The World Conference on Church and Society, Geneva 1966, is a very important Conference, as it is unique in its kind. Analysing below the methodological principles of this Conference I will explain why it is so important and unique. The idea of its organization belongs to the most important leading personalities of the Ecumenical Movement, as W. A. Visser’t Hooft, P. Abrecht, G. Blake, M. M. Thomas. Basically, it follows the main position about the social issues that was expressed in the 1st General Assembly in Amsterdam (1948). That was the position of the «responsible society». But the originality of this Conference is that most of the participants were laics and experts. So was posed the question «what we should do as Christians about the situation of society and its problems». This is a very important element, because this question has to do with the Christians as members of the society and as citizens of different nations. They were from seventy nations, as it is mentioned in the Message of the Conference about the universal participation. But this basic methodological element of the Conference was put aside in the following years and the criterion of the participation of the institutional Churches prevailed. It seems to me that this change was an essential mistake. The problems of the social structure, poverty, social exclusion, unemployment, peace, role of state and others like these are social problems and we must turn to society in order to face them. This is a main methodological principle to approach social

---

1 This is a paper that was presented in the fiftieth anniversary of the World Conference on Church and Society held by the Central Committee of the WCC in Geneva (2006).
problems. It is a way out from the narrow ecclesiastical environment to the social one. This means that the Christians as members of the society and the church, and churches as collective bodies, which act in the society, can contribute to facing the social problems.

Although this Conference is adapted to its time, it does not follow the dominant culture, but it takes a critical position towards it. It is really a period of rapid development of technology and economics, while people are still trying to get over the suffering of the Second World War, but at the same time many people demand the social situation to be changed. Intense social criticism is developed and unjust structures and relations are denounced on the local and universal level. The World Conference responds to this situation and it is obvious, from what was developed in it, that participants were conscious of the reality of their time.

What the charismatic Visser’t Hooft expresses in his initial speech are characteristic. He knows that the purely religious language is not understandable and sometimes even unacceptable by several people. But it is necessary for the positions that will be expressed to have a wide appeal. At this point it should be added that we need a rational language to approach the social problems. For this reason he proposes developing a free reflection and expressing the main positions using an understandable language. This problem has already occupied the Ecumenical Movement from interbellum. Then, J. H. Oldham proposed the important theory of the “middle axioms”. According to this theory a way should be found for the principles of Christian faith to be intermediated by other concepts in order to make clear their implications to the social and cultural context. It is known that something that cannot be understood and does not interrelate with reality, cannot find a response. Especially this basic position is forgotten by Churches which speak a religious language that cannot be easily understood by people. This means objectivation of the religious language, while the most important thing is to be able to influence society. But this influence can be achieved by a language that corresponds to the contemporary social understanding. Especially, in the case of social problems it must be rational.
But let us see more specifically some basic elements of the methodology that was followed by the Conference, analysing some basic points of its Message. As the participants were not simply representatives of the institutional Churches, but most of them were laics, it is emphasized that they live the reality of the Church as people of God. The main issue they face is the mission of Christians in the world. They must respond to this call by doing a serious study of the social issues and by engaging in dynamic action in the society. The social issues require action and this action has a political dimension, with the wide understanding of politics. This Conference does not fear to speak about politics, as is the case later, when many of the institutional Churches criticized the World Council claiming that it makes politics. But they wouldn’t like to see that they themselves also make politics. The difference is that this politics, i.e. the second one, is related to the institutional interests, while the right thing is to do politics with the wide understanding of the word, which means social activity.

How is it possible for people who are from different Christian communities to discuss? Do they have a common basis? According to the Conference, this basis is the common Christian faith, from which results the responsibility for work and activity in the society. At this point, it follows the basic principle that was already emphasized by the Ecumenical Patriarchate in its letter to the Christian Churches in 1920. Its position was, to see in common the problems of society putting apart the dogmatic differences. The same was later expressed with the well-known «dogma separates, praxis unites». Let me remind you here that this basic principle was not heard for the first time in the Ecumenical Movement, but it was a slogan from the 18th century, in order to put aside religious differences and face social problems, which were common for all people, by finding basic principles and values, which would have an ecumenical acceptance.

However, this basis is not enough to face social problems, because there are different proposals about them. It is clear, that these different proposals are influenced by other social, political and ideological positions which many times are oppositional. Unfortunately, faith alone cannot lead to the finding of the appropriate solutions to the social problems. The Conference proposes dia-
logue as an alternative, claiming that the dialogue leaves open the field for thought. This means that they considered the free reflection, the use of logic and the free expression as basic elements for the methodology that aims to approach social problems. To all these we could add, according to our contemporary knowledge from social sciences, that the empirical description and analysis of the social problems and the finding of their causes could be a good basis for this dialogue. Nobody can a priori know the solutions to the social problems, but this work can constitute the basis for further dialogue. The participation of laics and experts in the Conference created a very good opportunity for dialogue.

The Message of the Conference goes forward giving another important methodological principle of social ethics. In order for this work to be realized, the Church has to accept a steady dialogue between the social sciences and theology. The former search the social problems and from the latter come those who deal with these problems in practice, if this is the case. But this important dimension has not been accepted in many cases, although it is a basic presupposition. We have to use the contemporary scientific means in order to search the social problems. Although the Conference makes reference to tradition, it must some time be understood that tradition cannot provide answers to the problems of a rapidly changing society as the modern one, because tradition faces problems of another differently structured society. Moreover, it is given that nobody knows a priori their solution. For this reason there are not any authorities who can lead the others. In addition, the Church, as it is understood here, is the whole of the believers and not simply the institutional Churches.

Another basic principle is expressed by the Message of this Conference. As Christians, we must be in favour of the change of society. This signifies a change of social structures, social relations which have a hierarchical structure, release from stereotypes, recognition of the value of every human being, man or woman, democratic structures etc. This really surpasses the conservative attitudes of some institutional Churches which will not accept the basic modern formation of the world, but also the application of democratic principles in their function.
The social world is not static, but people formulate it by their action. They are all responsible for changing it and making it humane and just. This means that they are free. The free human beings have responsibility for their actions, while the ones who follow pastoral and hierarchical suggestions are not equally responsible. For this reason, the acceptance of the concept for the change of society incorporates the freedom and the responsibility of human beings. These are really modern views which are opposite on the one side to the traditional ones, and on the other to the practices that some institutional Churches follow, thinking that they know everything and that their role is to teach and lead.

Moreover, it is recognized that the Church or Churches cannot cover the whole world. This happens because not all the world is christian, some Churches are minorities in their society or they have many members who are not active. This point is very important as religion, especially the Christian Church, and society are not identical. It is necessary to take into account the real situation in relation to the problems of society. We cannot consider all human beings to be Church and then to see how we can change the social world. The social problems are pressing and cannot wait. Moreover, we must give so much value to the material human dimension as to the spiritual one in order to face them. The one-sided interest in the spiritual dimension creates other problems, which is not possible to explain here. But it is important in the present situation, where the Churches do not cover the whole society in which the problems are created, that the Churches should cooperate with all of them who belong to religious or secular movements and have the same sensitivities. This one belongs to the proposals of the Conference. All this activity offers the opportunity to the Christians to give their witness. And witness means service to the others. A life of service contributes to the discovering of the real mission of the Church.

The last urge in the Message is addressed to the Churches and calls them to make repentance. What is the meaning of repentance? It is the search and the knowledge of the real role of the practices and finally the change of mentality and behaviour. But one cannot make repentance when they always apologize and see «enemies» everywhere. If one apologizes they think that all their
practices are right and the others cannot see it. This is a big mistake. The Churches must hear how the others see them, and they have to search what the real implications of their practices are. In relation to our special issue, this of the church and society, the Church must take into account the real situation of the society and not to create an image of society that is convenient to it, i.e. an image of the past, when the institutional Churches had a leading role. Diaconia to the society and a leading position in it are oppositional things. Moreover, all these have not any place in this reflection when we speak about the social responsibility of Christians.

This way we can depart from the institutional “temptations”. The question about the responsibility of the Christians in the society and the social world takes us out of the stalemate. In this case, Christians are not weak people for whom the church institutions need to decide, but social actors who reflect and decide to act in the society facing its problems.

Let us continue this analysis by making a comparison with the later developments and the position of the institutional Churches, especially the Orthodox ones. Remembering the question about the repentance (metanoia) we must answer without doubt that it means self-criticism, something that the Churches avoid to do. But why do they not want to make self-criticism? Is it, because it will show that they have forgotten they must be collective bodies, which include many members and not only institutional ones that function as closed groups? Have they allowed the development of a free dialogue in their field and initiatives to be taken by Christians? Have they given the opportunity to the Christians to know their responsibility in society and to reflect on the issue of what kind of society they would like? The search for just relations, the facing of poverty and social exclusion, the overcoming of racism and sexism do not necessarily presuppose the acceptance of religious views by all people. But of course, Christians must be among the first who should be interested in overcoming these problems. The social problems are not a means for missionary work. They need responsible people who can change the problematic structures and relations through concrete actions. Moreover, some of these problems are sharper in some Churches.
than in Society. There are problems which Society tries to overcome but some Churches insist on keeping hierarchical relations which do not apply to our time.

The continuity showed that the Message of this World Conference and its methodology were not understood and discussed, especially by the Orthodox Churches. The claim that the World Council is a Council of Churches, i.e. of institutional Churches, has reduced to the minimum the possibility to develop a wider participation and problematism. It might be theoretically supported that the Churches are collective bodies, but they are practically interested in the leading structure. The objection that the Council makes politics and that this must be reduced, led to introversion. The important methodology of the Conference that proposes the openness to the Society was inverted in order to consider social problems as problems of the Churches. This means identification between Church and Society, something that is not correct.

How is it possible to make a dialogue with the sciences, as the Conference of 1966 proposed, when in 2006 an ecclesiastical leading person in the Orthodox Church of Greece spoke against logic, considering it as “idolatry”? When institutional Churches want to make decisions and guide people by creating texts and codes of social teaching, how can people develop a consciousness of freedom and social responsibility? When churches understand that they can do only what the clergy can do, then, there is no room for imagination, creativity and initiative. When in 2006 the 9th General Assembly makes an appeal for the issue of poverty and the Churches do not search what they do for this, how can we speak about the relations between Church and Society?

I would not like to finish my paper with criticism. Nowadays criticism is not enough, we also need to add positive positions. So, I prefer to report some points of positive action.

- Churches should accept that they live and act in the contemporary society and describe it as it really is.
- They should search for ways to leave room for their members to take creative initiatives.
They should leave their connection with the nation and the national culture in the past. The Church does not aim to save nations and races but only human beings.

They can express critical positions on the problems of contemporary society using proclamations, but at the same time they should do whatever they can in order to help face the problems of everyday life. This effort of the Church should be addressed to all and should be independent of their cultural accession.

One cannot speak about poverty and at the same time not want to see the wealth that some institutional Churches have and use.

It is wrong politics to provoke fears where there are not any. Provoking fear belongs to nationalism and racism and is not compatible with the Church. This means that Churches must not foster racism and nationalism in any way.

It is necessary to overcome the authoritarian positions and relations and the discriminations within the Churches. We cannot speak about society and its problems and at the same time maintain problems that society tries to diminish, as it is the position of women and generally of laics.

When somebody speaks about the respect for the others, the culturally or religiously different, they should care to discuss their relations with the others in a peaceful way through local councils. This means, in the case of Churches, that they should establish national Councils of Churches, where there are not any, as is the case in Greece.

In conclusion I can say that the most important thing is the consistency, the seriousness and the correspondence between words and practices. Jesus Christ praises those who teach by their works (Mt 5:19).
BIBLIOGRAPHY


Petrou, I. S. *Theology and Social Dynamics*. Thessaloniki: Paratiritis, 1993 (in Greek).

Petrou, I. S. *Christianity and Society*. Thessaloniki: Vanias, 2004 (in Greek).


