitive witness to God's love and rule. It provides the 'ultimate' in regard to faith, love and hope, but not — meanwhile — any final 'answers' to the huge number of 'penultimate' questions people have to face, whether in regard to truth questions about what is, relationship questions about how to behave to other people, or ethical questions about how to act in complex circumstances. Believers and leaders of believers are human beings subject to all the same conditionings and ambiguities as any others.

As is now widely understood in the light of painful experiences in history, Christians must be careful never to equate God's intentions and purposes with our own ! Our business as participants in the body of Christ is to witness to what God has done in Jesus, not to point to ourselves. More than that, we need to be careful about equating the teaching of our churches with the mind of God. Granted that the pronouncements of church leaders are put forward as carefully thought through, at times authoritative judgments, to which all Christians will do well to give heed. But the chances of inadequacy are always dangerously high !

Christians are called to be a company of people growing in the ability to recognise signs of God's promised Kingdom in things that happen around us because we have seen that Kingdom in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus. Only on the other side of death may we hope to be sure of God's purposes and judgments.

The hopeful side of that radical uncertainty about our own adequacy is that it is — thank God — not up to us to know just how much or little our witness is worth. Just as it is God the Holy Spirit who in her mysterious ways 'goes— between' (7) people, to communicate God's love and truth, in ways that are always beyond what we can expect and grasp, so it is by God's grace that our words and deeds may prove to have communicated something of God also when we had little idea that was what we might be doing !

The Orthodox tradition reminds us of the key truth that it is the witness of the *whole* church of all times and places that is to be relied on, not what may happen to be said or done by any particular set of Christians at any one time. Moreover we need to remember that what Christians *do* will almost always communicate more vividly than what we say. It is the entire life of a Christian, as of a Church as a whole, that constitutes the witness God gives us to make, and which God can at best use to his glory. Still more, because any one act of witness will always be caught up into, and at best confirmed by, the witness of the Church of every age and place, the maker(s) of it can only ever entrust it to the Holy Spirit as a potential contribution to God's communication of God's truth and love. It does not have to be a matter for the judgment of each of us whether or not our witness serves God's purposes.

One conclusion from those thoughts is that the key factor wherever 'different' churches find themselves acting in the 'same' context is that of the *quality of relationships* they have with one another. Are their relationships such as to make a witness to the truth and sovereignty of the one God who has called them both, through the Holy Spirit that was in Jesus Christ, to service of God's Kingdom ? Or are they rather demonstrating that they and their churches are approximating to one or other of the current options in the world's kaleidoscope ?

Matters of faith and of hope and of love, moreover, are not — by their nature — matters that can be subject to the control or command of earthly authorities. They will be worth much less if they are performed out of that sort of compulsion. They are the proper field of *religious* behaviour and *religious* obedience precisely because they are in the category of motives and actions that respond to what is believed to be an 'ultimate concern' (Tillich's useful phrase) and which therefore cannot be forced. No church can make you or me love an enemy, nor even impose on us a friendship with the person in the next seat along. Yet all human beings are capable of discovering love where the world seems to impose only enmity, or of entering into a friendship when the predictions would be for separation.



### ***When a 'new' church appears on the scene***

In the light of this 'open secret', what guidelines can we find for handling these many situations where a newcomer turns up uninvited ?

The first step must surely be to seek personal contact, if possible friendship, with one or more of its members or — better — leaders. That first contact should indicate relatively soon whether this is a case of a *diversity* or a *division*. This crucial distinction has been in danger of being overlooked in recent years as the Christian world has come — late in the day — to appreciate anew the value of human diversities for the richness of the life and indeed the witness of the church as a whole (8). Many *diversities* can and should be accepted gratefully within and between distinct churches — whether in respect of language, of racial or cultural background, of generation, of forms of worship or ways of behaving, etc. and etc. — without being experienced as sufficient reason for any *division* by which churches cut themselves off from one another, or refuse to recognise a sister church because of some supposed lack or fault in it.(9)

If the differences in the specific situation turn out to be based in some 'diversity', then my church is challenged to discover how we can so share with the newcomers as to be mutually enriched. Care must of course be taken, as in any other situation of witness, not to let the relationship be felt in terms of power, of one church as in some way superior or inferior to the other.

If however it is discovered that this is a case of a 'division', i.e. that it is some definite disagreement that has given rise to the new arrival, then appropriate processes for *healing* that will need to be discerned. Again, this must not be seen in terms of power - as if one party could in some way impose a form of healing on the other. Exactly what will turn out to be desirable and practicable will of course vary widely. In many cases — one must hope, in the long run almost all — careful and respectful conversation about the background and origins of the principles or doctrines that justify the division will turn out to show that there is a level of biblical teaching underlying *both* positions. The need then is to discover together how to learn from that underlying truth a reality that can encompass what both partners see as vital, and so begin to relativise the factor(s) of division.

These two paragraphs are inevitably inadequate, since any such 'process', whether towards agreement about the handling of a diversity or towards the healing of a division, can prove full of stones of stumbling. All too often, as has evidently been the case in Zambia recently, one party will simply refuse to consider altering its stance, let alone changing its mind. There are no easy answers. Yet there are virtually no situations where absolutely nothing can be done. Friendship, and through it conversations about key points, may for instance prove possible between women members of the two churches even where the men in leadership fail to make time for real sharing. Sometimes it can prove possible to agree on a 'third party' to come and help discover ways ahead. Sometimes minds and hearts can open when joint groups travel to some other 'place' and learn about people in greater need.

No rules for these processes can be laid down. But it must be insisted that it cannot be God's will for two churches simply to exist in competition with each other. It cannot but be a high priority alike for leaders and members of divided churches at least to make contact with one another and begin an appropriate 'running conversation', in which both churches can discover how best to work together for God's Kingdom within the wider community.

In situations where long—standing divisions have become firmly enshrined in 'denominational differences', there can be no short—cuts to the long process of searching for sufficient mutual understanding to allow a re—union of the hitherto separate churches — one of the causes to which Lesslie Newbigin devoted much of his life. In such a process, as in those that can reach more rapid results in the case of local diversities, it must be remembered by all involved that it is an 'open secret' they are serving, a mystery that is always more than either party can presume to be in certain or total possession of. Here in South Africa Ruth and I have been fortunate to hear something of the present struggles of the 'Uniting Reformed Church in Southern Africa'. This was formed a few years ago by a union of three of the 'daughter churches' of the Dutch Reformed Church in S. Africa, namely the churches that under apartheid had grouped the 'Coloured', the 'Indian' and the 'African/Black'

communities. The irony in these three forming the new, 'Uniting' Church is that — alongside some probably predictable internal difficulties over how best to bring the three separate organisations together — they are finding it extremely hard to get the 'mother church' to accept the prospect of a long—term conversation with a view to unity. In this there is a clear reflection of the huge difficulties of the Afrikaaner community, which provided the government until 1994, to imagine a sharply different role for themselves in the 'new' South Africa. One can hardly envisage a more important piece of Christian witness to the goodness and love of God than if the total Reformed community of believers could come to a pattern of effective and mutually respectful unity.

There is much valuable experience to be tapped in this context from within the Association of Inter—Church Families in the UK and other countries. This is a grouping that has over 30 years done more than any other to search out the needs and possibilities of uniting obedience within marriages/families in which one partner is a Roman Catholic and the other a convinced member of another Church. Many of these have patiently, yet with admirable perseverance, struggled to find possible ways through the problems they have encountered, and thus to help their churches grow towards the unity Christ intends. So one tip for any situation of blockage between two churches can be to learn from marriages that unite a man and a woman from each.

Still more, there is much to be learned in that setting from the children struggling to make the most of their 'double belonging'. Their path is never straightforward; rarely are there existing models for dealing with the puzzles arising from their specific circumstances. Yet at times the children handle the 'awkward' and unfamiliar questions with a natural sense for the truth and possibilities of the new situation in ways that can teach the rest of us. Many of the same sorts of dilemma have to be faced in inter—racial or inter—faith(10) marriages and families. So look to the children — their very birth proclaims the common humanity our disputes and border regulations seem to deny. They may well be able to give a living witness to what as yet most Christians can only speak of in abstractions.

From a very different angle, let it also be said here that it can only be unhelpful to call in the civil authorities to ban any new arrival. The recent debates in and around the Russian Duma have been sadly illuminating. For a long-established church to invite a parliament to institute a legal procedure in order to prevent new religious bodies coming into existence is to open a most dangerous door to an exclusiveness which can all too easily turn into a quasi—tyrannical oppression in the name of the status quo. The price of any legal prevention of new churches by civil authorities is too high, for the existing churches, let alone for society as a whole. Christian witness, like any other activity in civil society, needs to be able to function within a wider legal framework of free association. Yet this cannot in integrity be such as to lay down in advance exclusive answers to any of the questions Christians and others will need to work on for the common good of society as a whole.

### III

#### **Learning to live in an 'open society'**

That last point moves me on into the deeper questions to do with the best ways for communities to organise their common life. Many of the puzzles facing churches face humanity no less, often indeed more divisively, in the political and economic fields. Here we can find important guidance from thinkers exploring the possibility of an 'open society'. I refer in particular to the weighty contribution made during World War II by Karl Popper, then in New Zealand, in his two volume work *The Open Society and Its Enemies*.<sup>(11)</sup> His emphasis has been taken up anew by George Soros, the financier.<sup>(12)</sup> For both of them this key phrase, 'the open society' is essentially a polemic against any 'closed society', any society within which some particular class of persons, political ideology, economic system (etc.) either claims or has come to be accepted as having an *unchallengeable right to impose its rule* over the rest.

Popper pursues his argument against both Plato's 'guardians' and Marx's 'dictatorship of the proletariat': against rulers, whether from on high or from

below, who take to themselves the *right* to govern. Soros is aiming at any and every totalitarian system, having known much of both fascism and communism in his native Hungary. Both are unmistakably passionate. Yet neither gives much attention to theological considerations.

Popper, interestingly, is aware that

What matters to Christianity, is not the historical deeds of the powerful Roman conquerors but (to use a phrase of Kierkegaard's) "what a few fishermen have given the world".'(13)

In other words, the considerable freedom for which Popper argues is not a freedom in the first instance for the 'great ones' of this world but for the 'meek and lowly'. This is of course a freedom which can all too easily be manipulated by some so as to dominate others. Humanity is increasingly learning to recognise that danger. What we must however seek is a freedom in which all can find a near enough approximation to an equal measure of freedom with which to work together for the good of all.

In response to a question about 'the meaning of history', Popper writes:

We can interpret it (sc. history) with an eye to those problems of power politics whose solution we choose to attempt in our time. We can interpret the history of power politics from the point of view of our fight for the open society, for a rule of reason, for justice, freedom, equality, and for the control of international crime. Although history has no ends, we can impose these ends of ours upon it; *although history has no meaning, we can give it a meaning.* (...) It is we who introduce purpose and meaning into nature and into history. Men are not equal; but we can decide to fight for equal rights. Human institutions such as the state are not rational; but we can decide to fight to make them more rational. (...) History itself has no end or meaning,. But we can decide to give it both. We can make it our fight for the open society and against its enemies.(14)

He sums up the key attitude for the open society as that of 'I may be wrong and you may be right; and by an effort we may get nearer to the truth'.<sup>(15)</sup> In the end he sees no other solution than the 'running conversation' of patient and persevering negotiation, whether about the meaning of some 'truth' in our common life, or about the processes for working towards it. Soros also dwells at length on the necessity of preventing the 'open conversation' from falling prey to some human power seeking its own profit. However difficult this may seem, he pleads that we all learn to trust in the inherent values of keeping all the conversations 'open'.

Is this not the point where their approach cries out for the 'open' if transcendent 'secret' God has made known in Jesus ? How can we dare to suppose our societies can survive their radical 'openness'; how can we put our trust in such a fragile and difficult way of governing our turbulent society/ies, if not because it is the way the transcendent creator has shown us? I cannot but believe that this is one of the most pressing and important areas for Christian witness in our time.

Can Christians make available persuasive and convincing evidence for patterns of regulating our societies, all struggling to maintain their 'open' character, that can look beyond the convenient 'solution' of some overall mechanism, structure or principle, let alone some class or party, which can be trusted to do the ruling for us ? Christians are those who have begun to learn the difficult, risky art of relying not on ourselves but on God, whose power is always beyond our grasp, yet who has in Jesus made known enough to call out our trust in that hidden power. So a key element in the witness we have to give to our societies needs to be that any other single source of wisdom and guidance is bound to prove fallible. Only in ever 'running conversations' can humanity live up to the awesome responsibilities God has entrusted to the human race.

### ***Two examples towards appropriate disciplines***

The first was laid down 50 years ago by independent India. Not least because of the urging of Christians such as Paul Devanandan and M.M. Thomas, the

new India of 1947 decided to decree itself to be a 'secular state'. This did not mean that the state would refuse all awareness of religion, still less that it would downgrade religious ideas or institutions. Rather it pointed to the fact that the state would carefully ring—fence the position of religious institutions so that no one of them would have any automatic priority over any other. The state would establish a framework providing space for each to act, speak, grow or dwindle in freedom from any other, and from the state itself. In return, the religious institutions would bind themselves not to act in ways that would interfere with the proper powers of the state, nor by insult or violence breach the boundaries of mutual respect. Arguments between them, and with the state could and should be pursued, but in mutual respect, understanding and courtesy. They could expect to wield no other power than that which their witness would prove inherently to deserve.

That model was developed out of the specific and highly particular situation of India, a huge country that has known much of religious intolerance down the centuries, and where religions have often played significant — and not always helpful — roles in the crucial decisions facing the country. It has come under huge pressure in recent years, but seems to be holding.

It is by no means the same as the model adopted by the United States of America in the late 18<sup>th</sup> century under the pressures of the 'enlightenment', which provides for a total separation between church and state. This insists that no state institution can give credence to religious ideas or traditions, and that every citizen is altogether free to behave as he or she wishes, for example to start any new church or faith he chooses. It points to a sheer indifference to religion as anything other than a 'personal preference' of no importance to the state. Yet at the same time the USA has become at present the major world power, economically a super—affluent society whose restlessly consumerist and competitive economic system dominates the entire world economy. Patterns of 'globalization' turn out in fact to be of 'Americanisation' !

The USA appears to behave on the assumption that every other nation, by definition, will want to copy and follow its patterns, of economic, political, media/entertainment or indeed religious life. Popper and Soros provide the key arguments for insisting that that sort of power, no less at the global level than within any one society, must be regulated and checked by the running conversation of a genuine 'openness'..

A second example is being provided at the present time here in South Africa by the work and implications of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission.(16) This was established, after a long and arduous process of negotiation between the African National Congress (ANC) and the Nationalist Party (the former government), by the new government of 'national unity' elected in 1994. The Act which brought it into being gave it precise terms of reference in regard to 'gross violations of human rights' and to the offering of amnesty, under specific rules, to persons applying for that in respect of the perpetration of those gross violations. This is not the place to describe its work over two and a half years in any detail. (17) Its experience with both the telling of the stories of suffering by the victims and the testimonies of its perpetrators, widely disseminated over TV and in the press as well as in public hearings across this huge country, has inevitably opened up many sensitive and vital questions about the future of the country as a whole.

For the Commission has been able to uncover and communicate the 'truth' of what went on under apartheid in ways that are as moving as they are shocking. Yet it equally leaves a mass of questions about 'whose truth ?' Clearly what is told can be tested as 'the truth' of and in respect of an individual person. But how is 'the truth' for the nation to be known, and then responded to ? Krog sums up her perplexity at one point by saying: 'What you believe to be true depends on who you believe yourself to be.' Not a bad summary of the respective stances of Jesus and Pilate on that point, either ! So also with 'reconciliation': a difficult word to handle at the best of times. Black voices have pointed out sharply that without far—reaching measures of economic change (which go well beyond the TRC's mandate) the majority population is simply not going to believe that the Commission has done much



for the justice (e.g. in terms of jobs, pay and housing) which has to be at the heart of any true reconciliation. But Archbishop Tutu and others speaking for the TRC are adamant, rightly, that without the degree of truth and openness that the Commission has achieved the further work now so urgently needed for greater justice could hardly be envisaged. Within the specific limits the Act set for its work, this Commission has launched what deserves to be the decisive impetus for society as a whole — more particularly for the (mostly white) 'beneficiaries' from apartheid — to respond to its work by imagining and initiating a far—reaching transformation into a more genuinely just and open society. This will surely require a profound corporate, institutional (and for many a no less costly personal) repentance rooted in trust in the unseen but deeply just and reconciling God in whom so many of this nation's citizens put their faith.

#### IV

##### **Disciplines of the open secret for the open society**

So what are the disciplines towards which God's 'open secret' may be held to be pointing us ? I see above all two.

First, the disciplines of the '*running conversation*' on any and every point of disagreement and uncertainty between human beings. We must learn to trust, not ourselves, but the God who can work 'between us', if only we will approach each other in sufficient openness and mutual respect. There is no other way to 'solve' disputes that are not (yet) provided for by accepted laws, except by appropriate negotiation. The point of all such negotiation, whether on 'high' political matters or as churches seek their proper unity, is so to understand each others' points of view that the conversation—partners can eventually discover a 'win—win' approach. This is best sought in the light of what can be known of God's overarching purposes, that can promise all parties concerned not just a prospect of gaining a fair proportion of the ends they seek for themselves but also of contributing to a renewing and enriched society.

Behind all such conversations stand such 'truths' as:

- there are no set patterns of 'democracy'; each group of partners, each society, each generation needs to work out their own in constant revision of their inheritance(s).
- there are no unchallengeable 'goals', only those goals which particular societies will set for themselves.
- there are no given economic structures or regulations that simply have to be 'obeyed', only those which a society will have set for itself by its own processes of power or negotiation.

What is perhaps new in our time is that these 'verities' urgently need to be applied as much at the international, world—wide level as in the more familiar contexts of national and local government. Churches who have at least begun to find in such instruments as the World Council of Churches a way of coming to genuinely international agreement on crucial matters must be among the first to plead for a much 'stronger' reality for the United Nations, as for the growing 'family' of international organisations and agencies to be more clearly bound together by common attitudes and practices. The South African TRC, like the Nuremberg Trials and the European Union before it, has been deliberately harnessed to the achievement of a 'never again', e.g. in respect of particular groups 'taking the law into their own hands' and thus away from the hands of those entrusted by society with the responsibilities of government. This too needs to be internationalised, so that whatever action of a policing sort needs to be taken can be pursued in open conversation, never simply imposed by those who consider themselves the 'powers—that—be'.

Second, the disciplines of *'living in and by repentance'*. This means, at the simplest level, building into all personal and corporate behaviour Popper's maxim of 'You may be right and I may be wrong; and by a common effort we may both get nearer the truth'. Precisely what that can mean in the myriads of necessary cases can only be discovered by the participants. Not least, it

would transform the competitiveness that has seeped throughout societies dominated by capitalist economic structures. 'Convictions' a la Reagan or Thatcher are not good enough; intransigence must never be allowed the last word. Rather, 'running conversations' and appropriately structured negotiations must be empowered to take over responsibilities which the powerful have all too often assumed were theirs by right.

In fact such a governing attitude of 'repentance' is a sign of a real strength in relationships, not a weakness. Jesus on the cross proves a far 'stronger' witness than any alternative, alike to the power of sacrifice and suffering over evil and cruelty as to the truth and love of the unknowable creator of all. Precisely because only time can tell which pronouncements will carry the authority of God, modesty and repentance should be as characteristic of the utterances of churches and of church leaders as of individual Christians. We can only dare to claim some insight as true to Jesus if we immediately also turn to God in prayer and ask that the Holy Spirit use even this fallible utterance. That in turn becomes a prayer for repentance, that we may be given grace to admit inadequacies and be ready to change our mind, as God may will. Not as a one—off event but as a steady set of the mind and heart, in time coming to govern all we are, say and do.

'Religion' is in fact no more attractive or acceptable a 'power of this world' than any other. States do not become any better by being labelled 'Christian', 'Islamic' or 'Hindu'. At the same time humanity will do itself a grave disservice if we think we can afford to put away our religious traditions without the most careful of 'running conversations', not least between those different traditions, about their potential contributions to a future society with room and promise for us all.(18)

This will no doubt involve each community and nation learning a new openness by which it can welcome people from a much wider spectrum of backgrounds than up to now. Lesslie Newbigin, as I know well, learned to glory in the way Birmingham over the last 200 years has been a city welcoming and integrating wave after wave of people from elsewhere, at first

from elsewhere in England, then the British Isles, then Europe and since the Second World War from around the world.(19)

Of course there will remain no shortage of arguments to resolve. History will continue to throw those up, in ways that may well become all the more difficult the more our one world grows together into an inevitably tight—knit whole. To point to the 'open society' as a guiding principle which in some measure may reflect and serve the purposes of God, is to insist that the only way through those arguments must be by mutual negotiation and compromise. Somehow the interests of everybody must be discovered to deserve priority over the interests of the few.

More generally, a wise word was surely spoken at the 1998 Lambeth Conference of Anglican Bishops by Rowan Williams, Bishop of Monmouth in Wales. He gave what Donald Reeves describes(20) as 'an inspiring address noted for its intellectual rigour, eloquence and deep spirituality'. In a conference soon to descend into what sounds to have been at times a near—shouting match of opposing convictions about homosexuality, his guidance was all the more salutary.

He knows first hand what it is like to be in a situation of serious disagreement. He urged the bishops to stay with those who decide differently, to seek to discover how it is that within the Body of Christ we can recognise the other's views as "a gift" and, from the passionately held certainty of our own convictions, acknowledge that the body of Christ is fallible and divided. (...) Diversity — a favoured word at the conference — comes with a price. Anyone who is passionate for the truth, their truth, has to learn to affirm the right of those with whom they disagree also to be heard. (...) At the end of his address he said: "The most profound service we can do for each other is to point to Christ; turn from our confrontation in silence to the Christ we all try to look at; to say to one another — hopefully and gently — Do you see that ? This is how I see Him — Can you see too ?"

If the churches, in responding to the relatively slight — though entirely real — problem of the arrival of 'new' churches alongside those with a longer stake in a given place, can find ways of handling it that will point society as a whole more genuinely in the direction of an 'open society', then from what may at first appear as a 'woe' we shall be able to make a key witness to tomorrow's world. Even where by earlier criteria one can only see threat and division, we are offered the possibility of learning to weave diversity into a fuller and richer life for all.

### ***By way of conclusion***

Here I need only refer back to my sub—title: the concerns for *Christian unity* (reflecting the love that should govern relationships between Christians and their churches), for *Christian witness* (to a truth that is always beyond us, yet which provides the crucial criteria for what we can dare to hope for as the 'good life') and for the inescapably *social responsibility* of those called to serve God in the body of Christ, are all equally central to Christian discipleship. They cannot but belong together in a single whole, in lives lived not for self— regarding purposes but for the purposes of God.

In an unforgettable paragraph Lesslie Newbigin brought much of this together. He was responding to the simple question 'What is "a local church"?' (21) and began:

This apparently simple question raises, in fact, the profoundest issues concerning the nature of the Church. The adjective 'local' refers to the 'place' where the Church is. But this 'place' is part of the secular world, part of the world of nature and of culture. What is the relation of the Church to this 'place'? It is an intrinsic, not an extrinsic relation. The 'place' is not just the latitude and longitude of the spot where this church happens to be; it is not external or accidental to the being of the Church. The 'place' of the Church is not thus its situation on the surface of the globe, but its place in the fabric of human society. The Church cannot

be described apart from its place. The Church is wrongly described unless it is described as the Church *for that place*, and the meaning of the preposition 'for' is determined christologically; that is to say by what Jesus Christ has done, is doing and will do with and for the world as its author, redeemer and consummator. The Church in each place is the Church for that place, in the sense in which Christ is for mankind and for the world. Just as Jesus Christ is not understood unless He is understood as the Word by whom all things came to be, for whom they are, and in whom they are to be consummated, and as the Last Adam in whom alone mankind's destiny lies. So also the Church in any place is not rightly understood unless it is understood as sign, first—fruit and instrument of God's purpose in Christ for that place. And in this sentence the word 'place' must mean the whole secular reality of the place, including its physical, social, cultural and political aspects.

A high calling indeed. But will anything less truly witness to the truth and love of God as Jesus declared and lived these? Let us pray that the Harare Assembly, this book and many other events and initiatives can help this dense paragraph to be fleshed out in innumerable different ways by millions of local churches, each searching for God's truth and reconciliation in and for 'places' that encompass both their specific community and the 'place' that is formed by our world as a whole.

## Notes

1. Martin Conway is a lay member of the Church of England, who served from 1986-1997 as President of the Selly Oak Colleges, Birmingham, UK, on the nomination of a committee which included Bishop Lesslie Newbigin.
2. On which see the article by Ruth Rouse, 'William Carey's "Pleasing Dream" ' in the *International Review of Missions* for April 1949, pp 181-192 (London: International Missionary Council) and page 355 of the volume she edited with Bishop Stephen Neill *A History of The Ecumenical Movement 1517-1948*, (London: SPCK, second edition, 1967).
3. Its full report is due to be handed to President Mandela on October 29<sup>th</sup> 1998, and simultaneously published. Meanwhile, a thought—provoking, personal account is to be found in *Country of My Skull* by Antjie Krog, (Johannesburg: Random House of S. Africa, 1998, pp.286, ISBN 0—95841—951—5), a poet and radio journalist assigned to cover the experience of the Commission.
4. As I have chronicled in one sub-section of the chapter entitled 'Under Public Scrutiny' in the forthcoming Volume Three of the *History of the Ecumenical Movement* (Geneva: WCC and others), covering the years 1968-1995.
5. Chronicled in the article: 'Zambia: Challenges in a Christian Nation ?' by Peter J. Henriot sj in *Reconstruction — The Harare Assembly of the WCC and the Churches in Southern Africa*, ed. Leny Lagerwerf (Zoetermeer, Netherlands: Meinema, 1998, for the Inter—University Institute for Mission and Ecumenics, IIMO Research Publication No. 47, pp.200, ISBN 90—211—7016—7).
6. I refer, of course to the title he gave to his book on Christian mission, the fruit of lectures given in his earlier years of retirement to students in the Selly Oak Colleges *The Open Secret* (London: SPCK and Grand Rapids, Michigan: Wm B. Eerdmans, 1978). The reference is to *Ephesians* 1:9.
7. The key phrase of Bishop John V. Taylor's book on the Holy Spirit in mission *The Go—Between God* (London: SCM Press), pointing to the many ways in which the Holy Spirit is to be discerned and experienced in what happens *between* people, not primarily within each one in separation.
8. For a fuller discussion of this, I can best refer to my 1994 article 'A Universal Faith in 1001 Contexts', in the *International Review of Mission* (Geneva: WCC, Vol. LXXXIV, Nos 332/333, April—June 1994, pp.133-148).
9. These categories are discussed, in a slightly different framework, by Lesslie Newbigin in the article I shall return to below, 'What is "a local church truly united"?'.
10. Space again prevents me from trying to draw out the many vital questions in this area of inter—faith marriages, an area I believe to be peculiarly demanding and deserving for the century ahead. But to approach its many uncertainties and anxieties from the perspective of the 'open secret' will surely prove helpful. I simply refer to a few recent publications for those wishing to explore further: *Evangelism and Inter—Faith Dialogue — Are they incompatible or complementary ?* by Israel Selvanayagam, an Indian theologian presently teaching in Bristol; *Yours Interfaithfully — An English Christian Tries to Stay Honest* by Christopher Lamb, the Secretary of the British/Irish Churches' Commission for Inter—faith Relations (these are both Occasional Papers of the Selly Oak Colleges, Birmingham B29 6LQ, UK, nos 13 and 15, 1993 and 1997, ISBN 0—900653—20—5 and —18—3 respectively); and *In Good Faith — The Four Principles of Interfaith Dialogue*, published by the Council of Churches for Britain & Ireland, (35—41 Lower Marsh, London SE1 7RL, 1991, ISBN 0—85169—206—0)
11. London: George Routledge and Sons, 1945.
12. In two long articles first published in the journal *Atlantic Monthly*, unfortunately I cannot here trace the exact references, but the articles must have appeared in the mid to late 1990s.
13. Vol 2, (4th edition of 1962) p.273.
14. *ibid.* p.278.
15. *ibid.* p.225
16. Here I am particularly grateful to a three—day seminar at the University of Cape Town led by Dr Alex Boraine, Vice—Chairman of the Commission.
17. See the book by Antjie Krog, and the full report, mentioned in note 3 above.

18. Hence the sub—title Christopher Lamb gave to his lecture, mentioned in note 10 above.
19. See *Birmingham, The Great Working City* (Birmingham City Council, 1994 or so) in which the local historian Carl Chinn lovingly sets out the ways in which at least 27 different 'people groups' have found workplaces and family homes in what has become the home city of them all, even if it still has plenty of new challenges to face.
20. in *The Tablet* dated 1 August 1998, p.998.
21. In a paper originally written for a consultation of the WCC Faith & Order Commission in December 1976, trying to flesh out some of the implications of the statement on Christian unity agreed at the Nairobi Assembly of 1975; this was published in the Report of that consultation *In Each Place* ed. L. Vischer (Geneva:WCC, 1977), also in *The Ecumenical Review*, (Geneva: WCC, Vol. 29, No. 2, April 1977, pp.115—128).