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MS-603: Rabbi Marc H. Tanenbaum Collection, 1945-1992.

Series C: Interreligious Activities. 1952-1992

Box 44, Folder 13, Role of religion in conflict, 1984.

## ROLE OF RELIGION IN CONFLICTS

(Preparation of a Study Document)

1. The Executive Committee of the WCC in its February 1984 meeting adopted the following minute:

"That a preliminary study document be prepared by CCIA in collaboration with the sub-unit on Dialogue with People of other Living Faiths, for consideration by the Executive Committee in July 1984, on the problems posed by the recurrent and often violent eruption of conflicts between religious communities in many parts of the world. Special attention should also be paid to the implications for people of different religions where the law of the land is drawn from the tenets of one particular religion."

2. The Executive Committee had in mind a number of situations of conflict including violent conflicts where apparently religious factors played a role. Several conflicts around the world are described as religious in popular and media presentation. Among them are 'classical' situations like Northern Ireland and Lebanon and new situations like Punjab (India). There are also situations like Sri Lanka where the religious dimension is present in the conflict. However it is incorrect to say that all such conflicts are conflicts between religious communities. All these situations are complex and the conflicts are the result of a variety of socio-economic and political factors. Religion adds a volatile component to many of them.
3. In the preliminary outline for the study document given to the Executive in July 1984, some of the ways in which religion plays a role in conflicts were identified:
  - Religion as a component of nationalism, especially ethno-nationalism.
  - Religious factors exacerbating tensions or conflicts whose root causes are socio-political and economic.
  - Religious factors and sentiments being deliberately used to heighten tensions.
  - Religious notions of state transforming political institutions and leading to conflicts.
  - Religious fundamentalism or fanaticism influencing state policies substantially.
4. The Executive has proposed that the following aspects also should receive special attention:
  - Erosion of the secular and the identification of the secular with the west.
  - Use of religion in political processes and in influencing policies of governments.

- Growing lack of confidence in governments in many parts of the world by minorities, leading opposition and conflict making use of religion.
  - Tensions resulting from new financial power acquired (from outside) by previously marginalised sections.
  - Religious conflicts used by outside forces to destabilize countries.
5. Some aspects of the following also have to be dealt with in developing the study document:
- Religious pluralism
  - Religious liberty
  - Church, state, community relations
  - Role of religion in reconciliation and peace
  - Role of the churches.



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OUTLINE FOR A STUDY DOCUMENT ON  
"CONFLICT BETWEEN RELIGIOUS COMMUNITIES"

Revised title : ROLE OF RELIGION IN CONFLICTS

1. The Executive Committee of the WCC in its February 1984 meeting adopted the following minute:

"That a preliminary study document be prepared by CCIA in collaboration with the sub-unit on Dialogue with People of other Living Faiths, for consideration by the Executive Committee in July 1984, on the problems posed by the recurrent and often violent eruption of conflicts between religious communities in many parts of the world. Special attention should also be paid to the implications for people of different religions where the law of the land is drawn from the tenets of one particular religion."

2. In view of the complexity and sensitivity of the subject it was felt that it will be good if an outline of such a study document is discussed by the Executive. A preliminary study document along with analysis of a few situations will be presented to the Executive in February 1985, after discussions within CCIA and DFI. The document will then be further developed before the next Central Committee.

3. The Executive Committee had in mind a number of situations of conflict including violent conflict where apparently religious factors played a role. Several conflicts around the world are described as religious in popular and media presentation. Among them are 'classical' situations like Northern Ireland and Lebanon and new situations like Punjab (India) and Sudan. There are also situations like Sri Lanka where the religious component is present in the conflict. However, it is incorrect to say that all such conflicts are conflicts between religious communities. All these situations are complex and the conflicts are the result of a variety of socio-economic and political factors. Religion adds a volatile component to many of them.

The topic is of such a broad nature that the scope of the study document has to be limited and defined carefully. However, a few general indications of some of the new political and religious trends may be necessary to provide the context.

4. On the political level as a result of a variety of reasons there is a whole series of upheavals against established state structures, especially in the developing regions of the world.

In several instances they reflect demands for greater participation of people and recognition of identity. Such demands have been often channelled into ethnic, regional or religious opposition and even revolt. Primordial identities like nation, religion, language, and ethnicity are being reinforced partly as a result of insecurity, discriminatory treatment suffered by minorities and often as an authentic search for identity. The affirmation of subnational, autonomous or independent identities should not be condemned right away, though they may appear to have a negative communal image. But in several cases this has led to violent conflicts.

The challenge to the nation state comes from numerically significant ethnic groups which have retained or have developed or are in the process of developing self-awareness and which demand formal recognition of their distinct identities. Ethno-nationalism, also called sub-nationalism has two varieties, one, the national self-awareness of ethnic groups concentrated in compact geographical areas and the other, temporarily scattered ethnic minorities which nevertheless claim to form a national identity. In many instances religion is a social base of ethno-nationalism and there is a mixing of religious and political symbols.

5. These tensions and upheavals are taking place at a time characterized by violence and militarism. Therefore many conflicts which could be resolved peacefully have become violent. The arms race, open and clandestine, accelerating in most parts of the world also contributes to this.

6. In the CCIA Study Paper on Religious Liberty (Central Committee) it was said "The present era is characterized by what might be called 'a crisis of the secular'". The predominant trend in Western industrial culture during the twentieth century has been an ever expanding secularization of society, progressively pushing the religious dimension from operative participation towards the fringes of society, into the private realm. Secularization became an integral part of the dominant ideological systems whose developmental models were exported throughout the world. The last decade has seen an amazing resurgence of religion. It appears we are in an era of religious revival and return of the sacral. Not everything about the resurgence of religions is a blessing. While there is on one hand the search for deeper understanding of the liberating, humanitarian aspects of religion, on the other there is the ugly face of fanaticism and antagonism involving suppression of minority rights and large-scale violation of human rights.

7. In the Introduction to "Nairobi to Vancouver" it is stated "But what is significant about the present religiosity is its politicization. This is reflected in a variety of phenomena around the world. Religious fundamentalism has asserted itself in politics either by the transformation of political institutions or by attempts to exert direct influence on political decision-making. This has led to new tensions within and between nations. In some regions of the world it has added new dimensions to already existing conflicts".

8. While this religious resurgence has political implications in various ways the most significant is what is known as 'political Islam'. The Islamic world, like the rest of the 'Third World' has been struggling to free itself from Western political and economic domination, to redefine its own identity and to formulate its own response to Western ideas. In the process a great number of new Muslim states have come into being, and some have been transformed.

9. The Executive Committee minute refers to "the implications for people of different religions in states where the law of the land is drawn from the tenets of one particular religion". This also applies to a number of situations but is perhaps more directly related to the Islamic revival and the adoption of Islamic law by some countries. "Sharia-Divine Law. An important example of a system of law which is religious in meaning, and which applies not by virtue of citizenship or allegiance to a state, but by virtue of religious application and on condition that there is an Islamic ruler to enforce it. It is applicable primarily between Muslims (although it contains provision for non-Muslims within the jurisdiction) and takes the concept of obligation, rather than that of right as central. The law originated in the Koran and the traditions attributed to Muhammed and is regarded as immutable, since it consists in what Muhammed knew, by revelation of the divine will." (Roger Scruton - A Dictionary of Political Thought). The implementation of Sharia with respect to non-Muslims has to be analyzed with reference to a few countries.

10. It is proposed to analyze the religious components in a few selected situations of conflict.

11. In a preliminary way, several ways in which religion plays a role in conflicts can be identified:

- Religion as a component of nationalism, especially ethno-nationalism,
- Religious factors exacerbating tensions or conflicts whose root causes are socio-political and economic,
- Religious factors and sentiments being deliberately used to heighten tensions,
- Religious notions of state transforming political institutions and leading to conflicts,
- Religious fundamentalism or fanaticism influencing state policies substantially.

12. Some aspects of the following also have to be dealt with in developing the study document:

- Religious pluralism (some of the religious traditions do not have a theological or ideological base to deal with religious pluralism),
- Religious liberty,
- Church, state, community relations,
- Role of religion in reconciliation and peace,
- Role of the churches.

ROLE OF RELIGION IN CONFLICTS

1. The preliminary outline had identified the following ways in which religion plays a role in conflicts can be identified:

- Religion as a component of nationalism, especially ethno-nationalism,
- Religious factors exacerbating tensions or conflicts whose root-causes are socio-political and economic,
- Religious factors and sentiments being deliberately used to heighten tensions,
- Religious notions of state transforming political institutions and leading to conflicts,
- Religious fundamentalism or fanaticism influencing state policy substantially.

2. The Executive Committee in July 1984 pointed out that the following aspects should receive special attention:

- erosion of the secular and the identification of the secular with the West,
- use of religion in political processes and in influencing policies of governments,
- growing lack of confidence in governments in many parts of the world by minorities leading to opposition and conflict, making use of religion,
- tensions resulting from new financial power acquired (from outside) by previously marginalized sections,
- religious conflicts used by outside forces to destabilize countries.

3. Further work has begun in the analysis of the role of religion in the following situations of conflicts:

- Lebanon
- Sri Lanka
- Northern Ireland
- Sudan
- Punjab

A lot of information is available and studies have been made on the situations. The attempt is to point out some of the ways in which religion has played a role in the conflicts.

4. A small group (seven persons) will be convened in May/June to work on a draft study document.