

Evangelical Review of Theology

A Global Forum

GENERAL EDITOR: THOMAS SCHIRRMACHER

Volume 40 • Number 1 • January 2016

Published by



for
WORLD EVANGELICAL
ALLIANCE
Theological Commission

The Code: 'Christian Witness in a Multi-Religious World'—Its Significance and Reception

Thomas Schirrmacher

I The Document

Its origin

The question of ethics in missions and dialogue has in recent years increasingly been asked in intra-Christian dialogue¹ as well as in relationships between religions.² However, a political question has also been asked, and that is the extent to which the human right of religious freedom, including the right to public self-expression on the part of religions and the right to reli-

gious conversion, may and must be limited by other human rights.³ Christian witness is not an ethics-free space; it requires an ethical foundation which is biblically based, so that we truly do what Christ has assigned us to do.

With this background, the Pontifical Council of Interreligious Dialogue (PCID) and Interreligious Relations and Dialogue (IRRD, the dialogue programme of WCC) started a process of small and larger consultation. WEA entered on IIRD's side. This process finally led to the launch of the document, *Christian Witness in a Multi-religious World*⁴ in 2011 by the Vatican, the World Council of Churches (WCC) and

1 See Elmer Thiessen, *The Ethics of Evangelism. A Philosophical Defence of Proselytizing and Persuasion*, Exeter: Paternoster, 2011; Pope Benedict XVI, Encyclica, *Spe salvi*, 2007.

2 All codes on mission existing worldwide, secular, religious or Christian, are discussed and compared in Matthew K. Richards, Are L. Svendsen, Rainer Bless, 'Codes of Conduct for Religious Persuasion. The Legal Practice and Best Practices', in *International Journal for Religious Freedom* (Cape Town) 3 (2010), 2, 65-104. The ecumenical document is discussed pp. 67, 93-94, 103.

3 See the Oslo Declaration, 'Oslo Declaration, Missionary Activities and Human Rights: Recommended Ground Rules for Missionary Activities', www.oslocoalition.org/mhr.php (5.7.2011).

4 http://www.worldangelicals.org/pdf/1106Christian_Witness_in_a_Multi-Religious_World.pdf

the World Evangelical Alliance (WEA).

The document does not have any canonical or legal character. Situations in different countries and cultures are in fact so different that short, succinct statements can often not do them justice. For that reason, general guidelines and recommendations have been formulated at the last part of the document. (Throughout this article I will call it 'the document' for the sake of convenience.)

Tracking its use

Even though Cardinal Jean-Louis Tauran stated at the launch of the document: 'Today represents an historic moment in our shared Christian witness' and the WEA said, 'Today we write history',⁵ one rarely knows of documents of this kind what their future will be after having been launched. This was especially so in this case because this document did not fit any earlier category, and it was not clear how it would be received beyond the interreligious dialogue community that produced it.

But somehow the document made it! Already by 2014 it has become a standard reference in interreligious dialogue and in mission. Rosalee Velloso Ewell, director of the Theological Commission (TC) of WEA, and John Baxter-Brown, formerly with WCC, now with the TC, state:

Over the past two-and-a-half years the document had been studied and appropriated in many places: Brazil, India, Norway, Thailand, Nigeria,

Myanmar and various other places. Different church bodies have used the document to draft their own codes of conduct; mission agencies and international relief organizations have also adapted its content and used it as a study guide for staff working in inter-religious contexts. In some cases the meetings to discuss the document and its contextualization have been the very first truly all-Christian gathering in that country.⁶

Clare Amos, WCC programme executive for inter-religious dialogue and cooperation, commented in a meeting of all Canadian churches: 'The willingness of such a wide range of Christians to participate in this process is a very significant development. The key task now is to ensure that recommendations of the document are widely known and adopted through the whole Christian constituency.'⁷ Similarly, Fr. Indunil J. K. Kodithuwakku, undersecretary of PCID, wrote: 'If implemented rightly, the recommendations for Conduct' certainly will pave the way for new ecumenical and interreligious relationship ...'⁸

It is amazing, that there has been

⁶ 'Christian Witness in a Multi-Religious World': An Interview with Rosalee Velloso Ewell and John Baxter-Brown (11.2.2014) <http://imeslebanon.wordpress.com/2014/02/11/christian-witness-in-a-multi-religious-world-an-interview-with-rosalee-velloso-ewell-and-john-baxter-brown/>.

⁷ <http://www.oikoumene.org/en/press-centre/news/canadian-churches-reflect-on-identity-in-a-multi-religious-world>

⁸ Fr. Indunil J. K. Kodithuwakku, 'Christian Witness in a Multi-religious World', *Pontificum Consilium pro Dialogo inter Religiones* 137 (2011/2012): June-December 2011, 269-272.

⁵ Both quoted from www.bucer.ch/uploads/tx_org/BQ0172_eng_.pdf.

no real criticism of the document in principle. This is even true for the vast majority of Evangelicals and Pentecostals. I know of evangelical criticism of the content from Evangelicals only in the US, but none of it reached any major evangelical body, mission society or theological school. Also where in conciliar or Catholic circles view authors raised the questions as to whether Evangelicals really meant what they signed or the fact that the authors missed the whole debate on proselytism, such criticism was not directed against the content as such.

All three bodies have sent the document to their major member bodies several times (thus to all Catholic bishop conferences, all WCC member churches, all WEA national bodies), they have propagated it on their websites and printed the document in books and readers to be used among their 'members' worldwide. The WCC and WEA websites offer translations into Dutch, French, German, Spanish; the Vatican website offers translations into French, German, Italian, Korean, Portuguese, Spanish, and Swahili. There are official translations into Swedish, Russian and Arabic not available in the web.

Already in my short speech at the launch of the document,⁹ I started to gather information on the history of the

process, which I later expanded.¹⁰ In the IIRF archive, we store not only the whole launch on film and archive photos of people involved, but also texts, press releases and discussions around the document 2011-2014. When a small group of people, having been involved in the process that led to the document, met in Geneva on invitation of Clare Amos of WCC, to review the use of the document in the 18 months since the launch,¹¹ all agreed, that the reception of the document went far beyond what anyone had expected.

Having kept up to date with the use of the document worldwide, I would judge that the three bodies are on an equal level in emphasizing the document globally. That is, they all constantly use the document on international, regional and national levels on their own motivation without waiting for the others to go ahead first. The document seems to be first of all to be

¹⁰ See 'An Overview of the 5-year process leading to today's launch of the ecumenical recommendations "Christian Witness in a Multi-Religious World"' (28.11.2011). <http://www.thomasschirmmacher.net/blog/an-overview-of-the-5-year-process-leading-to-todays-launch-of-the-ecumenical-recommendations-christian-witness-in-a-multi-religious-world/>; Christian Troll, Thomas Schirmmacher: 'Der innerchristliche Ethikkodex für Mission'. *Materialdienst der EZW* 74 (2011) 8: 293-299 (Text S. 295-299).

¹¹ 'Meeting on reception of guidelines' (1.1.2013). http://www.oikoumene.org/en/resources/documents/wcc-programmes/inter-religious-dialogue-and-cooperation/christian-identity-in-pluralistic-societies/meeting-on-reception-of-guidelines?set_language=en; see the report by Clare Amos. 'Cooperation, Conversion and Christian Witness: The Continuing Conversation', *Current Dialogue* 54 (July 2013): 19.

⁹ 'People involved in the five year process leading to the ecumenical recommendations "Christian Witness in a Multi-Religious World"'. <http://www.thomasschirmmacher.net/blog/people-involved-in-the-five-year-process-leading-to-the-ecumenical-recommendations-christian-witness-in-a-multi-religious-world-whom-i-want-to-thank/> (22.1.2012).

in line with the thinking of each body itself and not because it is an ecumenical document.

II The fourfold results of the document

The executive director of the Theological Commission of WEA, Rosalee Velloso Ewell from Brazil, stated at a study day on the document in Beirut with representation of all three major bodies and a Muslim speaker:

This document is unique and its necessity lies in its nature: it is genuinely a mission document, it is genuinely an ecumenical document, it is genuinely an inter-religious document, it is genuinely a biblical document, and it is a historic document. Despite its brevity and simplicity, it is necessary in that these things have never been said jointly, by these three bodies who represent about 95% of Christians worldwide.¹²

Similarly Klaus Schäfer, Director of the Center for Mission and Ecumenism of the 'Nordkirche', a German Lutheran member church of WCC, endorsed the document for the Lutheran churches in Germany (VELKD), despite missing some additional topics, and sees five areas that make the document special: 1 ecumenical relations, 2 moving dialogue and mission mindedness towards each other, 3 ethical standards for mission, 4 using human rights argumentation concerning mission and 5 the joint

emphasis on the 'missio dei'.¹³

From the Catholic side one can hear similar things. Fr. Indunil J. K.Kodithuwakku wrote several similar articles on behalf of PCID, looking back one year¹⁴ and two years after the launch of the document¹⁵ he writes: 'It is the first document of its kind in the history of the Church' because 'The three Christian world bodies' did it on the broadest ecumenical level. 'Representatives of 90% of the world Christian population have formulated an ecumenical missionary approach to witness to the world. Its success depends on how respective churches and ecclesiastical communities implement its recommendations for Christian mission worldwide.' He adds: 'The document also gives birth to a new ecumenical theology of mission.'

Let me systemise the four areas or effects of the document, even though these points can be found in most statements on the document in one form or the other:

1. Interreligious dialogue was ac-

¹³ Klaus Schäfer. "das christliche Zeugnis in einer multireligiösen Welt": Einführende Bemerkungen zu den, Empfehlungen für einen Verhaltenskodex'. VELKD Informationen Nr. 136—April—Juni 2012: 12-21 pp. 12, 13, 16, 20, 21.

¹⁴ Fr. Indunil J. K. Kodithuwakku. 'Christian Witness in a Multi-religious World ...: First Anniversary: Rethinking back and Looking ahead'. Pontificum Consilium pro Dialogo inter Religiones 137 (2011/2012): June-December 2011, 269-272 = Vidyajoti Journal of Theological Reflection, 76/10 (2012 Oct), 749-759; also in East Asian Pastoral Review 49/4 (2012).

¹⁵ Fr. Indunil J. K. Kodithuwakku. 'Christian Witness in a Multi-religious World: Recommendations for Conduct', *International Bulletin of Missionary Research* 37 (2013), 109-113.

¹² <http://imeslebanon.wordpress.com/2014/02/13/christian-witness-in-a-multi-religious-world-recommendations-for-conduct-event-highlights/>.

cepted by all three bodies and was no longer seen in opposition to the mission mindedness of the church.

2. It brought missiologists of all camps together and became a major document for mission studies. It made the discussion of 'the ethics of mission' on the base of the 'missio dei' an integral part of mission theology.

3. Ecumenical relations: Meetings with the same range of the three world bodies became normal on an international, continental and national level, as never before.

4. Human rights: Interreligious dialogue and mission go hand in hand with human rights thinking and human rights are seen as a joint ecumenical heritage.

1. Interreligious dialogue

This of course was the original intent of the document.¹⁶ The (Buddhist) Prime Minister of Thailand said in his welcome speech at the final consultation for the document in Bangkok, that it 'is indeed an important step for the promotion of inter-religious harmony'.¹⁷

We will see that a Muslim representative spoke at the event in Beirut, and a Hindu representative in Toronto. The Council of Centers on

Jewish-Christian Relations proposes the document to be studied by dialogue groups.¹⁸ Spring Hill College adds the document to its 'Theological Library: Jewish-Christian Dialogue'.¹⁹ Rabbi A. James Rudin started his positive comments on the document: 'In a rare showing of Christian cooperation'.²⁰ At the World Assembly of Religions for Peace in Vienna, the document was discussed in several workshops. As the Vatican, WCC and WEA were all represented by their leadership and their interreligious dialogue staff, it was a good chance to evaluate the document.

The document gave interreligious dialogue a prominent place in ecumenical relations and ended the old discussion of mission versus dialogue. Yet in view of the fact that the original intent of the document was to further interreligious dialogue, one has to admit, that there is not much evidence of results beyond the Christian community.

2. Mission studies

The second unexpected area of influence is the academic study of mission. Missiologists and professors of mission studies around the globe welcomed the document. It became a topic at the International Association of Mission Studies (IAMS) annual meeting in August 2012 in Toronto, Canada, with

¹⁶ The original programme is spelled out in the opening plenary in Toulouse: Thomas Schirmmacher, "But with gentleness and respect". Why missions should be ruled by ethics', short version: in: *Current Dialogue* (World Council of Churches) 50 (February 2008), 55-66.

¹⁷ <http://www.thaigov.go.th/en/speech-press-release/item/57612-address-by-prime-minister-to-the-third-consultation-meeting-of-pcid-wcc-and-wea-at-arnoma-hotel.html> (25.1.2011)

¹⁸ <http://www.ccjr.us/dialogika-resources/themes-in-todays-dialogue/conversion/954-wcc2011>

¹⁹ <http://www.shc.edu/theolibrary/jewish.htm>

²⁰ A. James Rudin. 'Christian Witness In A Multi-Religious World'. *The Huffington Post: Religion*. 18.8.2011. http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2011/08/18/christian-witness-in-a-muti-religious-world_n_930912.html.

Evangelicals and non-Evangelicals presenting the consequences for mission studies together.

Dana L. Robert writes in her report: 'Forty years of the American Society of Missiology': 'With the shifting configuration of world Christianity, fresh patterns of ecumenical conversation became important, such as the Global Christian Forum and the 2011 document, "Christian Witness in a Multi-Religious World."²¹ The emphasis on the 'Missio Dei' concept made the document of great interest to Catholic, conciliar and evangelical missiologists alike and proved that this concept has become a point of reference for all.²²

The document has become a standard point of reference in all kinds of studies in the area of the science of mission²³ and from my judgment since 2013 has become the document that is quoted more than any other in academic mission studies.

In Germany the document led the conciliar Deutsche Gesellschaft für Missionswissenschaft (DGMV), (mainly professors teaching missions at universities), and the Association of German Speaking Evangelical Missiologists (AFEM) together when AFEM was invited to present the document at the yearly convention of DGMV in the

Akademie Chateau du Liebfrauenburg in Liebfrauenberg, Elsass, France, September 2012.²⁴ It also led to a closer relation between AFEM and other evangelical institutions and the Evangelische Missionswerk in Deutschland (EMW), especially during the official process of acceptance of the document in Germany.

3. Ecumenical relations

The goal of the document was not to improve ecumenical relations as such; otherwise different bodies like the Pontifical Council for Christian Unity (PCCU) would have been involved. It was specialists on dialogue, religions and mission working together on behalf of the responsible structures within the Vatican, WCC and WEA. It was built on a longstanding ecumenical relation between PCID and IRRD, with the Religious Liberty Commission (RLC) of WEA coming in on the WCC's side. But the pure fact that in the end, for the first time ever, the three largest Christian bodies signed a document not only made history in itself, but changed ecumenical relations to the good and on a worldwide scale.

There has always been cooperation between the Vatican and the WCC; there was and is an ongoing dialogue between Vatican and WEA. In recent years, the WCC and WEA have started to cooperate in conferences and human rights activities. The Global Christian Forum (GCF) was instituted and still is carried out by the Catholic Church, the WCC and WEA, as well as other Chris-

²¹ Dana L. Robert. 'Forty years of the American Society of Missiology: retrospect and prospect'. *Missiology: An International Review* 42 (2014): 6-25, 19.

²² See my German book, *Missio Dei: Mission aus dem Wesen Gottes* (Hamburg: RVB & Nürnberg: VTR, 2011).

²³ Eg Steven Bradbury. 'Mission, Missionaries and Development', 413-429, in Matthew Clarke, *Handbook on Research of Development and Research* (Cheltenham: Edward Elgar Publ., 2013), 426-427.

²⁴ The German news <http://www.bucer.de/ressource/details/bonner-querschnitte-312012-ausgabe-225.html> (6.11.2012).

tian World Communions. But when the three bodies signed the document and brought it to their regional and national levels, they automatically brought up the question of the discussion and adaption of the document

The Academia Christiana in Seoul organised a symposium, 'A New Horizon for World Christianity: The Convergence between the Ecumenical and Evangelical Understandings of Unity and Mission?' The document was not the only reason for this symposium, but it remained central to the debate between two Germans representing WCC and WEA (Martin Robra, Deputy General Secretary of the WCC, and Thomas Schirmmacher) and two Koreans working in high leadership positions in WCC and WEA (Joo Seop Keum, Director of the Commission on World Mission and Evangelism of WCC and Sang Bok Kim, then Chairman of International Council of WEA).²⁵ A report states:

Robra labelled the joint declaration 'Christian Witness in a Multi-Religious World' as a major step forward. Additionally, global Christian bodies are less and less interested in expanding their own institutions or making more of themselves. Rather, they are out to promote actual cooperation between all Christians, also with those outside of these bodies.²⁶

²⁵ All lectures were published in English and Korean in Jong Yun Lee (Hg.), *A New Horizon of World Christianity: International Symposium* (Seoul: Academia Christiana of Korea, 2012).

²⁶ <http://www.bucer.de/ressource/details/bonner-querschnitte-352012-ausgabe-229-eng.html>

4. Human rights

The question of how the human right of freedom of religion and belief (including what is integral to this, the right to propagate one's own religion) can be balanced with other rights, is discussed globally more and more.²⁷ This is a question that concerns all human rights thinking and is not in itself a Christian question only.

But with this document, world Christianity made it clear that not everything done in the name of religious freedom can be justified by human rights; it proclaimed that they deny mission to be *missio dei* if it violates the human rights of others. Human rights thinking is thus as much an ecumenical heritage of all three bodies as it is an integral part of theology, because it is not only valid as a legal category, but it sees human dignity, even importantly, as a God-given right which even mission cannot and will not deny.

That this in itself is a major achievement of the document, has been acknowledged several times from various sides.²⁸

III Conclusion

It is evident that this document, there-

²⁷ Matthew K. Richards, Are L. Svendsen, Rainer Bless, 'Voluntary Codes of Conduct for Religious Persuasion: Effective Tools for Balancing Human Rights and Resolving Conflicts?', *Religion and Human Rights* 6 (2011), 151–183.

²⁸ See Nelu Burcea, Thomas Schirmmacher (Hg.), *Journalul Libertatii de Constinta* (Bukarest: Editura Universitara, 2013); Thomas Schirmmacher, 'Mission und Religionsfreiheit', 113–133 in Marianne Heimbach-Steins, Heiner Bielefeldt (Hg.), *Religionen und Religionsfreiheit* (Würzburg: Ergon Verlag, 2010).

fore, has made a unique place for itself and deserves to be read and studied even more widely. The Asian Movement for Christian Unity (AMCU) meeting in Bangkok, Thailand in December, 2013, set the pattern when it said to its members, 'AMCU VI rejoiced in the uniqueness of "Christian Witness in a Multi-Religious World" which represents the consensus of three major world bodies of the Christian church.' It went on to explain:

'The participants in AMCU VI strongly commend this document to all the churches of Asia.

1. The document should be translated into local languages,
2. The document should be made available to theological colleges and seminaries as significant study material,
3. The document should be used to implement a living dialogue based on the Bible, recognising that Jesus is the focus of mission,
4. The articulated spirit of the document should find its way into bible studies, teaching and preaching for all ages and interest groups,
5. The churches should study the document together and use the

document for interfaith dialogue,

6. The churches should respect different cultures and apply the insights of the document in a culturally sensitive way, and
7. The churches should be prepared to accommodate and understand different approaches to implementing the document."²⁹

This is a commendable program, and others have taken up the spirit of it.³⁰

A much fuller record of the use of the text worldwide has been published as 'Christian Witness in a Multi-Religious World—Three Years On'. *Current Dialogue* 56 (Dec) 2014: 67-79; <http://www.oikoumene.org/en/what-we-do/current-dialogue-magazine/current-dialogue-56>

²⁹ 'Common Statement of the Sixth Meeting of the Asian Movement for Christian Unity (AMCU VI)' (5.12.2013), <http://cca.org.hk/home/asian-movement-for-christian-unity-amcu/>

³⁰ For details of some, see 'Christian Witness in a Multi-Religious World—Three Years On', *Current Dialogue* 56 (Dec) 2014: 67-79; <http://www.oikoumene.org/en/what-we-do/current-dialogue-magazine/current-dialogue-56>.