

# Between context and conflict: the ‘boom’ of Latin American Protestantism in the ecumenical movement (1955–75)\*

**Annegreth Schilling**

Friedberger Landstrasse 76, 60316 Frankfurt am Main, Germany

E-mail: annegreth.schilling@gmail.com

---

## **Abstract**

*The article looks at the entanglement of the international ecumenical movement and Latin American Protestantism in the ‘long 1960s’. It investigates the influence and significance of Latin American liberation theology for the churches and theology around the world. During this period, it was particularly the World Council of Churches (WCC), a worldwide fellowship of Christian churches, which strengthened the efforts of churches from the ‘Third World’ to identify their own theological issues and questions. In this way, the WCC strongly supported Latin American Protestant church leaders and theologians in giving specific attention to their own context. The article argues that the ‘boom’ of Latin American Protestantism within the WCC in the 1960s and early 1970s brought into the global ecumenical movement both new theological concepts, such as revolution and liberation, and individuals exiled from Latin America. Yet this contextual and emancipatory approach revealed at the same time fundamental differences and conflicts between churches of the North and South.*

**Keywords** contextuality, globalization, Latin America, liberation theology, World Council of Churches

---

\* This article presents major results from my research on the boom of Latin American Protestantism in the 1960s and 1970s, drawing on my doctoral thesis, published as Annegreth Schilling, *Revolution, Exil und Befreiung: Der Boom des lateinamerikanischen Protestantismus in der internationalen Ökumene in den 1960er und 1970er Jahren*, Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2016. I am grateful for the various responses to the present article, particularly the many useful comments at the ENIUGH Congress in Paris 2014, as well as the clear and thoughtful recommendations by the anonymous reviewers.

## Introduction: de-Westernization of the World Council of Churches in the 'long 1960s'

In the historiography of the World Council of Churches (WCC), the 1960s and early 1970s are known as *the* period of change.<sup>1</sup> Founded in 1948, the WCC was for a long time seen as a kind of Christian United Nations, under the leadership of representatives from European and North American countries. Member churches included different Protestant denominations (such as Lutheran, Reformed, Presbyterian, Baptist, Methodist, and Anglican) and Orthodox churches.<sup>2</sup> The Roman Catholic Church for its part has never been a member of the WCC; however, it regularly sends representatives and observers to ecumenical meetings, and there are Roman Catholic full members in several WCC commissions.

The two decades between 1955 and 1975 were a period marked by the re-envisioning of ecumenical self-understanding, and by worldwide cooperation between churches. Eugene Carson Blake, the second general secretary of the WCC, from 1966–1972, stated in 1966 that, in order to renew itself, the WCC must follow the path of de-Westernization: 'No longer dare the World Council of Churches rest comfortably in Geneva with tokens of Orthodoxy in its staff and committees. It must struggle to lose its westernness in a new ecumenicity. But this transformation will not come without effort.'<sup>3</sup> A new ecumenicity through transformation: Blake presented this goal as a new way of being a church in a global world. A truly global community of churches was only possible if the churches began to 'lose their westernness'. However, as a pastor from the Presbyterian Church in the United States, who was strongly engaged in the civil rights movement at the side of Martin Luther King, Blake knew that this transition would not be possible without conflict.<sup>4</sup>

In the history of the WCC, the 1960s and early 1970s marked a decisive turning point, as the beginning of a globalization process leading the World Council from being a mainly European- and North American-oriented institution to becoming a modern and global organization. The periodization presented here follows Arthur Marwick's thesis of the 'long sixties'.<sup>5</sup> However, instead of adopting Marwick's timeframe (1958–74), which is primarily oriented towards global historical shifts such as the oil crisis of 1973, the limits of the present article are set by changes within the ecumenical movement.

The timeframe 1955 to 1975 corresponds to the beginning of the WCC's Programme on Rapid Social Change, followed by the integration of the International Missionary Council (IMC) into the World Council at its third general assembly in New Delhi in 1961. The peak was the election of the World Council's first black general secretary, Philip Potter, in 1972, and the period came to an end with the assembly in Nairobi in 1975. During the 'long 1960s',

1 Katharina Kunter and Annegreth Schilling, eds., *Globalisierung der Kirchen: Der Ökumenische Rat der Kirchen und die Entdeckung der Dritten Welt in den 1960er und 1970er Jahren*, Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2014; Katharina Kunter, 'Global reach and global agenda: the World Council of Churches', in Stanley D. Brunn, ed., *The changing world religion map: sacred places, identities, practices and politics*, Dordrecht: Springer, 2015, pp. 2909–23.

2 Tom Stransky, 'World Council of Churches', in Nicholas Lossky et al., eds., *Dictionary of the ecumenical movement*, Geneva: WCC Publications, 2002, pp. 1223–31.

3 World Council of Churches Archives (henceforth WCCA), 995.1.01, Eugene Carson Blake, interview in Athens, 1966.

4 Kunter and Schilling, *Globalisierung der Kirchen*, p. 347.

5 Arthur Marwick, *The sixties: cultural transformation in Britain, France, Italy and the United States, c. 1958–1974*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998.

ecumenical protagonists from the southern hemisphere became more and more influential on the global ecumenical stage.<sup>6</sup>

The thesis developed in this article is that the coexistence between individuals and churches from ‘the North’ and ‘the South’ developed into an articulated conflict and challenge. This questions the ‘Western’ perspective on ecumenism, and thus also marginalizes the perspective of an East–West conflict within the WCC. Latin American Protestant churches, particularly from Brazil and the Southern Cone of South America, strongly contributed to this shift, and influenced the life and work of the WCC during the ‘long 1960s’ more than churches from any other region. The article therefore discusses the shift from a primarily Western-oriented ecumenical world order to a global liberating approach for ecumenical cooperation.

An essential observation is that Latin American theology underwent a similar development to that of Latin American literature. The ‘long 1960s’ were the time of an explicit politicization of literature and theology. My argument is that what is called the ‘boom’ in Latin American literature, discussed later in this article, can also be seen in Latin American theology. Regarding the WCC, the article argues that the ‘boom’ of Latin American Protestantism primarily questioned the social ethical concept of a ‘responsible society’, based on Western democratic ideas of freedom, social justice, and public order. In identifying three dimensions of the Latin American ‘boom’ – revolution, liberation, and exile – the process of how the de-Westernization of the WCC became possible is set out, and how this in turn transformed ecumenical dialogues from a Western universalist approach to a more contextual one.

## Responsible society? Questioning the ecumenical world order

The political frame for Blake’s ecumenical re-envisioning of the de-Westernization of the WCC was twofold. On the one hand, there was the division of the world into two antagonistic blocs, in the confrontation between East and West. On the other, there was the increasing self-consciousness of the nations in the ‘Third World’, especially in Asia and Africa, starting with the independence of India in 1947.<sup>7</sup> Within the WCC, a milestone for the formal integration of ‘Third World’ representatives into the world community of churches was its third assembly, held in New Delhi in 1961. With the integration of the IMC, twenty-three new member churches joined the World Council, among them eleven from Africa, five from Asia, and three from Latin America. These new admissions meant that one-third of the member churches of the WCC now represented ‘Third World’ countries.<sup>8</sup>

One strong catalyst for the integration of churches from the ‘Third World’ came through the study programme ‘Rapid Social Change’, which covered the period between the assembly in Evanston in 1954 and that in New Delhi in 1961. The Church and Society department of the WCC launched this study programme in 1955, under the leadership of a US theologian and

6 See the results of the research project on the globalization of the churches, particularly the WCC, in the 1960s and 1970s published in Kunter and Schilling, *Globalisierung der Kirchen*.

7 Katharina Kunter and Annegreth Schilling, ‘Der Christ fürchtet Den Umbruch nicht: Der Ökumenische Rat der Kirchen im Spannungsfeld von Dekolonisierung, Entwestlichung und Politisierung’, in Kunter and Schilling, *Globalisierung der Kirchen*, pp. 21–74.

8 Kunter and Schilling, *Globalisierung der Kirchen*, p. 339.

World Council staff member, Paul Abrecht. Through launching local conferences and publishing books, journals, and brochures, the Rapid Social Change programme analysed how churches in Africa, Asia, and Latin America responded to the urgent social challenges of the time, particularly those caused by processes of decolonization, industrialization, and urbanization. In Africa and Asia, the focus of the programme was primarily the response of local churches to nation-building processes in the region. It was thus clearly connected to the decolonization strategies of particular countries and regions.<sup>9</sup>

In Latin America, however, the programme on Rapid Social Change did not achieve 'the quality of the work in Asia and Africa'.<sup>10</sup> The political situation was different, as Latin American countries mostly gained their independence in the early nineteenth century. The Rapid Social Change programme thus did not resonate within established Protestant churches. Instead, it supported the development and setting-up of alternative ecclesial structures within Protestant churches, such as the launch of an independent movement on Church and Society, Iglesia y Sociedad en America Latina (ISAL). The programme thus questioned the power structures and hierarchies of Protestant churches in Latin America, and paved the way for new players on the global ecumenical stage.<sup>11</sup>

Generally, the Rapid Social Change programme pursued two objectives. First, it sought to raise the consciousness of Christians and churches in Asia, Africa, and Latin America concerning social, political, and economic changes in their societies, and to take on social responsibility. Second, it encouraged Christians in Europe and North America to revise their responsibilities regarding their economic and technical aid in countries from the 'Third World'. The programme thus called the ecumenical community not merely to understand political, economic, and social challenges as local problems, but also to be aware of their global dimension. A report from the WCC Central Committee in 1955 stated:

The problems of areas of rapid social change in Asia, Africa and Latin America must be seen as world problems. The social awakening of these countries has come about through the impact of western technology, education and religion; and the way in which the West responds will help to determine whether this awakening will find its creative fulfilment in the development both of a better community life in Asia and Africa and of human solidarity.<sup>12</sup>

Although the report advocated a global understanding of social changes in Africa, Asia, and Latin America, the success of the study programme still seemed to depend upon churches from the West and their governance. The WCC's department on Church and Society, which was the leading force behind the study programme, noted self-critically that this programme was only the beginning of overcoming the Western nature of Christianity: 'The apparent complacency of the nominally Christian West on these questions might not only be said to have

9 Paul Abrecht, *The churches and rapid social change*, London: SCM Press, 1961; Egbert de Vries, *Man in rapid social change*, London: SCM Press, 1961; Karl-Heinz Dejung, *Die ökumenische Bewegung im Entwicklungskonflikt 1910–1968*, Stuttgart: Klett, 1973, pp. 216–89.

10 Paul Abrecht, 'The common Christian responsibility towards areas of rapid social change: progress report 1955–1958', Geneva: WCC, 1958, quoted in Dejung, *Die ökumenische Bewegung*, p. 300.

11 Schilling, *Revolution*, pp. 73–91. In the framework of this article it is not possible to discuss the history of Protestantism in Latin America in depth, for which, see Jean-Pierre Bastian, *Historia del protestantismo en América Latina*, Mexico City: Casa Unida de Publicaciones, 1990.

12 World Council of Churches, *Minutes and reports of the eighth meeting of the central committee of the World Council of Churches*, Davos (Grison), Switzerland, 2–8 August 1955, Geneva: WCC, 1955, p. 105.

justified the study more than anything else, but also to have emphasized the necessity of finding ways and means by which the provincial and isolationist thinking of so much of the Christian West might be overcome.<sup>13</sup> What was at stake was not only the representation of churches from the ‘Third World’, but also the theological framework of ecumenical dialogues. With the foundation of the WCC in 1948, the underlying social ethical concept of ecumenical cooperation was that of the ‘responsible society’. Freedom, social justice, and public order were the three pillars of this concept.

After the shock and devastation of the Second World War, it was the declared goal of the ecumenical movement to contribute to the making of a new Europe, and to identify the churches’ responsibility in the face of ‘Man’s disorder and God’s design’, as set out in the theme of the WCC’s Amsterdam Assembly in 1948.<sup>14</sup> The assembly defined the responsible society as a society ‘where freedom is the freedom of men who acknowledge responsibility to justice and public order and where those who hold political authority or economic power are responsible for its exercise to God and to the people whose welfare is affected by it’.<sup>15</sup> The background of this definition was the mutual responsibility between God and God’s creation, leading to a responsibility of the churches for political freedom, social justice, and public order in social life. In the early years of the WCC, the concept of a ‘responsible society’ remained unquestioned in this regard.

However, a few years later, during preparations for the second assembly, in Evanston (USA) in 1954, the concept was extended to refer to a ‘responsible society in a world perspective’.<sup>16</sup> Yet this ‘world perspective’ was still dominated and governed by European themes and interests. When in 1961, at the third assembly in New Delhi, churches from the ‘Third World’ became involved in the work of the Council more than ever before, it became obvious that the concept of a responsible society showed profound fissures regarding its ethical values, which were dominated by Western principles such as freedom, public order, and justice.<sup>17</sup>

M. M. Thomas, an influential ecumenical protagonist from India, and later moderator of the WCC Central Committee, retrospectively summarized the importance of the assembly in New Delhi as milestone for the globalization of Christianity: ‘New Delhi 1961 was the Assembly which began the conversion of the WCC from being a movement largely of West European Protestant churches to being a truly *world* movement.’<sup>18</sup> Henceforth, during the course of the 1960s, strong criticisms against the concept of ‘responsible society’ emanated from representatives from the ‘Third World’, particularly from Latin America, who supported a new understanding of global ecumenical cooperation and governance. At the same time these criticisms provoked a series of debates and conflicts around the question of how to interpret the global shift of the ecumenical movement and its theological consequences.

13 WCC, *Evanston to New Delhi 1954–1961: report of the central committee to the third assembly of the World Council of Churches*, Geneva: World Council of Churches, 1961, p. 50.

14 Willem A. Visser ‘t Hooft, *The first assembly of the World Council of Churches: the official report*, London: SCM Press, 1949; Andrew Chandler, ‘The founding fathers and the new vision’, in Kunter and Schilling, *Globalisierung der Kirchen*, pp. 78ff.

15 Amsterdam Assembly, section III, no. 14, quoted from Michael Kinnamon and Brian E. Cope, eds., *The ecumenical movement: an anthology of key texts and voices*, Geneva: WCC Publications, 1997, p. 283.

16 ‘Report of Section III: social questions – the responsible society in a world perspective, second assembly of the WCC, Evanston, 1954’, quoted from Kinnamon and Cope, *Ecumenical movement*, pp. 282–7.

17 Kunter and Schilling, ‘Der Christ’, pp. 29–37.

18 M. M. Thomas, *My ecumenical journey*, Trivandrum: The Ecumenical Press, 1990, p. 252, emphasis in original.

## Early Latin American Protestantism

Since the European conquest of the Americas, Latin America had generally been regarded as a Catholic region. The first attempts to establish the Protestant faith in the area in the sixteenth century failed. Although Huguenot settlers sought to found the French colony France Antarctique as early as 1555, this first Protestant settlement was destroyed by Portuguese colonists soon after.<sup>19</sup> For more than three centuries, Roman Catholicism was the dominant religion in Latin America. However, a few non Roman Catholic Christians found their way to the Caribbean, such as Anglicans to Jamaica (1655), Danish Lutherans to the Virgin Islands, and the Brethren to Surinam (1735).<sup>20</sup> In colonies that had been set up by Catholic powers, the first Protestant congregation was founded in 1807, in Haiti, shortly after the territory had declared its independence from France in 1804.<sup>21</sup>

From the second half of the nineteenth century, more and more Protestant congregations were founded. On the one hand, this was due to waves of European migrants, representing various Protestant denominations: Lutheran, Reformed, Waldensian, Mennonite, and others. They settled primarily in the southern part of the region, in Argentina, Brazil, Chile, Paraguay, and Uruguay. On the other hand, missionary societies, primarily from the United States, gained influence in Latin America. They represented traditional Anglo-Saxon denominations – Methodist, Presbyterian, Baptist, Disciples of Christ, Quaker, and Adventist – as well as the Salvation Army and so-called Faith Missions.<sup>22</sup> In contrast to the Roman Catholic Church, Latin American Protestantism of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries was regarded as an emancipatory movement, and as a precursor of modernity, particularly through attitudes to public education, representative democracy, and economic liberalism.<sup>23</sup> Protestantism remained in a minority position, but gained new strength in the course of the twentieth century, particularly through the rise of Pentecostal churches and charismatic movements in the last third of the century.<sup>24</sup>

In the perspective of the international ecumenical movement, Latin America was not only seen as a Catholic but was also defined as a ‘neglected continent’.<sup>25</sup> Therefore, the World Missionary Conference in Edinburgh in 1910, with its 1,200 delegates from primarily Protestant churches and missionary societies in Europe and North America, did not decide on a

- 
- 19 Frank Lestringant, *Jean de Léry, ou, l'invention du sauvage: essai sur l'histoire d'un voyage fait en la terre du Brésil (1578)*, Paris and Geneva: Champion and Slatkine, 1999.
  - 20 Martin Dreher, ‘Latin America’, in *Religion Past and Present*, [http://dx.doi.org/10.1163/1877-5888\\_rpp\\_COM\\_12679](http://dx.doi.org/10.1163/1877-5888_rpp_COM_12679) (consulted 2 March 2018).
  - 21 Hans-Jürgen Prien, *Das Christentum in Lateinamerika: Kirchengeschichte in Einzeldarstellungen IV/6*, ed. Ulrich Gäbler and Johannes Schilling, Leipzig: Evangelische Verlagsanstalt, 2007, p. 311; Bastian, *Historia del protestantismo*.
  - 22 Ondina E. González and Justo L. González, *Christianity in Latin America: a history*, New York: Cambridge University Press, 2007, pp. 184–205.
  - 23 José Míguez Bonino, *Faces of Latin American Protestantism*, Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1997.
  - 24 David Stoll, *Is Latin America turning Protestant? The politics of evangelical growth*, Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1991; Todd Hartch, *The rebirth of Latin American Christianity*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014.
  - 25 Edward C. Millard and Lucy E. Guinness, *South America: the neglected continent*, New York: Fleming Revell Co., 1894; John Alexander Mackay, *The other Spanish Christ: a study in the spiritual history of Spain and South America*, London: Student Christian Movement Press, 1932; Arturo Piedra, *Evangelización protestante en América Latina: análisis de las razones que justificaron y promovieron la expansión protestante 1830–1960*, vol. 1, Quito: Consejo Latinoamericano de Iglesias, 2000, pp. 2–4.

specific missionary strategy for Latin America, as it did for Africa and Asia.<sup>26</sup> This exclusion from the world missionary movement led in turn to a growing self-consciousness of Latin American Protestantism during the years that followed.

The idea of a unified Latin American Protestantism began to grow between 1916 and 1949, at various Pan-American conferences, held in 1916 in Panama, in 1925 in Montevideo (Uruguay), in 1929 in Havana (Cuba), and in 1949 in Buenos Aires (Argentina).<sup>27</sup> The Protestant churches on the Latin American continent sought to find ways to cooperate, and thus bear witness to their common faith in Jesus Christ, despite their different denominations and spiritualities. Additionally, social changes, such as the growth of population, industrialization, and urbanization, began to arouse much interest within some of the Protestant churches in Latin America, particularly in the Southern Cone, leading to some of these churches developing a well-defined political position.<sup>28</sup> This is where the ‘boom’ of Latin American Protestantism sprang from.

## The ‘boom’ of Latin American Protestantism in the 1960s, and the Second Vatican Council

The term ‘boom’ is borrowed from the discourse on Latin American literature in the 1960s, and the rise of the *nueva novela*. Authors like Gabriel García Márquez, Julio Cortázar, Carlos Fuentes, and Mario Vargas Llosa put the otherness of the Latin American continent, compared to European writings, at the heart of their narratives.<sup>29</sup> The characteristics of the so-called ‘boom literature’ were independence from European writings and their narratives, the political implications of such independent writings, and their broad international reception.

The boom of Latin American Protestantism occurred along similar lines to developments in literature. In theology, the 1960s marked a period of emancipation from European influences, by promoting the formation of a contextual theology from Latin America. Additionally, Protestant churches in Latin America became aware of the political, social, and economic circumstances of their continent, and were strongly influenced by political theories such as Christian socialism and dependency theory.<sup>30</sup> Finally, the boom of Latin American Protestantism, like that of Latin American literature, was strongly connected to growing international solidarity in the political field. The Latin American Protestant boom was thus characterized by its inherently political approach to theology, and by its ecumenical and global orientation, as well as by the necessity of developing a contextual Protestant theology from

26 Klaus Koschorke, ‘The World Missionary Conference in Edinburgh 1910 and the rise of national church movements in Asia and Africa’, in Klaus Koschorke, ed., *Transkontinentale Beziehungen in der Geschichte des außereuropäischen Christentums*, Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz: 2002, pp. 203–17; Piedra, *Evangelización protestante*, pp. 120–4.

27 Míguez Bonino, *Faces of Latin American Protestantism*, pp. 1–25; Orlando Costas, *Theology of the crossroads in contemporary Latin America*, Amsterdam: Editions Rodopi, 1976.

28 Mauricio López, ‘The political dynamics of Latin American society today’, in Zachariah Keodirelang Matthews, ed., *Responsible government in a revolutionary age*, New York: Association Press, 1966, pp. 148–69; Luis E. Odell, ‘The church and society explosion in Latin America’, *Ecumenical Review*, 37, 1985, pp. 34–9.

29 The most famous novel of the ‘boom’ literature was Gabriel García Márquez, *Cien años de soledad (One hundred years of solitude)*, Buenos Aires: Editorial Sudamericana, 1967.

30 José Míguez Bonino, *Doing theology in a revolutionary situation*, Philadelphia, PA: Fortress Press, 1975; Eduardo Galeano, *Las venas abiertas de América Latina*, Montevideo: Universidad de la República, 1971.

Latin America.<sup>31</sup> Liberation theology became the symbol for this development, even if in retrospect liberation theology has rarely been linked to Latin American Protestantism.<sup>32</sup>

One catalyst for the boom in Latin American Protestantism was the Roman Catholic Second Vatican Council (1962–65) and its reception in Latin America, particularly at the bishop's conference in Medellín in 1968. José Míguez Bonino, a Methodist theologian from Argentina, was the only Protestant observer from Latin America to be present at the Second Vatican Council. At a Latin America task force meeting of the WCC, he argued that the Catholic council was 'not least a Council for Latin America'<sup>33</sup> because of its guiding principle to read the 'signs of the time'.<sup>34</sup>

Following this principle, the Roman Catholic Church underwent a period of radical transformation in Latin America in the 1960s and 1970s. The 'option for the poor' and the foundation of 'base communities' were the new landmarks of this change, questioning the power structures of the Roman Catholic hierarchy. In a radical manner, priests from different Latin American countries organized action groups and demanded the participation of the Roman Catholic Church in the process of revolutionary transformation. One of these groups was the Movement of Priests of the Third World (Sacerdotes para el Tercer Mundo), based in Argentina, who stood up against political and social oppression during military dictatorship in that country. Similarly, in Colombia, fifty priests founded the group 'Golconda' after the revolutionary priest Camillo Torres had been murdered in 1966. Among the most famous Latin American protest groups were the Christians for Socialism (Cristianos por el Socialismo), founded in Chile in 1971, who supported President Salvador Allende's project of socialism as vision for a renewal of the whole of Latin America. After the military coup in Chile in 1973, the movement continued its work underground and in exile. This radicalization of clergy, which had not been supported by the Roman Catholic hierarchy, indicates the scale of the tensions within the Catholic Church in the period following the Medellín conference.<sup>35</sup>

The acknowledgement and analysis of these fundamental changes within the Roman Catholic Church in Latin America are necessary in order to better understand the boom of Latin American Protestantism in the 1960s and 1970s. The argument here is that the boom was partly the Protestant answer to the ongoing political and social transformations in the region, and was thus closely connected to developments within the Catholic Church. Particularly in their theological reasoning, Protestant and Catholic theologians were often on the same track.

As in the Roman Catholic Church, Latin American Protestants formed action groups, which often were ecumenically open. The outstanding think-tank for the Latin American boom of Protestantism was ISAL, which was a network of primarily younger Protestant theologians, who broadly reflected the role of churches in society. ISAL was officially founded in 1961. It had roots in the Latin American student Christian movement, Movimiento Estudiantil Cristiano, which had been active since the mid 1930s, and in the Latin American

31 Schilling, *Revolution*, pp. 17–18.

32 Gustavo Gutiérrez, *Theology of liberation*, rev. edn, Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1988 (originally published as *Teología de la liberación*, 1971); Christopher Rowland, ed., *The Cambridge companion to liberation theology*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007.

33 WCCA, 42.55.09, José Míguez Bonino, 'The impact of Vatican Council on Latin American Roman Catholicism and Protestantism: presentation at the Latin American working party', 11–12 June 1964, p. 1.

34 Apostolic constitution *Humanae salutis* (1961), English translation available at <https://jakomonchak.files.wordpress.com/2011/12/humanae-salutis.pdf> (consulted 19 September 2017).

35 Enrique Dussel, *A history of the Church in Latin America: colonialism to liberation (1492–1992)*, Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1981; Schilling, *Revolution*, p. 67.



Christian youth organization, Unión Latino-Americana de Juventud Evangélica, which dated from the early 1940s.<sup>36</sup>

ISAL was also affected by the WCC's programme on Rapid Social Change. In preparation for the World Council Assembly in New Delhi 1961, a working committee announced the end of the ecumenical isolation of Latin America:

Churches in Latin America which have long been isolated from the ecumenical movement are ready to play a new role within it, and at the same time many Christian groups, especially Christian youth, are demanding that the church help them discover answers to the complex and puzzling questions posed by changing society and the *reformation* of political life.<sup>37</sup>

The goal of ISAL was to call the Latin American churches into ecumenical cooperation regarding the rapid social, political, and economic changes on the continent. The organization operated through studies and publications, as well as through social action and project work. The ISAL journal, *Cristianismo y Sociedad* (*Christianity and Society*), was published three to four times a year, and at the time was one of the most important Christian organs from Latin America, with a global reach. It covered a variety of themes that were discussed among Christians in Latin America and beyond, such as Marxism, inter-American relations, economic development, liberation, violence, and education.<sup>38</sup>

Although ISAL understood itself as 'the first awakening to the profound significance of the Latin American revolution', it was not a mass movement.<sup>39</sup> Consisting mainly of theologians such as Richard Shaull, José Míguez Bonino, Rubem Alves, and Julio de Santa Ana, it was a minority movement of left-wing intellectuals, who tried to bring socialist ideals to the Protestant churches of Latin America.<sup>40</sup> A US observer, John Sinclair, set out his observations during an ISAL conference in the following way:

I was impressed by the caliber of delegates. They were definitely not a cross-section of the Latin American Protestant churches, but rather representative of the emerging educated second and third generation urban Protestant. ... Few had any gray hairs. Only a handful were beyond forty. ... I was observing ... a phenomenon – a new elite, largely of the 'southern cone' of South America ....<sup>41</sup>

It was this young and 'new elite' that helped the Latin American Protestant churches take a stand regarding the ongoing political and social changes on the continent. At the same time, they helped to integrate a Latin American Protestant perspective into the international ecumenical movement. Being closely connected to the aims of the study programme on Rapid Social Change, ISAL became *the* Latin American point of reference for the work of the WCC in the region.

36 Hans-Jürgen Prien, *Christianity in Latin America*, Leiden: Brill, 2013, pp. 383, 543.

37 *Work Book for the Assembly Committees*, prepared for the Third Assembly of the World Council of Churches, New Delhi, India, 18 November–6 December 1961, Geneva: WCC Publications, 1961, emphasis in original.

38 José Antonio Ruíz, 'Cristianismo y Sociedad: un instrumento de ISAL', *Cristianismo y Sociedad*, 20, 17, 1982, pp. 11–25.

39 Iglesia y Sociedad en América Latina, *Social justice and the Latin churches: church and society in Latin America*, trans. Jorge Lara-Braud, Richmond, VA: John Knox Press, 1969. This is an edited summary of the discussions and reports presented at the second Latin American Conference on Church and Society in El Tabo, Chile (1966).

40 See the thematic volume on ISAL in *Teología y cultura*, 8, 13, 2011; Julio de Santa Ana, *El aporte de iglesia y sociedad en América Latina (ISAL)*, <http://trilce.com.uy/pdf/forjando04.pdf> (consulted 2 March 2018); Dejung, *Die ökumenische Bewegung*, pp. 296–321; Schilling, *Revolution*, pp. 91–112.

41 WCCA, 428.12.02.1/13, John Sinclair, 'Report on Latin America church and society consultation (ISAL), 11–17 December 1967, Piriápolis, Uruguay, 22 December 1967', p. 1.

As will be developed further in the sections that follow, this Protestant perspective and ecumenical influence from Latin America became globally visible in three areas. First, Latin American representatives at ecumenical gatherings challenged the ecumenical concept of 'responsible society' through the vision of permanent revolution. Second, Latin American theologians introduced the notion of liberation into ecumenical discourse, and thus challenged an understanding of development being primarily oriented towards economic growth. Third, the WCC provided help in exile for several Latin American intellectuals during the late 1960s and 1970s, and thus developed into a 'third space' for joint action and reflection.<sup>42</sup>

All three areas complement one another, and support the argument that Latin America became a key player for the WCC in the 1960s and 1970s, regarding the emergence and influence of contextual theology within global ecumenical dialogues. The Protestant perspective from Latin America revealed the shift in theological thinking in the second half of the twentieth century which held that there is not one global universalist approach to theology. In contrast, the approach of liberation theology that emerged from the ecumenical discussion strengthened the notion of contextuality – that is, the need to construct local theologies, and to shape contextual identities through difference.<sup>43</sup>

## Permanent revolution rather than responsible society

It was at the World Conference for Church and Society in Geneva, in 1966, that the issue of revolution took centre stage within the global ecumenical dialogue, while revealing contrary opinions. The overall theme of the Geneva conference was 'Christians in the technical and social revolutions of our time'.<sup>44</sup> This effectively expressed the objective of the conference, which was to ensure that churches were involved in, and were part of, social, political, and economic changes. What was new about the Geneva gathering was that it was the ecumenical conference with the highest participation of churches from the 'Third World' up to that point. Out of 330 delegates, 130 came from Asia, Africa, or Latin America.<sup>45</sup> For Harvey Cox, a US Baptist theologian who attended the conference, the most unforgettable part of the conference was 'the intellectual and spiritual cogency of the Latin Americans'.<sup>46</sup> And the Swiss church newspaper *La vie protestante* enthusiastically stated that the 'prophets' of that time came from Latin America.<sup>47</sup>

One of these intellectuals and influential theologians was Richard Shaull, a US missionary in Brazil, who strongly identified himself with the Latin American context.<sup>48</sup> He was also a leading member of ISAL and was even regarded as its 'prime mover', despite his North

42 Homi K. Bhabha, 'The third space', in Jonathan Rutherford, ed., *Identity, community, culture and difference*, London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1990, pp. 207–21.

43 Robert Schreier, *Constructing local theologies*, Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1985.

44 WCC, 'World Conference on Church and Society: Christians in the technical and social revolutions of our time, Geneva, 12–26 July 1966', official report with a description of the conference by M. M. Thomas and Paul Abrecht, Geneva: World Council of Churches, 1967.

45 Kunter and Schilling, 'Der Christ', pp. 37–48, esp. p. 39; Schilling, *Revolution*, pp. 133–4.

46 Harvey Cox, 'Geneva '66: the Latin Americans' challenge', *Carta Latinoamericana*, 2, 10, 1966, p. 1.

47 Simon de Dardel, 'Le retour des prophètes', *La vie protestante*, 22 July 1966, p. 1.

48 Angel D. Santiago-Vendrell, *Contextual theology and revolutionary transformation in Latin America: the missiology of M. Richard Shaull*, Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2010; Eduardo Galasso Faria, 'Richard Shaull (1919–2002)', in Rudolf von Sinner, Elias Wolff, and Carlos Gilberto Bock, eds., *Vidas ecumênicas (Ecumenical lives)*, São Leopoldo: Sinodal, 2006, pp. 97–116; Annegreth Schilling, 'Lateinamerikanische Existenz in ökumenischer Begegnung: Richard Shaull und Rubem Alves als reformierte Wegbereiter der Befreiungstheologie', in Marco Hofheinz, Georg Plasger, and Annegreth Schilling, eds., *Verbindlich werden: reformierte Existenz in ökumenischer Begegnung. Festschrift für Michael Weinrich zum 65. Geburtstag*, Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchner Verlag, 2015, pp. 319–31.

American background.<sup>49</sup> Shaull heavily criticized the understanding of the so-called ‘responsible society’. According to him, the responsible society was a concept of Western hegemony, which did not aim to change society but rather called for freedom of people, justice, and public order. He particularly criticized the concept for not paying attention to the economic, political, and cultural dominance of Europe and North America over societies of the ‘Third World’.

As early as 1954, Shaull had hoped to contextualize the notion of responsibility for Latin America:

If we hope to progress in the direction of a more responsible society, then the social revolution which has begun must go forward. ... [T]he possibility of a more responsible society depends essentially upon the development of political movements and institutions which can direct the social revolution and keep it within bounds. ... To a somewhat lesser degree the guidance of the social revolution in the direction of the responsible society depends upon the development of responsible and democratic group organizations in each country, especially labour unions, both of industrial workers and peasants.<sup>50</sup>

For Shaull, the development of ‘new political movements’ was crucial to raising social and political responsibility among Protestant Christians in Latin America. In this regard, the ISAL movement perfectly fitted into his idea of political (church) movements, which supported the social revolution, and thus shared and lived out their responsibility for society.

At the Geneva conference, Shaull explained further his vision for society. For him, a social ethical perspective always had to reflect the context from which it emerged. He therefore pleaded for a radical new social order. In his eyes, only a revolutionary process could contribute to the humanization of society. This did not refer to a sudden political overthrow of a regime but to a permanent revolution, which addressed ‘the specific social goals, the specific human needs, the specific technical possibilities and priorities’.<sup>51</sup> Shaull thus urged Christians ‘to point to God’s work of renewal in the social revolution’, slowly forcing the political and economic system to change.<sup>52</sup> If necessary, this would involve the use of violence. This revolutionary perspective was shared by a group of Latin American theologians at the Geneva conference, such as the Colombian theologian Gonzalo Castillo Cárdenas and the Uruguayan sociologist Hiber Conteris. It was the beginning of the influence of Latin American thinking on the WCC.

African representatives also supported the plea for revolutionary change. Bola Ige, a lawyer and human rights activist from Nigeria, did not completely deny the understanding of a responsible society as one where Christians might respond to changes in society. But he asked for a new interpretation of the words ‘peace’ and ‘freedom’. True peace and true freedom could only emerge if societies worked towards overcoming poverty and racism. Thus, revolution was the only possible way to achieve sustainable social, political, and economic change.<sup>53</sup>

49 WCCA, 24.2.012, Egbert de Vries to Paul Abrecht, 6 December 1955, p. 1.

50 WCCA, 24.2.012, Richard Shaull, ‘The church and the problems of a responsible society in Latin America’, 1954, pp. 19–20.

51 Richard Shaull, ‘The revolutionary challenge to church and theology’, speech at the World Conference on Church and Society, Geneva, 1966, quoted from Kinnamon and Cope, *Ecumenical movement*, p. 302.

52 *Ibid.*, p. 303.

53 Bola Ige, ‘The political dynamics of the newly awakened peoples’, in M. M. Thomas and Paul Abrecht, ‘The structure and work of the conference’, in WCC, ‘World conference on church and society’, pp. 17–18; Kunter and Schilling, ‘Der Christ’, pp. 42–4.

Yet the understanding of revolution did not remain unchallenged by many European delegates. Two Dutch conference members, Max Kohnstamm and Constantijn Patijn, criticized the word 'revolution' as being ambiguous, and they requested that a theology of revolution be defined from the perspective of Christian responsibility. The French politician André Philip heavily criticized ideological understandings of revolution, and advised against what he described as a fascist use of the term.<sup>54</sup> In Germany, in connection with the radicalization of student protests after 1968, what was at that time referred to as the 'theology of revolution' caused a huge theological debate, particularly concerning its perceived tendency towards violence.<sup>55</sup>

The notion of violence, however, did not determine the discussions at the Geneva conference. Violence was always regarded as a last resort for revolutionary change, although in the reception of the conference, and its inherent 'theology of revolution', it became one of the most discussed issues. But the analysis of the ecumenical discourses of the late 1960s and early 1970s show that the debate around violence did not arise primarily from Latin America. In fact, the question of violent revolution was more closely connected with the Programme to Combat Racism, launched by the WCC in 1969, supporting the churches' efforts to overcome structures of racism and oppression in southern Africa.<sup>56</sup>

The revolutionary approach to societal changes, as promoted by the Latin American speakers in Geneva, clearly divided the ecumenical fellowship. Willem Visser 't Hooft, general secretary of the WCC until 1966, tried to combine the idea of the responsible society with the changes that the churches had experienced through the previous decade. For him, the central question was how churches globally could understand one another as part of a responsible society, and yet do so in a global perspective. In his argument, Visser 't Hooft complemented the idea of a responsible society with the aspect of global solidarity and responsibility, including responsibility for economic justice:

Fortunately ... the ecumenical movement has, through its discussion of social problems and its development of the idea of Responsible Society, discovered an ethical criterion for creative action on the problems of our world. Today this must be renewed and reinterpreted in view of the need for a responsible world community and the demands for international economic justice.<sup>57</sup>

The critique from representatives of the 'Third World' was that the concept of a responsible society in a global perspective, as articulated by Visser 't Hooft, relied on a far too harmonious picture of a world community. In the view of Shaul and Ige, the responsible society too easily reproduced Western values and ethical principles on a global scale, without being aware of their neo-colonial impact.

54 Thomas, *My ecumenical journey*, pp. 278–9.

55 Trutz Rendtorff and Heinz Eduard Tödt, *Theologie der Revolution: Analysen und Materialien*, Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1969; Ernst Feil and Rudolf Weth, eds., *Diskussion zur 'Theologie der Revolution'*, Munich: Kaiser, 1969; Alexander Christian Widmann, *Wandel mit Gewalt? Der deutsche Protestantismus und die politisch motivierte Gewaltanwendung in den 1960er und 1970er Jahren*, Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2013.

56 Antti Laine, *Ecumenical attack against racism: the anti-racist programme of the World Council of Churches, 1968–1974*, Helsinki: Luther-Agricola-Society, 2015; David Gill, 'Violence and non-violence: resuming the debate', *Ecumenical Review*, 32, 1980, pp. 25–8.

57 Willem Visser 't Hooft, 'Opening address', quoted from Thomas and Abrecht, 'Structure and work of the conference', p. 13.

Attempts were made to bridge these divisions. Protagonists of global ecumenical dialogue, like the moderator of the conference, the Indian lay theologian M. M. Thomas, and the World Council staff member Paul Abrecht, did not share the conflictual perspective of relations between the North and South. For Thomas and Abrecht, the controversy between churches from the North and churches from the South was an indication of true ecumenical world community rather than of conflict: 'The strong representations from the Churches of Africa, Asia, Latin America, and the Middle East meant that those from the western Churches were introduced to a new ecumenical dialogue which challenged their customary views about the way in which the Gospel is to be related to our world.'<sup>58</sup> They stressed that conflict was necessary to show the different contextual approaches within the ecumenical dialogue. Even if churches differed in their opinion of responsible society and revolution, Thomas and Abrecht understood this divergence as a necessary part of a global ecumenical dialogue, which supported the search for visible unity of the church rather than dividing it.

## **SODEPAX and the ecumenical articulation of liberation theology**

Looking at the development of the social and ethical discourse at the WCC in a longer perspective, it can be seen that the plea for revolution was only a discourse of transition. In the years following the Geneva conference, the centre of attention shifted again, from revolution towards humanization and liberation. This new change of emphasis occurred particularly through the influence of Latin American theologians. One focal point became the work of the Joint Commission on Society, Development and Peace (SODEPAX) between the World Council and the Pontifical Commission *Justitia et Pax*, an organization that to date has been hardly investigated.<sup>59</sup> Its aim was to evolve a joint strategy of the churches regarding world development. Through the joint work of Protestants, Orthodox, and Catholics, SODEPAX became a space where the approach of liberation theology was designed and discussed ecumenically.

Throughout its existence SODEPAX was an 'explorative body', which thus had an experimental character.<sup>60</sup> This had a number of implications for ecumenical dialogue: SODEPAX was not a governing body of the ecumenical movement, like the Assembly or Central Committee of the WCC. As it was not a governing institution, it could not make any decisions on specific ecumenical strategies or political actions. However, it became an influential space of interaction and reflection, where opposing opinions on poverty, economic growth, and development were discussed at a global level between the WCC and the Roman Catholic Church. Thanks to its composition of both Protestant and Catholic forces, through its work SODEPAX nurtured the vision of ecumenical dialogue beyond the membership of the WCC. In addition it strongly shaped the World Council's strategy for liberation, and its option for the poor, which guided policy throughout the 1970s and early 1980s.<sup>61</sup>

58 Thomas and Abrecht, 'Structure and work of the conference', pp. 41–2.

59 Schilling, *Revolution*, pp. 159–88.

60 WCCA, 4201.5.1.1, 'An introduction to SODEPAX', p. 1.

61 Julio de Santa Ana, *Good news to the poor: the challenge of the poor in the history of the church*, trans. Helen Whittle, Geneva: World Council of Churches, 1977.

The first SODEPAX consultation, in Beirut in 1968, shared the optimism regarding development expressed by the United Nations, which declared the 1960s as the 'decade of development'. The goal was to increase the rate of economic growth up to 6% per year, and to modernize the agricultural sector, while also strengthening the industrial sector. Before the Beirut meeting, George Dunne, a US Jesuit and the acting SODEPAX general secretary, explained the meaning of the consultation as follows: 'For the first time Protestant and Orthodox churches and the Roman Catholic church are joining forces and pooling resources in a world-wide campaign to awaken mankind to a realization that an increasing chasm divides the rich from the poor, and to quicken the Christian conscience to a sense of responsibility and of moral obligation.'<sup>62</sup>

One achievement of the consultation was that its delegates did not reduce the notion of development to economic growth only, but agreed that social, political, and cultural factors also needed to be taken into account.<sup>63</sup> The consultation thus did not deny the developmental model in general, but widened the perspective beyond an economic understanding of development. In this regard, the goal of the development process, according to the consultation, was to contribute to the liberation of the people. It is worth noting that this 'liberationist' approach has had little attention in the reception of the Beirut consultation, even in secondary literature.<sup>64</sup>

Nevertheless, critical voices from different parts of the world accused the Beirut conference of 'Westernness'. Their main demand was that SODEPAX should oppose the Western perspective on development, including the vocabulary of 'developed' and 'underdeveloped' countries. An overview of criticisms against the Beirut consultation stated: 'The experts relied upon at Beirut proceed through traditional established channels and traditional centres of research. These tell the developing world what their development ought to be: but the thinking is done dominantly by the West.'<sup>65</sup>

Besides this general criticism of SODEPAX's Western orientation, a voice from Latin America particularly questioned its ecumenical development strategy. It was primarily Julio de Santa Ana, the general secretary of ISAL and a Methodist theologian from Uruguay, who criticized 'the ultra-conservative developmentism positions taken by the Beirut Conference'.<sup>66</sup> He argued that these positions were oriented towards progress and modernization only, and did not reflect the people's needs appropriately. What Santa Ana saw as lacking was a contextual approach to development, which put the human into the centre of development, and not the related technical problems.<sup>67</sup> For him such a contextual approach had to include a

62 WCCA, 4201.2.9/12, WCC, 'Press information: international economists to participate in World Council/Roman Catholic Conference', 26 March 1968.

63 Committee on Society, Development and Peace, *World development: the challenge to the churches: the conference on world cooperation for development, Beirut, Lebanon, 21–27 April, 1968: the official report*, Geneva: World Council of Churches, 1968.

64 Schilling, *Revolution*, pp. 161–91. For the German reception of the Beirut conference, see Margot Kässmann, *Die eucharistische Vision: Armut und Reichtum als Anfrage an die Einheit der Kirche in der Diskussion des Ökumenischen Rates*, Munich: Kaiser, 1992, pp. 114–17; Wolfram Stierle, *Chancen einer ökumenischen Wirtschaftsethik: Kirche und Ökonomie vor den Herausforderungen der Globalisierung*, Frankfurt am Main: Lembeck, 2001, pp. 292–339.

65 WCCA, 4202.053, 'Criticisms of the Beirut report', p. 3.

66 Julio de Santa Ana, 'Christians, churches and development', *ISAL-Abstracts*, 1, 6, 1969, p. 7 (originally published as Santa Ana, 'Los cristianos, las iglesias y el desarrollo', *Cristianismo y Sociedad*, 7, 21, 1969, pp. 51–69).

67 *Ibid.*

Marxist critique of imperialism and neo-colonialism: 'In respect to this failure of the neo-liberalistic Beirut Report to see the positive role in history of social warfare, we must go back to recognize in Marx a valid method of investigation in the social sciences. Otherwise the Churches will continue to produce more Beirut reports.'<sup>68</sup>

The SODEPAX conferences that followed tried to deal with this harsh criticism. They argued that, instead of maintaining paternalistic power structures, the new understanding of development should lead to solidarity and justice. The second SODEPAX conference, held in Montreal in 1969, agreed that the goal of the development process should no longer be seen solely in terms of economic growth, but also of its humanizing and liberating effect for the people.<sup>69</sup> This also had theological implications.

It was the task of the third SODEPAX conference, held in Cartigny, Switzerland, in 1969, to discuss the theology and theological language inherent in the discourse on development. The most influential contribution in this regard came from two presentations from Latin America, in search of a 'theology of development'. The Peruvian Roman Catholic theologian Gustavo Gutiérrez and the Brazilian Reformed theologian Rubem Alves, independently of one another, presented their concepts of a 'theology of liberation' that had wide influence on ecumenical discussions.<sup>70</sup> Gutiérrez set out what he termed a humanist approach to development as being a holistic social process including economic, social, political, and cultural aspects. He agreed with Santa Ana's position when he identified the human being ('mankind'), and not economic growth, as the centre of this process: 'This humanist approach places the concept of development in a broader, historical context, in which mankind is seen as shouldering responsibility for its own destiny. This involves a change in perspective which we should prefer to designate by the term liberation.'<sup>71</sup>

Likewise, Rubem Alves placed the term 'liberation' at the centre of his reflection on a theology of development. As a Reformed theologian, he challenged the members of the conference to develop a new language of Christian faith. For him, this included refusing any language of 'utopian technicism'<sup>72</sup> and entering into the language of 'radical utopianism': 'Our task is to discover where and how the Spirit is groaning today and to help human communities to transform the wordless groaning into articulate and conscious speech. This is the new language we are looking for.'<sup>73</sup> When people started to identify with this kind of language, against any kind of 'technicism' and oppression, they would start to liberate themselves, according to Alves.

Through their presentations, the two Latin American theologians replaced the search for a theology of development with the search for a theology of liberation. They saw the most important criteria in a theology of liberation as being the critical reappraisal of traditional

68 WCCA, 4202.053, 'Criticisms of the Beirut report', p. 2.

69 Committee on Society, Development and Peace, *The challenges of development: a sequel to the Beirut conference of 21–27 April 1968 at Montreal, 9–12 May 1969*, Geneva: World Council of Churches, 1969, section II: new definition of development.

70 Gutiérrez, *Theology of liberation*; Rubem Alves, *A theology of human hope*, Washington, DC, and Cleveland, OH: Corpus Books, 1969.

71 Gustavo Gutiérrez, 'The meaning of development (notes on a theology of liberation)', in Committee on Society, Development and Peace, *In search of a theology of development: papers from a consultation on theology and development held by SODEPAX in Cartigny, Switzerland, November 1969*, Geneva: World Council of Churches, 1969, p. 122.

72 Rubem Alves, 'Theology and the liberation of man', in Committee on Society, Development and Peace, *In search of a theology*, p. 88.

73 *Ibid.*, p. 83.

theology and the emergence of a new language, the language of humanization and liberation. They both agreed that technological development and economic growth hindered the setting-up of a just society. Instead, they shared the ecclesiological vision of a liberating church, which, rather than making agreements with hierarchies and elites, turned its attention to the marginalized and oppressed. This was the ecumenical hour of the birth of the theology of liberation. Even if the concept was later accepted more within the Roman Catholic Church, it is important to note that its cradle was truly ecumenical.

The liberation approach did not remain unquestioned. There were critics, such as the Jesuit professor for economics at the Gregorian University in Rome, Philip Land. In his contribution at the SODEPAX conference, he accused the theology of liberation of lacking a positive and realistic understanding of economics. He instead advocated for the productivity of the economic system providing food, clothing, medicine, and education.<sup>74</sup>

Despite such objections, SODEPAX was the first ecumenical platform to launch an open and critical discourse on oppression and dependency, thus introducing liberation as a new measure for the process of world development. This discourse was also necessary for a differentiation within ecumenical social ethics. The 'responsible society' as a social ethical concept was no longer a point of reference, and was being deeply called into question, particularly because of its adherence to Western economic thinking and its short-sighted nature. Striving for humanization and liberation became the new leitmotif, challenging the ecumenical discourse.<sup>75</sup>

Although SODEPAX had been created by the WCC and the Roman Catholic Church as an independent ecumenical body, and a space for encounter and theological reflection, its institutional relevance, and its governing role, remained unclear. Eugene Carson Blake identified its role as 'somewhere between legislation and advice'.<sup>76</sup> Yet one of the main fears was of SODEPAX developing into a 'third entity' between the World Council and the Catholic Church.<sup>77</sup> As a result, from 1972, there was both a financial and a structural reduction in the programmes of SODEPAX, which led to it being discontinued in 1980.<sup>78</sup> It would be a major contribution to global ecumenical historiography to undertake an extensive analysis of the work of SODEPAX, and so better to understand changes within the patterns of ecumenical governance in the 1970s.

## Liberation through ecumenical exile

A third approach is needed to fully understand how Latin American perspectives became crucial for the development of a 'new ecumenicity', according to Blake's vision. In order to grasp how the WCC integrated Latin American liberationist voices into the ecumenical discourse, alongside debates around revolution and development, it is important to consider the role of Geneva as a place of ecumenical exile. Between 1969 and 1973 four leading Latin

74 Philip Land, 'Sociological observations on Cartigny', in Committee on Society, Development and Peace, *In search of a theology*, p. 57.

75 Charles Elliott, 'An esoteric critique of Cartigny', in Committee on Society, Development and Peace, *In search of a theology*, pp. 12–25.

76 WCCA, 4202.049, 'Opening remarks of Dr Eugene Carson Blake at the annual meeting of the Committee on Society, Development and Peace at the Ecumenical Institute Bossey', n.d., p. 7.

77 WCCA, 4201.5.1, 'Ecumenism in crisis: report from IDOC', 6 March 1972, p. 6.

78 Tom Stransky, 'SODEPAX', in Lossky et al., *Dictionary of the ecumenical movement*, pp. 1055–4; Philip Land, 'SODEPAX: an ecumenical dialogue', *Ecumenical Review*, 37, 1985, pp. 40–6.



American intellectuals, who were closely connected to the ISAL network, joined the WCC staff there: Paulo Freire, the Brazilian educator and leader of literacy programmes, within the Office of Education; Leopoldo Nilus, an Argentinian lawyer and the ISAL general secretary, as director of the Commission of the Churches on International Affairs; and two theologians from Uruguay, namely Julio de Santa Ana as study coordinator of the Commission on the Churches' Participation in Development, and Emilio Castro as director of the Commission on World Mission and Evangelism.<sup>79</sup>

These exiles fled from repressive military dictatorships in Brazil, Uruguay, and Argentina, and sought exile in Geneva, where the World Council became a space of trans-cultural and trans-confessional encounter for them. Santa Ana even saw the role of the WCC as being that of a 'healing community', after his experiences of political persecution in Uruguay.<sup>80</sup> Ecumenical exile allowed these men to continue their research and writing outside Latin America, while sharing their thoughts on liberation theology with the global ecumenical community.<sup>81</sup>

In 1973, the WCC launched a programme to address human rights violations in Latin America, through the Human Rights Resources Office for Latin America. The establishment of this office, which to date has not been the subject of extensive research, can be seen as part of the influence of the exiled Latin Americans within the World Council, as well as an institutional answer to the widespread violation of human rights by military dictators in Latin America.<sup>82</sup>

The theoretical concept referred to by the new Latin American staff members emanated from Paulo Freire's vision of a liberating process of education called *conscientização* or *concientización*, translated into English as 'conscientization', consciousness raising, or critical consciousness. For Freire, the process of continuing reflection and action helped marginalized and oppressed people to discover social, political, and economic contradictions, in order to liberate themselves from passivity and apathy, and to become subjects of their own lives.<sup>83</sup> Freire himself, after four years of working for the WCC, concluded that the model of conscientization was his contribution to the global ecumenical discourse: 'every time I have time and space to act as an educator my main preoccupation is to develop, in different ways, critical consciousness. This is how I see this question and maybe it is the result of my four years of work at the World Council.'<sup>84</sup>

Freire's Latin American colleagues, particularly Santa Ana and Castro, referred to his vision of a liberating education, and adopted it for their thematic work. Castro introduced Freire's concept of conscientization to the World Council's mission theology. Following the idea of the *missio Dei*, Christian mission for Castro always implied the political participation of Christians in the liberating acts of God in different contexts.<sup>85</sup>

In a more comprehensive way, Julio de Santa Ana implemented the concept of conscientization in his capacity as study coordinator of the Commission on the Churches'

79 Schilling, *Revolution*, pp. 191–244.

80 Santa Ana, 'Die Armen nicht romantisieren', *Junge Kirche*, 60, 9, 1999, p. 503.

81 Schilling, *Revolution*, pp. 241–2.

82 Charles Harper, *O acompanhamento: ecumenical action for human rights in Latin America 1970–1990*, Geneva: WCC Publications, 2006.

83 Paulo Freire, *Pedagogy of the oppressed (1968)*, New York: Herder and Herder, 1970.

84 WCCA, 992.1.1/14, 'Transcript of Paulo Freire's speech to the consultation at Cartigny', 28 October 1974, p. 4.

85 Emilio Castro, *Amidst revolution*, Belfast: Christian Journals, 1975; Emilio Castro, 'Mission today', *Missiology*, 2, 1974, pp. 359–67.

Participation in Development. In a study document that he published, entitled 'Domination and dependence', he called on churches to take responsibility within the development process, taking into account the notions expressed in dependency theory.<sup>86</sup> By using Freire's terminology of conscientization, the study showed 'that the process of becoming aware must be a collective one'.<sup>87</sup> However, for Santa Ana, this collective process could never be universalist, but always needed to find its expression in different contexts. For this 'new ecumenical task', he saw the need 'to seek out the points of convergence between different socio-cultural and theological contexts which have taken a stand for social justice and against poverty and underdevelopment'.<sup>88</sup> The 'option for the poor', the leading concept of the theology of liberation, was deeply rooted in Santa Ana's theological thinking.

This liberating approach entailed a clear socialist political position. Leopoldo Nilus, Julio de Santa Ana, and Paulo Freire were especially influenced by Marxist and socialist ideals. They openly criticized capitalism and developmentalism as the basis for the political and economic world order, and explained the need for the churches to develop a Christian approach to socialism. For Santa Ana, socialism was the road to the kingdom of God – even if the determination of socialism remained unspecific:

If capitalism is unacceptable to the Christian conscience struggling for social justice, it is the dimension of the Kingdom which will determine what kinds of socialism can point out the road towards the goal God plans for us. Because we must recognize that the term socialism covers a vast range of possibilities, and not all are acceptable to the conscience of faith.<sup>89</sup>

In their writings, Santa Ana and the Argentine theologian José Míguez Bonino affirmed that the discussion on socialism should not be limited to the reality of actually existing socialism in the Eastern Bloc. Through a contextual interpretation of the gospel, a new perspective on socialism would emerge, which would focus on the liberation of people from oppression and suffering.<sup>90</sup>

The WCC assembly in Nairobi, in 1975, marked the culmination of the integration of insights and convictions from Latin American liberation theology. Two sections in particular of the final report referred to key aspects of liberation theology, and adopted them for future ecumenical work. These were section IV, dealing with education for liberation and community, and section V, on structures of inequality and the struggle for liberation. These passages strongly affirmed the need for a liberationist practice for education, the awareness of contextuality in theological discourses, and the responsibility of the churches in regard to human rights, sexism, and racism.<sup>91</sup>

While these debates showed that Latin American theology had become an integral part of the WCC's ideas, the focus on liberation also revealed deep conflicts within the social ethical reflections of the ecumenical movement. Seen more widely, the integration and international

---

86 Commission on the Churches' Participation in Development, *To break the chains of oppression: results of an ecumenical study process on domination and dependence*, Geneva: World Council of Churches, 1975.

87 *Ibid.*, p. 53.

88 *Ibid.*, p. 64.

89 *Ibid.*

90 Míguez Bonino, *Doing theology*.

91 WCC, *Nairobi report: fifth assembly of the World Council of Churches, Nairobi, 23 November–10 December 1975*, London: Catholic Truth Society, 1975.

reception of Latin American theology strengthened the political stance and theological foundation of the Protestant churches in Latin America, as well as revealing the necessity to contextualize theological convictions on the global scale.

## **Conclusion: in search of a global ecumenicity between context and conflict**

The call for a de-Westernization of the WCC that Eugene Carson Blake envisioned in 1966 became a reality in the ensuing years. In the long 1960s, the transformation of the World Council from a Western-oriented institution into a global fellowship of churches was accompanied by a fundamental change in its structural shape and thematic orientation. The Protestant churches from Latin America and their representatives took a leading role in this transformative process.

Against the background of the three dimensions of revolution, liberation, and exile, it becomes clearer what the ‘boom’ of Latin American Protestantism actually involved for the WCC. The Latin Americans brought a new political approach to theology within ecumenical dialogues, as well as stressing the importance of acknowledging different theological contexts by questioning the universal certitudes of Western theology. Liberation theology became the key expression for this influence of Latin America in the World Council, entailing a shift from a Eurocentric approach to a global one, and at the same time providing a contextual understanding of ecumenism. In this regard, the ‘new ecumenicity’, which Blake had called for, was the result of a transformation process enacted through debates within the WCC, in which churches from the ‘Third World’ questioned ‘universal’ ecumenical certitudes of Western origins.

In summary, at least four points of conflict can be identified that were related to this new contextual ecumenicity. First, the Latin American contribution towards global ecumenism can be clearly seen in a change of generation and staff within the WCC. Young intellectuals from Latin America joined the staff, integrating their perspectives into the global ecumenical work by sharing a liberating approach, and thus renewing ecumenical theology. Second, the Latin American perspective towards global ecumenism clearly opposed the understanding of the ‘responsible society’. Instead of adopting this social ethical concept in a global perspective, as suggested by Visser ‘t Hooft, Latin American representatives such as Richard Shaull called on churches to actively participate in the process of permanent revolution, in order to take over social responsibility, and to change repressive political and economic systems.

Third, the Latin American perspective towards global ecumenism questioned the paternalistic and hegemonic understanding of development, as discussed at the SODEPAX conferences. It was the beginning of a postcolonial approach, which criticized the sole reliance on economic growth as the motor for development, and strengthened the perspective of liberation and humanization as preconditions for sustainable developmental process. Finally, the Latin American perspective regarding global ecumenism meant taking a stand for political liberation and democratic socialism. In particular, debates about the understanding of political concepts like socialism, liberalism, and capitalism put the cohesion of the churches to the test. For the WCC as an institution, representing churches from Western countries, from the ‘Third World’, and from the Eastern Bloc, it became a difficult task to mediate between different political

understandings, which called on one side for political neutrality and, on the other, for revolutionary change. The discussions around the use of violence in the revolutionary process, and the unclear attitude of the World Council towards human rights violations in the Eastern Bloc, contrasting with its strong commitment to opposing such violations in Latin America, are just two examples of the widespread ecumenical conflicts during the ‘long sixties’.

More than ever before in the history of the WCC, cultural context played a crucial role for ecumenical dialogue. The World Council became a space ‘in between’ the conflicts between East and West and North and South, where these differences and conflicts could be articulated and negotiated. In the postcolonial terminology of Homi Bhabha, the WCC became a third space.<sup>92</sup> This led to a new self-understanding of the global community of churches, where contextual and cultural disparities transcended confessional differences, and thus challenged the search for unity in a new way.

*Dr Annegreth Schilling is a Protestant theologian and researcher with expertise in ecumenical theology, contemporary church history, and mission and postcolonial studies. She received her doctorate from Ruhr-University Bochum, and followed this by a period as a visiting research scholar at the Union Theological Seminary in New York, in 2014–15. Between 2011 and 2015, she was a research associate and lecturer at the Ecumenical Institute at the Ruhr-University of Bochum. She is an assistant pastor of the Evangelical Church in Hesse and Nassau.*

---

92 Homi Bhabha, *Location of culture*, New York: Routledge, 1994; Schilling, *Revolution*, pp. 20, 252–75.