

The Fourth Assembly of the WCC at Uppsala 1968 and the Catholicity of the Church

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ABSTRACT

This article examines the origin of the study of the catholicity of the Church, which became an important issue at the Fourth Assembly of the WCC in Uppsala 1968. Some scholars argue that the assembly, held more than fifty years ago, was almost entirely politically driven by left-wing groups. Others state that the Uppsala meeting had limited theological depth and was dominated by many false myths. This article demonstrates that the catholicity of the Church had been studied within the ecumenical movement for a number of years prior to the assembly in Uppsala. It was there, however, that the breakthrough took place that became the basis for many decisions. The WCC ‘Programme to Combat Racism’ (PCR), which had a deep impact on the churches’ understanding of the necessity to oppose apartheid, originated at the assembly in 1968 and was a result of the WCC’s understanding of the catholicity of the Church.

Left-wing Politically Driven WCC Assembly at Uppsala?

The historical roots of the modern ecumenical movement and the World Council of Churches can be found in student and lay movements of the nineteenth century, the World Missionary Conference in Edinburgh in 1910, and an encyclical from the Orthodox Ecumenical Patriarchate in 1920.¹ Inspired by the new ecumenical climate, the *Life and Work* movement was founded in Stockholm in 1925, followed

1 The World Student Christian Federation was founded in Vadstena, Sweden in 1895 with representatives from various churches in Europe and North America (Rouse, Ruth, “Voluntary movements and the changing ecumenical climate” in *A History of the Ecumenical Movement 1517–1948*, edited by Rouse, Rose & Neil, Stephen Charles (London: SPCK, 1954), 341). The Ecumenical Patriarchate published an encyclical in 1920 urging churches around the world to accept a uniform calendar, suggesting exchanges between theological schools, initiating a deeper historical study of doctrinal differences, etc. The most important suggestion was probably to establish a league (*koinonia*) between the churches similar to the League of Nations. The encyclical probably did not receive proper attention because of deficient translations into Western languages (“A new translation of the 2010 Message of the Ecumenical Patriarchate”, *The Ecumenical Review*, Vol 12, Issue 1 (Geneva: WCC, 1959), 79–82).

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