Reclaiming "responsible freedom"

By Mark Edwards
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Amid all the recent debates about religious dialogue as a means to disarm religiously inspired terrorism, we are about to celebrate the 75th anniversary of the World Council of Churches. The WCC was formed in 1938 but officially launched ten years later in Amsterdam, and its two founding committees—“Faith and Order” and “Life and Work”—suggested how the council would serve both spiritual and political purposes.

The WCC was never intended to be a “super-church,” as critics charged. Its goal was to facilitate local and regional inter-Protestant or “ecumenical” identity, fellowship and service on a global scale. Over the decades, the WCC’s function as a clearinghouse for cross-denominational communion and interfaith dialogue has moved to the forefront. But 75 years ago, the geopolitical leadership of the churches was the center of ecumenical conversation.

The WCC was founded just after World War II, and its primary aim was to transcend the American-Soviet rivalry—particularly when pressed to do so by its Asian constituency. The founders knew what they were against—secularism, totalitarian forms of nationalism, militarism and nuclear war, unfettered capitalism—but what were they for?

After years of deliberation, the Amsterdam planners adopted “The Responsible Society” as the best name for their common vision of a good society. The Responsible Society was intended to “preserve the possibility of a satisfying life for ‘little men in big societies.’” For people caught up in the Cold War, ecumenists offered a reinvention of small-town sociability—of the sort many of them had personally enjoyed. “For a society to be responsible under modern conditions,” WCC delegates maintained,

> it is required that the people have freedom to control, to criticise and to change their governments, that power be made responsible by law and tradition, and be distributed as widely as possible through the whole community. It is required

> that economic justice and provision of equality of opportunity be established for all the members of society.

Most American and European ecumenicals looked to Labor Party England as the model Responsible Society, especially after its adoption of nationalized healthcare. Ecumenicals in general wanted to see stronger welfare state measures wedded to advances in participatory democracy through unions and other civic organizations. The cure for “big government” was not a return to gunslinger individualism. It was the maximization of “responsible freedom” through public-private partnership.

During the late 1960s, the WCC abandoned talk of responsibility. It did this out of respect for global political and cultural difference. American and British ecumenicals had long been aware of their difficulty in trying to represent their global southern constituency. After Asian ecumenists left the WCC in protest against the Korean War, the executive committee held special meetings in India. Thereafter, the WCC began to endorse the “responsible emancipation” of colonized people, to meet with anticolonial leaders like Ghana’s Kwame Nkrumah and Indian prime minister Jawaharlal Nehru, and to directly support global southern “self-development.”

And the idea of a “Responsible Society” was changed to a “Responsible World Society.” In many ways, the WCC did successfully position itself as the Protestant wing of Nehru’s anti-Cold War Non-Aligned Movement (NAM). As complaints continued to rise against Western imperialism—and against WCC complicity in that arrangement—ecumenicals chose to follow their post-colonial partners in endorsing liberation theology.

The word “responsibility” is present in American political culture today, but it has been robbed of its social ethical seriousness. It has become the rhetorical servant of personal autonomy instead of its master. Progressive liberals today would do well to take this countercultural word and discourse back from the right. They can no longer afford simply to streamline and sustain New Deal and Great Society programs, as important as that is. Responsible governance—in terms of more investments in education, community revitalization and infrastructure—is badly needed.

As ecumenical Protestants realized nearly 75 years ago, a too-big-not-to-fail society must make way for one that promotes “responsible freedom” for all its members.

This post has been corrected to clarify the ten-year gap between the WCC's initial founding and its official establishment.

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