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Tacit dewesternisation in the ecumenical movement: The example of the World Council of Churches

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Dewesternisation is a concept still undergoing conceptual clarification and refinement. It is used in different theoretical approaches, often differently meant and assessed. Irrespective of its still uncertain theoretical scope, it appears to be a valuable tool for denoting the phenomena and processes taking place in global Christianity, especially in the ecumenical movement, including the World Council of Churches (WCC). The article aims to identify the crucial field of the WCC' teaching that demonstrates and highlights dewesternisation processes within the ecumenical movement. Before tackling the main problem of this study, it discusses the issues 'internal' for dewesternisation and ecumenism, such as evolutionism, postcolonial theory and postcolonial theology. They all set a historical deduction that helps better comprehend dewesternisation within the ecumenical movement, as exemplified by the WCC. Literary analysis is the primary method employed in this study.

Contribution: By identifying and exemplifying the term of dewesternisation within the WCC, the article contributes to its better comprehension, particularly in the Northern Hemisphere.

Keywords: dewesternisation; ecumenical movement; World Council of Churches; postcolonial theory; postcolonial theology.

Introduction

Dewesternisation is a word that appeared several decades ago in politics and social sciences, and developed because of the growing dissent among non-Western countries against the Western hegemony in the economy, episteme and culture. However, such a simple statement opens a range of scientific observations, political ideas and strategies as well as just claims and impatience caused by a global imbalance in the distribution of power and affluence.

Dewesternisation is also an instrument of policy-making. The Valdai Club, founded by the Russian authorities in 2002, is a good example of a think-tank that uses the concept of dewesternisation to promote Russian political narration. For example, one of the articles published on its website explains the Russian invasion of Ukraine as 'radical military methods to try to break the international order dominated by US hegemony' (Wen 2023:1).

The concept of dewesternisation can also be applied to global Christianity. Even though in many non-Christian corners of the world, Christianity is still sometimes associated with the West, the conviction about Christianity's shift to the Global South – and thereby also dewesternisation – is widely shared by Christian theologians. In addition, Pope Francis' pontificate provided new impulses for a growing contestation of Western epistemic dominance.

An excellent insight into what dewesternisation in Christianity looks like is the teaching of the World Council of Churches (WCC). The term itself is hardly used in the Council's official documents and its institutional jargon. Nevertheless, the process this term designates is one of the most crucial for the future of the ecumenical movement, especially when considering European-Atlantic secularisation. And the topic of ecumenical dewesternisation can be viewed from many angles. A broader perspective could simply equate dewesternisation with Christianity's shift to the Global South accounted within the WCC. However, I will take a narrower view in this article when identifying the crucial field of the WCC' teaching, demonstrating and highlighting dewesternisation processes within the ecumenical movement. I will address the research question of whether the WCC constitutes an institutional space for dewesternisation. But before tackling the main problem of this study, the issues 'internal' for dewesternisation and ecumenism, such as evolutionism, postcolonial theory and postcolonial theology will be discussed. They all set a historical deduction that helps better comprehend dewesternisation within the ecumenical

movement, as exemplified by the WCC. Literary analysis is the primary method employed in this study.

Western evolutionism

Dewesternisation may be better understood when juxtaposed with Western linear evolutionism as a dominant intellectual mindset since the 19th century. Many critical theories indeed accentuated that such evolutionism no longer can designate the paradigms of Western thinking.

Many pointed to the crisis narrations that increasingly eroded the idea of progress driving the Western world for two centuries. But, despite this, it would be hard to deny that echoes of evolutionism still reverberate in the widespread Western imaginary. The conviction – even though not publicly demonstrated – that different tribes or ethnic groups reflect a historical state that should strive for the highest development grade, still permeates Western societies.

However, three theoretical comments on this conviction could be added. Firstly, the thinking in terms of Western evolutionism is perhaps an expression of a certain historical particularism that causes an inability to look at history as encompassing the whole planet. Jaeger (1965), in his monumental book *Paideia*, argued that:

> Such a community of forms and ideals exists in a special sense between Greek and Rome on the one hand, and the great modern nations of the West, individually and collectively, on the other. If we accept this deeper conception of history – as expressing a community of origin and ideals – we can never make the whole world the object of historical survey; and however widely our geographical horizon may be extended, the frontiers of our history can never recede beyond those which for the past three thousand years have bounded our historical destiny. (p. xvi)

Despite decades of perpetuating international political order, building international law and developing global civil society, the observation by Jaeger still seems timely, even though written 90 years ago. On the other hand, Jaeger's view, while influential in classical studies, exemplifies a Eurocentric historiography that excludes non-Western civilisations from the narrative of human development – a perspective increasingly challenged in postcolonial thought.

Secondly, this genetic dependence between Greek-Roman civilisation and the modern West is leading not only to the above-mentioned particularism. Indeed, 'our history still begins with the Greek', as stressed by Jaeger, but it also means that this history was moving some features and values that have determined Western civilisation down the ages. Nisbet held even that among them, the idea of progress has been a driving force: 'No single idea was been more important than, perhaps as important as, the idea of progress in Western civilization for nearly three thousand years …' (Nisbet 2009:4). However, the most intrinsic and endogenous element of this idea was a process of coming from the primitive past to a more advanced future. Evolutionism in the 19th and 20th centuries' social sciences, even though directly derived from Spencer's theory that ushered in a mainstream of sociology and anthropology in their first decades, is based on this idea, which originated in Greek philosophy.

Thirdly, some theological standpoints derived an idea of progress from Christianity. Particularly in the 19th century, liberal theology and its main representatives, such as Albrecht Ritschl, Adolf von Harnack and Ernst Troeltsch, linked progress with the continuous realisation of the Christian idea, namely the Kingdom of God, *hic et nunc*, in the earthly dimension. The liberal theologians, therefore, affirmed the concept of progress in the very sense of this word as an ever-unfolding line. They have shared a 19th-century optimistic belief that humanity would enter an age of prosperity and moral development, and Christianity should contribute to this continuous process. They have also adopted a theological and historical monism – a conviction that the secular history of the world and salvation history are homogeneous.

There is also another approach to a historical connection between Christianity and the idea of progress. It is about a belief that an ideology of progress stems from secularised Christian eschatological beliefs (in the sense of the tenets of prominent political thinkers, such as Carl Schmitt and Vladimir Tismăneanu, who argued that political ideas are merely secularised versions of former theological concepts). In this perspective, it is worth referring to Karl Löwith, who, in his famous book *Meaning and History*, claimed that the idea of progress, while secularising theology of history deriving from Hebrew prophecy and Christian eschatology (Löwith 1949:17), lost its primary meaning and purpose, becoming its opposition:

> [*T*]he progress of the modern revolutionary age is not simply a consequence of its new knowledge in natural science and history but that it is still conditioned by that advance which Christianity has achieved over classical paganism. Hence, the ambiguous structure of their leading idea of progress, which is as Christian by derivation as it is anti-Christian by implication and which is definitely foreign to the thought of the ancients. While the starting-point of the modern religions of progress is an eschatological anticipation of a future salvation and consequently a vision of the present state of mankind as one of depravity, no similar hope and despair can be found in any classical writer describing Athens' or Rome's decay. The eschatological interpretation of secular history in terms of judgement and salvation never entered the minds of ancient historians. It is the remote and yet intense result of Christian hope and Jewish expectation. (p. 61)

In this regard, it is also worth referring to the sociological approach of Anthony Giddens, who, when denoting late-modernity, therefore, the epoch we live in, regarded the colonisation of the future as one of its inherent attributes (Giddens 1991:142).

Postcolonial theory

Much was made to contest or resist this evolutionary gradation of the societies. A departure from liberal theology

after World War I was an evident example of an intellectual trend that undermined the Western optimistic historiosophy of the 19th century. The critiques of Western modernity, such as Marxist alienation, Durkheim's anomy, ecological critiques and the critique of mass society, were other well-known and evident illustrations of pessimistic views on Western civilisation taken from the inside, distorting its good picture and questioning social evolutionism.

The erosion of the colonial world order paved the way for the critiques from outside. Of course, it is not that critical voices appeared only after many countries in Asia or Africa emerged from former colonies. Many Latin American philosophers abhorred Western (meaning mainly Anglo-Saxon) civilisation, demonstrating it already at the turn of the 19th and 20th centuries.

For instance, José Rodó, in his well-known (but at the same time too idealistic and thereby bearing the risk of oversimplification of the Latin American intellectual history) essay 'Ariel', referring to Shakespeare's 'Tempest', contrasted Latin American and Anglo-Saxon civilisations when insisting that the former mirrors good, gratuitousness, nobleness and sensitivity, and the latter is driven by egoism, arrogance and ignorance. The former is the civilisation of idealism, and the latter is the civilisation of utilitarianism. To stop the influences of the Western world must have been a duty of the Latin American intellectual, political and spiritual leaders (Cholewińska 2015:98).

The way to political decolonisation was accompanied by declarations and concepts demonstrating 'epistemic' independence. The breakdown of the post-war world entailed a number of emancipation movements that opposed not only Western colonisation but also the relationships of deprivation embedded in local, non-Western cultures. Bhimrao Ramji Ambedkar, who cooperated with Mahatma Gandhi in fighting for an independent Indian state (Paswan & Pramanshi 2002:312) but opposed caste social system in India, was an evident example of such a 'double emancipation'.

The experiences of early independence unveiled a multidimensional character of the colonial legacy, which at times was additionally converging with the progressivist political strategies adopted by many newly established states. Of course, the rivalry between the two global political blocs during the Cold War also had a huge impact on the ideological trends in these countries since both the capitalist West and the communist East 'exported' their political ideas in different ways, deepening political chaos. Already in the 1970s, economic failures, ethnic conflicts, humanitarian catastrophes and wars between postcolonial states dispelled hopes for a soon and bright welfare future. Kapuściński (2007) has masterly narrated this dissonance between expectations and gloomy reality in his classic collection of essays on Africa:

> The epoch of the fifties and sixties, full of promise and hope, had come to an end. While it lasted, the majority of the continent's countries freed themselves from colonialism and began their development as the independent states. The dominant political and economic theories of the time held that freedom would automatically bring prosperity, would instantly, with one stroke, transform regions that were poor and wretched into lands flowing with milk and honey. (p. 128)

This rapid shift from hope to frustration coincided with the emergence of postcolonial theory.

However, even though the term 'postcolonialism' may suggest a reference to direct experiences of the crises in the countries established during decolonisation, it soon went outside the sheer historical context and became a conceptual umbrella for a broad family of social, cultural and political emancipation movements. In addition, since the countries and continents differed in their experience of colonialism and its aftermath, postcolonialism widened its scope and came about more than a mere theoretical consideration. Sri Lankan theologian Sugirtharajah (2003) insisted that:

> Postcolonialism, it has to be stressed, has a multiplicity of meanings, depending on location. It is seen as an oppositional reading practice and as a way of critiquing the totalising forms of Eurocentric thinking and of reshaping dominant meanings. It is a mental attitude rather than a method, more a subversive stance towards the dominant knowledge than a school of thought. (p. 15)

Sugirtharajah's conclusion, apart from paying attention to a semantic heterogeneity of postcolonialism, accentuates the role of knowledge in perpetuating the relationships of coloniality, bringing to mind the concept by Michel Foucault about power-knowledge, so influencing sociological discussions and altering 'our understandings of many institutions of Western society' (Foucault 1980:292). The summary by Arif Dirlik helps tidy up an enlarging field of meanings when distinguishing three main aspects to which postcolonialism refers. First is 'a literal description of the conditions in formerly colonised societies, in which case the term has concrete referents, as in postcolonial societies or postcolonial intellectuals'. Then it is:

> [*A*] description of a global condition after the period of colonialism, in which case the usage is somewhat more abstract and less concrete in reference, comparable in its vagueness to the earlier term Third World, for which it is intended as a substitute.

Finally, it is 'a description of a discourse on the above-mentioned conditions that is informed by the epistemological and psychic orientations that are products of those conditions' (Ashcroft 2001:8).

Both aforementioned descriptions emphasise postcolonialism's epistemic dimension. Yet, a large area of postcolonial theory refers to the economic consequences of the Western political and economic hegemony over the world and, therefore, turns into the criticism of capitalism. For example, Taylor (2004:42), in his juxtaposition of terms critical to postcolonial theory, perceived recolonisation which he refers to the relationships between former metropolitan and colonised

countries. Such economic dependence is often stressed by the critics of political and economic globalisation, which is itself regarded as another way of the colonisation by the former colonisers. Martin Khor expressed it emphatically when stating that 'globalization is what we in the Third World have for several decades called colonization' (Al-Rodhan 2006:14). These interdependencies between colonialism and globalisation have been a crucial subject of reflection by the WCC – for example, during the general assembly in Harare, Zimbabwe, in 1998, where the ecumenists insightfully noted that:

> In the midst of these visions for our people, and our children's children, we have become more acutely aware that, in some fundamental respects, the legacy of colonialism of the past is still present with us in a new form – a form perhaps more seductive on the surface, but demeaning and dangerous at deeper levels. The driving forces of this new form of domination are economic powers which may be as insidious as political colonisers and a subtle but powerful ideology which assumes that the most promising way to improve the quality of life for all people is to give free rein to market forces. (ed. Epps 2004:41)

Statements similar to the above mentioned can be found in many later utterances by the WCC' theologians. A critical stance towards market globalisation became, without a doubt, one of the driving forces of ecumenical social thought for the next decades.

Postcolonial theology

This short reference to postcolonial theory with a mention of the ecumenical movement leads to postcolonial theology. Like liberation theology (with which it is sometimes linked), postcolonial theology develops on the margins of mainstream theological systems of the Churches, raising the voices of the profound change and even radical transformation which faces Christianity, religion and the world. Like sociological, political and cultural postcolonial theory, postcolonial theology is a conceptual field of encounters of theological and philosophical ideas, existential concerns and social postulates. It is also far from ideological and methodological homogeneity, and can be defined by its function, namely, unveiling the perpetuated mechanisms of deprivation created by colonialism. Of course, colonialism is regarded as broader than a mere political and economic domination of one country over another.

Given that postcolonial theology concerns such intimate and inherent spheres of human existence as spirituality and religiosity, and despite the plurality of forms and manifestations, it has some common places.

Firstly, it stems from the experiences of liberation movements appearing worldwide since the 1950s, which contested different forms of oppression and subjugation, whether political, or cultural, social, economic and epistemic. Postcolonial theology reflects, thereby, postcolonial theory in politics, sociology and anthropology.

Secondly, postcolonial theology is based on deconstructive theories, which declare the end of hitherto theological assumptions and the quest for a new theological language in the world of a global epistemic shift. In this regard, various examples of postcolonial theology question such structures of theological thinking, which, in their view, perpetuate unfair systems in society and culture (*Minjung* theology in Korea is a good illustration of such an approach).

Thirdly, postcolonial theology strives to bring down a specific hermeneutic empire of post-Constantinian Christianity. Of course, the category of empire is crucial for postcolonial theory, in which it becomes more sociological and philosophical than merely historical. Talleyrand's succinct definition that an empire is about 'the art of putting men in their place' (Colás 2007:7) still remains relevant when considering the ways how postcolonial theory understands empire – much further than a mere political structure.

Taylor (2004) views this Christian imperialism as distorting a true Christian message to the world:

> Centuries of Christian imperialist hermeneutics have obscured the counter-imperial elements of Christianity's own scriptural narratives: Jesus' contesting imperial corruption in the temple-state of his time; gospel writer Mark's portraits of Jesus' action in opposition to Roman occupying soldiers; Jesus' death by crucifixion, an execution usually for the seditious who threatened the religiously backed imperial order; the apostle Paul's money-raising and community-building activity that kept him quite literally on the run across imperial terrain until he was executed in the capital city, Rome. (p. 44)

Such facts (among others) from the Gospel's history are often referred to by the groups or expert teams that could be denoted as postcolonial: Kairos movement, Radical Reformation project, *Oikotree* movement, The Association of Third World Theologians (to mention but a few). These groups exemplify Christian religious and social movements which fight human deprivation, social exclusion and political and economic oppression. However, such a fight is not only taking place through diaconia, but it also has to assume a struggle for transforming corrupted epistemic systems that, as many postcolonial theologians state, for ages have overwhelmed the world's dominant socioeconomic order.

Abovementioned groups refer to the next resource of the postcolonial theology distinguished by Taylor, that is liberation theology broadly understood. Taylor deems that the most obvious examples are Latin American liberation movements, Christian feminist theologians and black theologians. All in all, postcolonial theology relies on the call to liberation from each form of oppression, believing that just this is a true Christian message to the world.

The World Council of Churches

The abovementioned references to postcolonial theology and its 'resources' lead to the concretisation of this cultural and intellectual movement in Christianity. But, behind this, the key

question of the article, one about Christian dewesternisation in Christian Churches, awaits. An illustration of both issues is supposed to be found in the changes taking place within the WCC.

Before drawing this illustration, two comments should be made. Firstly, given that the WCC is a worldwide institution, producing thousands of documents and launching dozens of programmes, its dewesternisation is assumed, based on observing its activities. Secondly, the term 'dewesternisation' is not commonly used within the WCC. Its semantic field has been, thereby, reconstructed while examining and selecting various examples regarded as connotations.

The WCC is a large and well-known organisation, so it would be redundant to repeat more detailed information about it. However, some short description is necessary to introduce the issue. The organisation is one of the largest ecumenical, and thus Christian bodies, bringing together Churches from many theological traditions, Anglican, Lutheran, Reformed, Orthodox, Methodist, Indigenous and Free Churches. When self-defining the WCC states that it is 'a fellowship of 349 churches from more than 110 countries, representing over five hundred million Christians worldwide' and that it is:

> [*A*] fellowship of churches which confess the Lord Jesus Christ as God and Saviour according to the Scriptures and therefore seek to fulfil together their common calling to the glory of the one God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit. (VanElderen & Convey 2001:6)

In addition, the WCC defines its goals when declaring that:

> The primary purpose of the fellowship of churches in the WCC is to call one another to visible unity in one faith and in one eucharistic fellowship, expressed in worship and common life in Christ, through witness and service in the world, and to advance towards that unity in order that the world may believe. (VanElderen & Convey 2001:51)

Consequently, the Council gathers many Churches, even from the most distant locations and various denominations, and it is an institution that creates conceptual ecumenism.

From the very beginning, the WCC followed the vision of Christian cooperation relying on common resistance to the factors ruining the human community, such as injustice, poverty, social exclusion, economic inequalities, ecological calamities, political upheavals, among others. Down the decades, the WCC has produced a huge collection of reports, declarations, sermons and statements that comprise an impressive repository of ecumenical social teaching. They are both the fruits of the academic concepts of the theologians from different denominations and the common reflection of Christians sharing their daily life observations. Moreover, the WCC accentuates the transformative significance of theological knowledge that has to lead to a transformation of the corrupted structures of human institutions.

Another aspect of the WCC' social involvement concerns one of the fundamental observations in ecumenism, meaning the shift of Christianity to the Global South. This is not only about the statistics revealing the growing secularisation of the West on the one hand and the progress and rise of Christianity in Africa, Asia and Latin America, but also about the transformation of the ecclesiastical structure of the ecumenical movement. From the 1960s onward (especially from the WCC General Assembly in New Delhi in 1961), many Churches from the new, postcolonial countries joined the WCC, bringing in their specific understanding of the crucial tenets of faith and their life contexts.

Accentuating both the socially transformative significance of theological knowledge and Christianity's shift to the Global South has a huge impact on the contemporary ecumenical mainstream, which the WCC constitutes. The Council can be regarded as a 'conceptual hub' where different concepts and ideas from Churches, theological think-tanks, expert groups, grassroots organisations, among others, are exchanged. The way the WCC addresses issues such as alternative visions of the world economic order, the integrity of creation, just peace for regions affected by military conflicts, the emancipation of oppressed and persecuted nations, ethnicities and castes (such as Dalits in India), makes it one of the most active humanitarian organisation. This, in turn, sometimes elicits criticism from those who claim that the Council alters the basic tenets of Christian message into an idea of a new humanity achieved through political and sociological measures. Walter Kasper, the former President of the Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity (today Dicastery) defined this model as 'a secular ecumenism', an ecumenical paradigm focused on the joint Christian efforts for justice, peace and integrity of creation, instead of coming to a theological agreement. Regardless of the voices of criticism, the number of activities and issues concerning comprehensive liberation of people from social, political and cultural oppression that the WCC takes up is impressive. All in all, as it will be discussed later on, the oncoming general assemblies, especially those in Harare in 1998, Porto Alegre in 2005 and Pusan 2013, and such WCC programmes as Justice, Peace and Integrity of Creation confirmed and affirmed the theological commandment of social involvement within the ecumenical movement (Kopiec, Składanowski & Kantyka 2024:47).

Ecumenical dewesternisation

As already mentioned, the category 'dewesternisation' is rarely used in the WCC documents. However, when understanding it as a departure from Western-centrism (given that it means viewing Western civilisation as superior to other cultures), dewesternisation has become one of the main aspects of the ecumenical mainstream. It is regarded as both the objective process taking place in Christianity and a commitment taken by ecumenists who see it as an act of historical justice (also in a theological sense). In such a perspective, the WCC can be called an agent of dewesternisation.

Already basic, commonly accepted observation can prove it: one about Christianity's shift to the Global South. The most prominent ecumenists from the WCC, including General Secretaries, such as Phillip Potter and Konrad Raiser, emphasised this change many times, before it became evident in the theological imagery. During the first General Assembly in Amsterdam in 1948, only 30 of 147 founding Churches came from Africa, Asia and Latin America (Albrecht 1984:138). Nowadays the WCC is entirely different from when it was established in 1948 in Amsterdam; it is a global organisation, of which member churches are based in Africa (26%), Europe (22%), Asia (22%), North America (9%), Latin America (8%), Pacific (5%), Caribbean (4%), and in the Middle East (4%), representing more than 550 million people.

Besides these telling statistics, dewesternisation resonates in the growing significance of the non-Western narratives and fields of engagement. When outlining the situation of the current ecumenical movement, the members of the WCC central committee noted in the WCC strategic plan for 2023–2030:

> Ecumenical understanding has received new challenges. These globalized and digitalised times present challenges to churches in every part of the world. While membership in traditional churches is declining in some parts of the world, churches in other parts of the world are growing. In many places, formerly dominating theologies are challenged by creative, postcolonial approaches and ways of being church. This contributes to growing diversity within the ecumenical fellowship while challenging the ecumenical movement in new ways. (WCC 2023:1)

Of course, a strategy must be concise by default; however, the above-quoted words reflect anyway a twilight of the dominance of the hitherto theological approaches.

In addition, when presenting the strategic direction 'as a pilgrimage of justice, reconciliation, and unity', the WCC confirms the vision of socially involved ecumenism confronting unjust and corrupted social systems. However, though not mentioned in this document, the WCC' vision contains harsh criticism of the world's social and economic order built on neoliberal capitalism, which is linked to the West by default (introduced in the following paragraphs).

The changes in the ecumenical movement can also be illustrated by a brief historical sketch of milestones in the WCC' history, especially by the global general assemblies, which are supposed to be the central moment in the organisation's life. In this regard, of particular importance were the following general assemblies: in New Delhi in 1961, where many Orthodox Churches joined the WCC; in Uppsala, Sweden, which affirmed a direction of 'social ecumenism'; in Vancouver, Canada, which launched the programme Justice, Peace and Integrity of Creation, later the main field of WCC' engagement; in Harare, Zimbabwe, where neoliberal capitalist globalisation met the harsh criticism; and in Pusan (now officially Busan), South Korea, which considered the motives of global problems such as poverty, conflicts and migration. Besides the general assemblies, the crucial point of this shift from Western-centrism into a more global perspective was the conference 'Church and Society' held in Geneva, Switzerland, in 1966, which laid the conceptual foundation for the global commitment and responsibility of the ecumenical movement.

The preceding paragraphs help distinguish the field of the WCC activities in which dewesternisation has taken place: ecumenical criticism of the world economic system and Western epistemic dominance. Such a distinction is neither complete nor categorical; yet, it invites one to discuss the ways of changes in global Christianity.

If, in the first decades, the Council consequently avoided political declarations (accentuating the teaching about the responsible society), the general assembly in Harare in 1998 was a great accusation against neoliberal ideology (Western by default). The final report of the gathering put it firmly:

> Economic globalization is guided by the neoliberal ideology. The credo of the free market is the firm belief that through competing economic forces and purposes, an 'invisible hand' will assure the optimum good as every individual pursues his or her economic gain. It views human beings as individuals rather than as persons in community, as essentially competitive rather than cooperative, as consumerist and materialist rather than spiritual. Thus, it produced a graceless system that renders people surplus and abandons them if they cannot compete with the powerful few in global economy. As a consequence, people tend to lose their cultural identity and deny their political and ethical responsibility. Promising wealth for everybody and the fulfilment of the dream of unlimited progress, neo-liberalism draws a picture of universal salvation. But obsessed with rising revenues from financial markets, expansion of trade and growth of production, the global economic system is blind for its destructive social and ecological consequences. (ed. Kessler 1999:258)

This extended quotation contains at least three references, which are crucial in light of this study. Firstly, it is the significance of globalisation for the ecumenical movement, which has been many times affirmed, not only in Harare, but also in numerous utterances of the WCC' leaders (Fröchtling et al. 2013:x). Secondly, it is the belief that neoliberal ideology has its advocates and beneficiaries, mainly big transnational companies and multinational corporations (from the West by default). Thirdly, it is the conviction that the world needs counter-values and counter-cultural patterns, which would confront egoism and social atomisation caused by neoliberal ideology (again, which is Western by default). In addition, the concept of 'white saviourism' appears in the ecumenical life under the WCC' umbrella. Kenneth Mtata, WCC programme director for Public Witness and Diakonia, when reflecting on the famous book 'White Saviourism in International Development' published recently, defined 'white saviourism' as an 'intersection of race and capitalism'. Mtata (2023) explained that:

> [*W*]hite saviourism is comprised of individual virtue versus systemic justice – the focus on the altruism of white individuals without addressing the systemic injustices that cause poverty … We must not move Western citizens to be more generous – they must work for justice. Africa and the developing world need just economic relationships – not charity. (p.1)

Mtata's statement well summarised the WCC' stance towards social question – it is not enough to bring humanitarian aid to the places touched by famine, wars and ecological catastrophes; instead, Christians must actively involve in the transformation of corrupted social and economic structures. Here, one can easily recognise the perpetuated theological influences of the Social Gospel theology, including the teaching about social sin.

The narration of white saviourism converges and intersects with the criticism of the prevailing economic order. Initially, the latter arose on the margins of the theological mainstream. For example, the Association of Third World Theologians, a theological think-tank established in 1976, stated in its founding declaration:

> The theologies from Europe and North America are dominant today in our churches and represent one form of cultural domination. They must be understood to have arisen out of situations related to those countries, and therefore must not be uncritically adopted without our raising the question of their relevance in the context of our countries. Indeed, we must, in order to be faithful to the gospel and to our peoples, reflect on the realities of our own situations and interpret the word of God in relation to these realities. (West 1999:130)

The Association of Third World Theologians inspired many other theological groups striving for a profound transformation of Christianity and generally rejecting alleged Christian imperialism, which is, as it is said, represented by the main historical Churches. Although in a more moderate way, the WCC' mainline social teaching, as conveyed in reports and documents, such as referenced above, relates a call for a transformation of the socioeconomic system with a big epistemic change. This is illustrated by some non-Western cultural categories that are presented as counter and complementary to the dominant Western hermeneutics. The ecumenical documents mention the Bolivian category *sumak kawsay* [good life], Kenyan *sokoni* [marketplace] (Kobia 2007:3) and Zimbabwean *padare* [meeting place] - this list is still complemented. Yet, probably the best known is *Ubuntu*.

World Council of Churches has included *Ubuntu*, in its teaching, mainly thanks to the influential advocacy of Desmond Tutu. It is employed as an alternative anthropological and sociological model which can counter destroying anthropology of *homo oeconomicus* (which constructs the human person as being essentially insatiable and selfish) (Mshana & Peralta 2010:99). Even though its potential is still limited, its main value lies in paying attention to the richness outside the Western cultural mainstream. When promoting concepts such as this, the WCC demonstrates a constructive stance to dewesternisation. In other words, it becomes a window for dewesternisation of which Westerners can look out.

Conclusion

When established, the WCC was rather a Western organisation. Also, the leading topics of the WCC social teaching in the first years were rather Western-centric: ramifications of World War II, the Cold War, industrial society and technological progress. However, the decolonisation and Christianity's rapid growth outside the West changed the ecumenical movement, including the WCC. Today, the organisation demonstrates a global reach of Christianity. This is reflected in the WCC statistics, the main fields of interest and involvement, and the leadership examined by theologians from outside the West. World Council of Churches is a field of tacit dewesternisation – which is taking place in the institution's structure and Council's stance towards the most critical questions of contemporaneity. Yet, tacit dewesternisation crushes the cognitive pillars on which the West is based and undermines the prevailing Western narrations, such as individualism and market economy. Of course, it is not so that the WCC is a sort of global Christian parliament that enacts the laws and regulations that are imposed on believers. It is an ecumenical 'united nations', which is the voice of Christians often unheard and unseen from the West, who increasingly decided to look for their Christian way in their cultural frame.

As the WCC continues to navigate the tensions between unity and diversity, its tacit dewesternisation may serve as a model for other global religious institutions seeking to decolonise their epistemic foundations. This is a difficult process – taking into account threats such as theological and cultural syncretism or a conflict between the West and non-West. However, Christianity is not about the West or Europe or Greek and Roman cultural and philosophical legacy, but the living faith of people in all corners of the world.

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CRediT authorship contribution

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