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Too little too late … On the reaction of the WARC to the resurgence of violent identity politics in the 1990s

ABSTRACT

This contribution offers an analysis of the manner the World Alliance of Reformed Churches reacted to the influence of the identity politics of the 1990s on its way to the 23rd General Assembly in Debrecen in 1997. Contrary to the outspoken position of the 21st General Assembly in Ottawa in 1982 over against the South African Reformed churches that supported apartheid and adopted its racial structures correspondently, the 1997 Assembly's reaction was much more subdued. Attempts to find an answer in the traditional Reformed teaching on church-state relations and in the Presbyterian Synodal structure were finally dismissed as not to the point. Instead a Barmen Declaration like call for a multicultural church was accepted. But with its eschatological style no church felt pressed upon to reflect on its link with nation, ethnic group, or tribe. The conclusion weights the consequences of reducing an ecclesial problem to an ethical issue.

Introduction

One year after joining the Faculty of Theology at the University of the Western Cape, the young theologian Dirkie Smit would become one of the main drafters of the Belhar Confession. This confession positioned itself in a most outspoken way in the then existing political and ecclesial apartheid within the Dutch Reformed Church family. The Belhar Confession reverberated strongly among the member churches of the World Alliance of Reformed Churches (WARC) (cf. Naudé 2010). For Smit it would be part of a life-long academic interest in Reformed theology, as attested to by the recent publication of one of his collections of essays (Smit 2009).[2] Smit's method of contributing to ecumenical theology from a Reformed perspective has always attracted me.

In this contribution I offer an analysis of the way WARC reacted to the identity politics of the 1990s. I do so with a view to answering the question whether any continuity exists in the way WARC reacted to racial identity politics in South Africa in the 1980s. In this way I wish to honour the work of Smit and to challenge him and others to continue working towards the unity of the church as part of doing public theology in a "global" world.

In 2010, WARC and the Reformed Ecumenical Council together formed the World Communion of Reformed Churches. This new body faces the same challenge as other global Christian communions in the broad ecumenical movement, namely how to deal with sociocultural

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2 This volume contains 28 of Smit's essays on aspects of Reformed theology.

identities in relation to the identity of the church? The issue of social identities, including racial, national and ethnic identities also faced the twentieth century ecumenical movement. The movement serves an interesting case for two reasons: First, it has a history of publicly condemning violence caused by racial, national and ethnic tensions. At the same time, since the unity of the church is its core business, the ecumenical movement is an environment where resistance to attempts at linking the Christian message and Christian denominations too closely with racial, national, and ethnic identities can be expected. Such attempts would, after all, contradict the idea of the unity and catholicity of the church.

Identity issues were very high on the international agenda at two occasions during the twentieth century: First, before World War II due to the threat of an imminent war as a result of nationalistic profiling, especially in Nazi Germany. After World War II a new ideological confrontation pushed national and other identities into the background. However, the end of the Cold War brought a reawakening of the violence that often accompanies identity politics in the West. Many people were surprised by the resurgence of nationalistic violence and in stances of ethnic cleansing in the heart of Europe. Especially unexpected was the use of religion as an identity marker in these former communist societies that had been thoroughly secularised by the state for more than forty years. Serbs, for example, presented themselves as Orthodox, Croats as Roman Catholics, and Bosnians as Muslims.

Religions were, of course, misused for political purposes, but at the same time they also used the opportunity to present themselves in the public sphere. In this heated atmosphere the jargon of Christian peace and reconciliation was used, but more importantly, many religious leaders, theologians and lay believers unreservedly defined themselves in terms of their national or ethnic affiliations. There was no theological reticence whatsoever. This is not surprising in light of the common conviction (also expressed in Faith and Order documents) that social identities within the church were of a nontheological nature and that they do not harm the fundamentals of the one Catholic Church.

A FIRST REACTION: A REMINDER OF THE RESPONSIBILITY OF THE STATE

In response to the historical changes that took place in Europe in 1989, WARC's Department of Theology organised two consultations. The first was held in November 1990, one year after the implosion of communist regimes in most of the Central and Eastern Europe (cf. Wilson 1991).[3] The theme and the mandate of the consultation (on Christian Community in a Changing Society) were broad. Its task was to discern how Christians in a living community could exercise responsibility in a changing society. The consultation produced a working paper that was intended for further discussion by member churches. More than merely expressing gratitude for the end of the Cold War and communist dictatorships, the paper also breathes an air of concern about an uncertain future. Will the new governments in Central and Eastern Europe still see as their task the protection of vulnerable members of society in a time of unemployment, economic chaos, ethnic and cultural strife, et cetera? Will authorities and churches respect the secular state, and how will they react to ethnic nationalism?

The rise of ethnical identity and nationalism was just one of the issues that followed in the wake the rapidly changing society since 1989. However, the fact that the Message to the Churches, which resulted from the above consultation, does not mention the issue confirms that it was still not seen as a real challenge (cf. The Message to the Churches in Wilson 1991:88 - 89).

3 Some thirty persons, all from the Reformed tradition, took part.

In the introduction to the working paper, an explicitly negative reference to the issue of nationalism is found: "we are concerned about the rise of nationalism, racism, and other disquieting features of the present day" (Wilson 1991:80). In his introduction to the volume containing the texts from the consultation, H. S. Wilson (then Executive Secretary of WARC's Department of Theology) observed that the negative connotation attached to nationalism was not shared by all consultation participants (Wilson 1991: ii). This volume is also revealing in another way. It contains the presentations at the conference: six case studies,[4] and two papers. The latter two papers are on the same issue, namely the relationship between church and state but from two perspectives, the biblical witness and the Reformed tradition (Gottwald 1991:118 and Busch 1991:19 - 28).

The tradition affirms that God has installed governments with the clear function of looking after the wellbeing of all and creating a just social body responsible for protecting the weak from the strong and freeing all the oppressed. The Christian community is, then, called to support the functions of the government in striving towards this goal (Wilson 1990:108).

But would this specific Reformed contribution be enough when more violence, fuelled by ethnic and nationalistic claims, erupted in Europe and other parts of the world in the first half of the 1990s?

A SECOND REACTION: CHURCHES CALLED TO PROTECT DIVERSITY AND TO WORK AS AGENTS OF RECONCILIATION

The second consultation took place in 1994, in Colombo, Sri Lanka, in the wake of the ethnic crises in Bosnia and Rwanda. This consultation was organised in cooperation with the Lutheran World Federation (LWF) and the World Council of Churches (WCC).[5] It focused on one of the main characteristics of the post Cold War era, namely the resurgence of ethnicity and nationalism. Four short presentations and a statement resulting from this consultation have been published. In the first presentation, Jayadeva Uyangoda (who teaches political science at the University of Colombo) attempted to entangle ethnicity and nationalism and ended with a call to de-ethnicise politics (Uyangoda 1995:190 - 194). He explained that issue of conflicting identities also affect churches:

> In other words, the church is a part of the problem because at one level church has this universalizing, universalist, homogenizing identity, while at the same time church members have micro identities (Uyangoda 1995:193).

The second paper by the then still fairly unknown Croat scholar Miroslav Volf (1995:195 - 205) offered theological perspectives on cultural identity and conflict.[6] According to Volf, striking a balance of distance and belonging Christians should not be of the culture, but in and for the culture. This requires a catholic personality that belongs to a catholic community – catholicity referring to openness to other personalities and communities. The catholicity of the local church is attributed to its being part of the universal church, but in reality every local church is a catholic community because all other churches shape its identity. However, next to this

4 German Democratic Republic, Czechoslovakia, Northern Ireland, Lebanon, South Africa and South Korea.

5 This time thirty six people attended, representing WARC, LWF or the WWC.

6 Volf used some ideas he later fully developed in a volume entitled *Exclusion and Embrace: A Theological Exploration of Identity, Otherness, and Reconciliation* (1996).

movement towards embracing culture, especially other cultures, a movement in the direction of exclusion needs to be distinguished. It requires an evangelical personality, transformed by the Spirit and engaged in transformation of the world as part of an ecumenical community that says "No!" to evil in each culture. Volf referred to the Barmen Declaration that called upon the churches to reject all "other lords". But Barmen's abstract formulation now needs an added formulation in order to nurture commitment to the multicultural community of the Christian church (1995:198200).

The meeting in Colombo ended with the adoption of a statement entitled A Challenge to the Churches.[7] The introduction to the statement contains a revealing confession:

> The role of the Christian community in any situation of ethnic strife is always difficult and often ambiguous. In many of these conflicts, no solution is apparent; and we recognize that Christian faith offers no ready answers to them (Ethnicity and Nationalism 1995:225).

The report consists of three sections: a) reflections on some types and elements of ethnicity; b) biblical and theological perspectives; and c) practical suggestions for the churches. I shall focus on the second section. It starts with aspects of creation theology with references to Genesis 1 (creation) and 11 (Tower of Babel). "God is the author both of our common humanity and of our diversity" (1995:227). Due to sin – greed for wealth and power, land and its fruits – human beings have made ethnic differences a source of deadly conflict. As a consequence of the redemption in Christ, every tribe and nation is called to gather around the Triune God in a new heaven and earth (Rev. 21 – 22). Before this promise will be fulfilled, all cultures will be refined and renewed. The relationship between the church and the nations is described as follows:

> As the gospel has been preached to many nations, the church has taken root in many cultures, transforming them as well as being profoundly shaped by them. Yet the church does not have its own specific culture; rather, to be church is a way of living the life of the new creation within a given culture. The church must have its feet firmly planted in any culture in which it lives, and its arms stretched out towards God and God's future, the new creation (1995:227 - 228).

Since Pentecost is in line with the experience of the Tower of Babel – the new community speaks many languages (Acts 2), it is not reverting to the unity of cultural uniformity; it is an advance towards the harmony of cultural diversity.

The church contributes to the flowering of diverse cultures by affirming cultural diversity. At the same time, the church is called to protect cultures against forms of ethnic aggression against the "stranger who is within the gates" or towards neighbouring ethnic groups. Churches also need to challenge structures or oppressive practices whether these are economic, political, sexual, racial or ethnic. Churches must, furthermore, strive towards peace and justice, and should give special attention to the plight of the vulnerable.

Confronted with the present ethnic conflicts around the globe, the first act of churches should be to repent.

7 This statement was published in *The Ecumenical Review* (47(2), 1995, 225231) as well as in Wilson 1995:113124 and in Tschuy 1997:150156.

Finding it difficult to distance themselves from their own culture, churches too often echo its reigning opinions and mimic its practices, sometimes to the point of repeating nationalistic slogans and propaganda (1995:228).

The report next recalls the appeal made at the 7th Assembly of the WCC in Canberra (1991):

> The churches are called to move towards visible unity in order to proclaim the gospel of hope and reconciliation for all people and show a credible model of that life God offers to all (1995:228).

Churches are invited to respond to this gift and calling for the sake of ethnic harmony. Because of the blood of the one Lamb, people of all tribes and nations belong to the one church. References to Revelations 5:9 and Galatians 3:28 underscore the Christological and unique soteriological basis of the one community in Christ.

As can be seen from the above, several themes are mentioned in this central biblical and theological section. First, starting from creation theology, unity and diversity are confessed as gifts from God, with the emphasis on diversity. Second, the calling of the church in the world is to cherish diversity, while at the same time being attentive to signs of exclusion within cultures. Three, churches must repent because they have too often been open to nationalistic slogans. And finally, in order to be a community of reconciliation, the church itself must be one people gathered from every tribe and nation, reconciled with God and each other on the basis of the blood of the one Lamb. Creation theology thus supports the diversity of nations and ethnical groups while the unity of the church is based on Christological arguments. The problem with this analysis is that ethnic strife is viewed only as a problem of the world. The one church is called to protect harmonious relations between various cultures, nations and ethnic groups. However, ethnicity or nationalism is not seen as a problem for the identity of the church and that can only diminish the reconciliatory potential of the church in the world.

The last part – challenges to the churches – confirms the above analysis. The challenges are ways to strengthen the reconciliatory power of the church: critical evaluation of its own history of involvement in ethnic strife; interfaith encounter in order to prevent the abuse of religion for nationalistic and ethnic purposes; the local congregation as the place par excellence for encounter across ethnic lines; wise leadership that promotes the gospel above ethnic affinities; sensitivity for the rights of minority groups; and churches that are politically, economically, historically and culturally well informed. In other words, the church "is challenged to break down the walls of hostility among groups and to unmask the dehumanizing powers often inherent in nationalistic programs" (1995:230). The phrase "kingdom of God" is proposed as inspiration toward an improved understanding of nationalism and ethnicity.

One point of advice is difficult to relate to the other "challenges", namely that "[t]he church is challenged to respond to the increase in missionary activity and the phenomenal growth of new religious movements in many countries" (1995:229). The latter groups are accused of propagating a faith that is alien to the cultural identity of the communities to which they belong, of offering simplistic responses to complex and critical issues and of serving as vehicles for promoting the economic and political interests of other powers. The accused groups are not identified, but the text contains the exact accusations levelled by the auto-cephalic Orthodox churches in Central and Eastern Europe against Evangelical missionary outreach,

which is often financially supported by American Evangelical or Pentecostal churches, or by the Roman Catholic Church. This is considered as resulting in inappropriate proselytism. What "the response" of "the church" – note the singular – should be is not explicitly stated. What in reality happened in many of these Central and Eastern European countries was that the historical church in these countries – often Orthodox churches, but sometimes also churches belonging to other traditions – tried to strengthen the bond between nation and a specific church in a combination of national and ecclesial identity in order to exclude other religious traditions.

For WARC the 1994 Colombo consultation had to be understood as the sequel to the 1990 Swiss conference on Christian Community in a Changing Society (cf. Wilson 1995:113). However, since it was co-organised by the LWF and WCC, specific Reformed emphases were absent. In his introduction in *Reformed World,* Wilson suggested some key doctrines that might require reinterpretation and application, namely those on the sovereignty of God, covenantal relationship, exercise of Christian freedom with responsibility, and the pilgrim nature of Christians (Wilson 1995:115). What these doctrines might mean in the context of rising ethnic and nationalistic tension was not further developed, but Wilson seems to be referring to theological elements that might help in looking critically at the issue of ethnic and nationalistic identification and that might help churches to keep their distance from a too close alliance with specific nationalistic and/or ethnic groups. For further direction Wilson referred to the 23rd General Council of WARC that was to follow in 1997.

On the way to Debrecen 1997: The presbyterian synodal structure as model

A study book and a volume with study texts were prepared in preparation for the 23rd Assembly of the General Council of WARC. These supplied participants with the basic documents to be discussed during the Council meeting. National and ethnic identity would be addressed, but not as part of the first section (Reformed faith and the search for unity), but of the second, which would deal with "justice for all creation". Next to justice in the economy and in creation, justice with regard to issues of national and ethnic identity would form the third subsection. The focus was on protecting ethnic and national diversity and on protecting ethnic and national minorities. It further built on the results of the meeting in Colombo.

After describing the ambiguity of belonging and types of ethnic conflicts, the document called National and Ethnic Identity (in Réamon 1997:64 - 72) observes that churches are not often able to act as agents of peace in ethnic conflicts. In the fourth paragraph, biblical and theological perspectives are provided for: dignity and equality in creation; God's option for diversity as expressed in the story of the Tower of Babel; ethnic discrimination as sin; the calling of Israel to be different for the sake of the others; the cross of Jesus, "the stranger", reconciling humans with God and with one another; the eschatological promise of the gathering of all tribes and nations around God's throne; Pentecost as the confirmation of God's option for diversity at the Tower of Babel; the Christian attitude of distance towards and belonging to culture; forgiveness as Christian message in contexts of ethnic violence; and both justice and truth as indispensable on the way to ethnic harmony.

Two of the theological themes contain valuable perspectives from the Reformed tradition. One is the Reformed understanding of the state. The state as an institution is a gift of God to promote peace and justice and to provide for the protection of the weak. One recognises

here the central theme of the first consultation in 1990. The second Reformed accent is new and refers to Calvin's organisation of the church:

> This Pentecost vision of unity in diversity is reflected in Calvin's view of the church. According to Calvin, the visible church is first of all local: the church in a definite region of the world where it can act responsibly, because it is small enough to be manageable. The church in its region is not, however, separate: it is in this region the one Christian church. It is immediately in contact with other churches in their regions, tied with them in federal communication. Without imposing its confession or order on the churches in the other regions, it is connected with them in the same faith. The church is in this way an ecumenical church (quoted in Réamon 1997:6970).

The autonomy of the local church and the interdependence within the presbyterialsynodal system are presented as a kind of model for the way ethnic groups and national states should interact with one another.

Biblical and theological perspectives are followed by challenges and tasks for the churches. These are identified as: being a welcoming and open community to all; the development of liturgies that reflect ethnic diversity; a reassessment of churches' involvement in ethnic conflicts; the need to explore the political meaning of forgiveness; the need to engage in the struggle for the rights of vulnerable people; the need to call governments to account; and the need to promote encounters with people of other faiths.

The study text on national and ethnic identity ends with a confession in the tradition of the Barmen Declaration:

> "You were slaughtered and by your blood you ransomed for God saints from every tribe and language and people and nation" (Rev 5:9). "There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus" (Gal. 3:28).

All the churches of Jesus Christ, scattered in diverse cultures, have been redeemed for God by the blood of the Lamb to form one multicultural community of faith. The "blood" that binds Christians together as brothers and sisters is more precious than the "blood" (the language, the customs, the political allegiances or economic interests) that may distinguish them or separate them from each other.

We reject the false doctrine, as though a church should place allegiance to the culture it inhabits or the nation to which it belongs above its commitment to brothers and sisters from other cultures and nations, servants of the one Jesus Christ, their common Lord, and members of God's new community (in Réamon 1997:72).

Subsection 2.3 of this study text concerns national and ethnic identity and is the most elaborate reflection on the issue produced by WARC thus far. It has no official status, but it provides us with good insight into the thinking on this theme within WARC. It is obvious that the approach in the Colombo statement of 1995 provided the main inspiration for the study text. First, the call on the churches to be a community of reconciliation is echoed and transformed to fit the theme of the conference: ethnic discrimination is understood as a justice issue. The protection of diversity and care for minorities become central issues. Second, the theological themes also correspond. Diversity and equality

are stressed as creation theological, Israel theological and pneumatological focuses, while unity is approached from a soteriological and an eschatological angle. Third, the churches are described as communities of people reconciled with God and with one another. It is their vocation to call other people, national and ethnic groups to reconciliation. Forgiveness is an important part of their message, especially in the context of ethnic violence.

In a further analysis it becomes clear that the approach is ecclesiastical and not ecclesiological. It deals with ethnicity and nationalism on the level of the churches, not on the level of the church. If the latter would have been the case, the subsection should not have been part of section 2 (on justice) but of section 1 (on the unity of the church). At the Colombo conference the political scientist Uyangoda challenged the church to rethink the way its universalising identity corresponds with the micro identities of its members. The presentation by the theologian, Volf, also contained various creative ideas that linked ethnicity and nationalism to the identity of the church as one and catholic. However, following the Colombo statement, the study text abstains from looking into the issue of ethnicity as relating to the fundamental ecclesiological issue of unity. One element of Volf's lecture is incorporated though, namely the Barmen Commitment to the Lordship of Christ complemented by a commitment to the multi-cultural church of Christ.

Of the two specific Reformed theological inputs, one has been repeated over and over again. The church should be a sentinel in relation to the state, permanently assessing whether the state is performing as God calls it to. The other is new. The Reformed presbyterialsynodal church order is presented as a model for the way multiple ethnic and national groups can relate to one another. The quite small and manageable local church in one region is linked with other churches in other regions to together form the one church of God. In this way unity in diversity is provided for. Still it is to be seen whether this church model is really that attractive. Calvin understood this as a regional model, having one church for each region, but in the Calvinist tradition this connection of one church for one locality was lost. Due to the strong emphasis on truth, discussions often led to schisms in which the unity of the local church was sacrificed in order to safeguard the purity of the church. The presbyterialsynodal structure has survived in a variety of denominations within the same region. Diversity is rescued at the cost of unity. Would the theological input of and all the other elements in this study text on national and ethnic identity become part of the official statement accepted by the 23rd General Council of WARC that met in Debrecen in August 1997?

The 23rd general assembly in Debrecen: no longer an ecclesiological issue

National and ethnic identity would indeed become part of the official report of the Debrecen assembly. It is found in Section II under the title Justice for All Creation (in Opočenský 1997:192201). The texts of the subsections in the study texts have been integrated into one document. Economy, ecology and national or ethnic identity are all themes of the living together in the household of God. The third issue deals with "respect for diversity of the household" (Opočenský 1997:192). National and ethnic identity forms a subheading under "biblical perspectives and analysis of issues" (Opočenský 1997:195 - 197).

In the final part of the second section of the report, separate conclusions are drawn on economic and ecological issues and regarding national and ethnic identity. In relation to economic injustice and ecological destruction a *processus confessionis* (a progressive

recognition, education and confession) is called for. In relation to national and ethnic identity, the General Council calls upon the member churches to affirm the multicultural character of the church in a way similar to Barmen. The text proposed by Volf is then quoted. It also calls on the churches to engage in religious dialogue, to evaluate their own historical track record on this theme, and to repent and repair. The General Council calls upon WARC to establish a permanent commission on ethnic and cultural conflict, and to disseminate these statements and concerns to religious and political authorities (Opočenský 1997:200201). Just as the climax regarding economic and ecological justice is found in the call for a processus confessionis, so the climax regarding national and ethnic identity is be found in the affirmation, which is modelled on the Barmen Declaration.

This Barmen like declaration is copied from Volf's lecture at the Colombo meeting. It was not part of the statement adopted in Colombo. Because it is central to the Debrecen declaration, this "affirmation" is worth a closer look: Churches are asked to confirm that they place loyalty to Christ above loyalty to their ethnic group or nation. Just as ethnic and national allegiance finds expression in group identities, belonging to Christ is also expressed in terms of group identity. In the Barmen styled recommendation that was accepted this group identity is described as "one multicultural community of faith". The context suggests that this has to be understood eschatologically in the sense that this is directed at the future rather than at realised eschatology. The reality is one in which "all the churches of Jesus Christ, scattered in diverse cultures", but is transformed into one multicultural identity through God's redemption by the blood of the Lamb. The biblical introduction supports this eschatological reading. The first of the two texts is from the Book of Revelation (Rev. 5:9) and an anathema confirms this interpretation as well. Allegiance to nation and culture is rejected when it is placed above allegiance to God and "to the vision of God's new redeemed community". The word "vision" is important. It suggests that it is not what the churches are now but what they are heading towards.

The anathema is clearly not aimed at "all the churches of Jesus Christ scattered in diverse cultures". It is only aimed at Christians who and Christian churches that fully identify the Christian community with the ethnic or national community and who have lost this eschatological vision of one multicultural community of faith. Churches organised along ethnic or national lines should not feel they are the addressees of the anathema if they keep alive the hope for that multicultural future in one community. Reformed churches will confirm that their loyalty to Christ has priority above loyalty to their people – also because the multicultural community of faith has eschatological over tones. At the same time they will be happy with the approach taken by the WARC in Debrecen. The argument follows a strong creation theological line, while Christology and ecclesiology are set in an eschatological key. The main accent is not on unity but on diversity and the call for the protection of minorities. It is possible that for Volf, the original author of this text, the declaration might have sounded less eschatological. In his ecclesiology, *After our Likeness* (1998), which was published later, he further developed the notion of congregational catholicity and the local multicultural congregation becomes the expression of this congregational catholicity.

It is obvious that the Barmen like declaration founds its way, first into the study text and later into the official report on the General Council in Debrecen 1997, because the original Barmen Declaration of 1934 was awarded confession like status in many Reformed Churches. A statement built on the central idea of Barmen (a recommitment to the Lordship of Christ within the Church) and on the Barmen model (biblical references, followed by a

confessional statement and an anathema) appeals deeply to the Reformed, and confirms and strengthens the collective Reformed identity. This has become so central that other specific references to the Reformed tradition in the study text have not been retained in the final text. Both the traditional call on churches to be a sentinel in relation to the government and the reference to the presbyterialsynodal system disappeared.

Volf's Barmen like statement is imbedded in an original ecclesiological discourse on catholicity and unity. The first section of the Debrecen General Council report addresses the issue of the Reformed faith and the search for unity. This sections deals with Reformed self-understanding, gospel and cultures, and common witness, but not with churches and their cultural and national identities. This complete silence on the issue in the context of the 1990s is more than remarkable.

Conclusion

In the beginning of the 1990s the world was shocked at the upsurge of in identity politics and the accompanying violence. Almost nobody had expected ethnic cleansing in the heart of Europe less than fifty years after the end of World War II. What was even more surprising was the role played by religions in these identity politics. Christian communities were part of this and Re formed congregations and churches were no exception as the declaration of the Reformed churches in Hungary and Romania proved. So was WARC able to provide theological leadership in order to prevent churches from become accomplices to identity profiling? Here are some conclusions.

Ecumenical reaction came late. The Dayton Agreements to end most of the fighting in the Balkan was signed in November 1995. Faith and Order would only launch a project on the ethnic identity, national identity and the unity of the church in 1997. The WARC Debrecen statement is also from August 1997.

WARC did not understand it as an ecclesiological challenge; it saw it as a justice issue. What ultimately happens in such cases is that civil governments are called upon to take action and the result is a very unsatisfactory kind of public theology. The Barmen like call for a multicultural church is original. However, no church should feel as if it is its addressee, since its tone is eschatological.

No theological concepts from the Reformed tradition were presented as possible solutions. Neither the traditional call on the state, nor the presbyterialsynodal model survived.

WARC has been able to convey what it condemns as heretical in relation to sociocultural identities and the unity of the church in one case – that is, the way some South African churches developed a model of congregations and synods separated along racial lines. However, race is not the sole category; the concepts of nation, ethnicity and clan are also used for profiling churches within Reformed traditions. The Debrecen General Assembly of WARC went out of its way to deal with the problem by reframing it as a justice issue. In my opinion, the issue is still very urgent and potentially very dangerous for unity within the Reformed tradition.

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