

## International Affairs in the Focus of Ecumenical Work: Human Rights and the WCC from 1948 till Today

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### **Ecumenical Action in Formulating the Universal Declaration of Human Rights**

*Human rights rise on the ecumenical agenda after the Second World War*

Human rights were actively discussed in the corridors of the United Nations when the Second World War was over. Built on the ruins of the League of Nations, the United Nations was established to safeguard peace and bring about a new world order when the guns fell silent. In this arena, the violation of human rights and disregard for human dignity were given as an explanation for why the disastrous war broke out in 1939. It had very clearly turned out that fascism and its ideological twins did not believe in equality of humans but stood for and propagated inequality between ethnicities, human beings, and nations. Delegates to the UN kept repeating that the Holocaust was an unforeseen violation against human rights. As a summary, the architects of the new world order were convinced that the observance of human rights was one of the foundation stones and an imperative requirement for world peace in the aftermath of the Second World War.<sup>1</sup>

It was against this background that human rights became a high priority for the modern ecumenical movement during the Second World War and afterward. In particular, the World Council of Churches (WCC), functioning “in process of formation” at that stage, was determined to provide access to and express a Christian view on this topic in the international arena.

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1. Konrad Hilpert, *Menschenrechte. Lexikon für Theologie und Kirche*. 7. Band. Maximilian bis Pazzi. Hg. von Walter Kasper mit al. (Freiburg: Herder, 1998), 120–27, at 122–23; Matti Peiponen, “Ecumenical Action in World Politics: The Creation of the Commission of the Churches on International Affairs (CCIA), 1945–1949.” *Schriften der Luther-Agricola-Gesellschaft* 66. Diss. Helsinki (Helsinki: Luther-Agricola-Society, 2012), 211–12.

In addition to the WCC's ambitions to be influential inside the United Nations, there were other reasons why human rights became the special focus of ecumenical action prior to the inauguration of the WCC in 1948.

First, international affairs had been in the focus of ecumenical work before the war years. The World Alliance for Promoting International Friendship through the Churches and the Life and Work, two action-oriented streams of the modern ecumenical movement, had actively worked on bringing Christian views to the international arena. In the 1920s and 1930s, a variety of Christians and church representatives affiliated with these two bodies actively advocated for human rights, freedom of religion, and minority rights and raised other socio-ethical issues as essential parts of their ecumenical engagement.<sup>2</sup>

Second, ecumenically oriented American Protestant mainline churches had done extensive work on human rights long before the end of the Second World War. Having in their minds the US Declaration of Independence of 1776, the ecumenists had spent a lot of time pondering what religious liberty was and how states should safeguard it within their own country. Leaning strongly on this cornerstone of the American heritage, they emphasized that human rights and religious liberty were strongly intertwined, and that this linkage should be recognized globally. This urged them to make efforts to involve the future WCC in these talks.<sup>3</sup>

Third, freedom of religion was a requisite for Christian mission work. Missionary activities of churches required that there be a common understanding about human rights which safeguarded the right to practise religion, teach it, and change it. Therefore, the ecumenists made it clear that the broader set of religious rights had to be incorporated into the human rights documents.<sup>4</sup>

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2. For more on the World Alliance, see Harmjan Dam, "Der Weltbund für Freundschaftsarbeit der Kirchen 1914–1948. Eine ökumenische Friedensorganisation." Diss. Kampen (Frankfurt am Main: Verlag Otto Lembeck, 2001); David Thomson, "Ecumenism," in *The Cambridge History of Christianity: World Christianities c.1914–c.2000*. Vol. 9, ed. Hugh McLeod (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2006) 50–70, at 53–54; Peiponen, "Ecumenical Action," 40, 95, 356.

3. William Korey, *NGOs and the Universal Declaration of Human Rights: "A Curious Grapevine"* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1998), 35, 182–83; John Nurser, "The 'Ecumenical Movement' Churches, 'Global Order,' and Human Rights: 1938–1948," *Human Rights Quarterly* 25 (2003), 841–81, at 867–68; Peiponen, *Ecumenical Action*, 74–80.

4. Peiponen, "Ecumenical Action," 313, 325–26.

*The CCIA is established as the instrument of the churches in the world arena*

In its formative years, the architects of the World Council of Churches agreed that one of this body's main tasks was to closely monitor what was discussed and decided upon in international politics. To fulfil this aim, an instrument was needed. Thus, the Commission of the Churches on International Affairs (CCIA) was created at the Church Leaders' Conference held in Cambridge in 1946. The CCIA was founded as a joint body of the WCC in the formative years; the International Missionary Council (IMC) brought both an ecumenical and missionary bearing to the CCIA's agenda.<sup>5</sup>

Furthermore, the delegates to the conference agreed that this new instrument should bring the churches' voice in the international arena. The aim of the CCIA was to "suggest effective Christian action to international problems and speak on Christian principles indicating their bearing on immediate issues." In the Charter of the CCIA, human rights were written in as one of the CCIA's tasks. The CCIA would assist in "the encouragement of respect for and observance of human rights and fundamental freedoms; special attention being given to the problem of religious liberty."<sup>6</sup>

From the very beginning, it became evident that the emphasis of the CCIA's work was to be on action. Furthermore, it was in the corridors of the United Nations that the action was to take place. Meanwhile, the CCIA was getting organized as a body of commissioners and staff: human rights were keenly discussed and debated in the UN. There, the Commission on Human Rights (CHR), consisting of representatives of UN member states, was assigned a task to put down in writing human rights. In early 1947, the work of the CHR became the principal interest of the CCIA.<sup>7</sup>

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5. Nurser, "Ecumenical Movement' Churches," 126–42.

6. The Charter of the Commission of the Churches on International Affairs: The Commission of the Churches on International Affairs 1946–1947, Appendix 8–10.

7. Frederick O. Nolde, *The Universal Declaration of Human Rights*. Headline Series No. 76 (July–August 1949) (New York: Foreign Policy Association, 1949), 31–34; Frederick Nolde, "Ecumenical Action in International Affairs: The Ecumenical Advance," in *A History of the Ecumenical Movement*, Vol. 2, 1948–1968, ed. Harold E. Fey. 2nd ed. (Geneva: WCC, 1986), 261–85, at 264; John Nurser, *For All Peoples and All Nations: Christian Churches and Human Rights* (Geneva: WCC Publications, 2005), 143–46.

*Professor O. Frederick Nolde enters the international arena on behalf of the CCIA*

Ecumenical action within the UN needed competent persons with capable hands. Professor O. Frederick Nolde<sup>8</sup> was the person charged with the task to act in this arena. In addition to his main job as professor of religious education, he acted as the director of the CCIA from his hometown of Philadelphia.<sup>9</sup>

At the beginning of 1947, Nolde travelled to New York, where the Commission on Human Rights held its first full session. As the CCIA was in process of gaining consultative status<sup>10</sup> within the United Nations, Nolde got a foot in the door of the UN; thus, the voice of the ecumenical movement did not go unheard in the long talks undertaken by the CHR. Together with other advisors representing a few NGOs, Nolde enjoyed the right to speak when called upon by the chairperson of the CHR. He could not propose documents, but he could persuade a representative sitting on the CHR to sponsor them and present them in the name of his or her government. Nolde used this possibility actively throughout the whole process, leading finally to the adoption of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights.<sup>11</sup>

Nolde was uniquely positioned as a representative of an international religious organization when attending the CHR sessions. As an American, he could maintain regular contact with the chairperson of the CHR, his compatriot Mrs. Eleanor Roosevelt: American diplomat, humanitarian, and first lady of the United States from 1933 to 1945. In May 1946, Nolde contacted Roosevelt to indicate the four points that churches wished to press regarding human rights: implementation, the rights of minorities, freedom of speech, and an international bill of rights.<sup>12</sup>

*Nolde lobbies for human rights and religious liberty*

When the CHR started drafting the human rights documents, severe tensions appeared, especially between the representatives of the US and the Soviet Union, who had different views on human rights. The US and its allies emphasized civil or political rights, also referred to as the first generation

8. Nolde was director of the CCIA based in the USA from 1946 to 1969.

9. Nolde, "Ecumenical Action," 268, 271.

10. UN ECOSOCOR 5th Session.

11. Johannes Morsink, *The Universal Declaration of Human Rights. Origins, Drafting, and Intent* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1999), 4; Peiponen, "Ecumenical Action," 222–23.

12. Nurser, *For All Peoples*, 131; Peiponen, "Ecumenical Action," 223.

of human rights. These included equal protection before the law and the courts, individual liberty, freedom of assembly and association, and freedom of speech and expression. Freedom of conscience and religious liberty were part of these rights. The Soviet Union and its allies would have preferred to start from economic, social, and cultural rights, also referred to as the second generation of human rights, such as the right to study, work, and health care, which were based on the principles of social justice and public obligation.<sup>13</sup>

At the second session of the CHR, held in Geneva in December 1947, the CCIA had gained consultative status as one of the NGOs in the UN system. Nolde was again present at the session where the CHR approved the text of a draft International Declaration on Human Rights and a draft International Covenant on Human Rights.<sup>14</sup> The approval was a significant victory for Nolde, who could conclude that all the recommendations advanced by the CCIA and conveyed by him were reflected in the new text. First, the CHR had managed to draw up both a declaration and covenant,<sup>15</sup> which had been strongly recommended by the churches that Nolde had consulted. Second, the broader set of religious rights and freedoms was retained in the draft of the declaration.<sup>16</sup> The broader set of religious rights and freedoms encompassed “freedom to change one’s religion or belief, and freedom, either alone or in community with others, and in public or private, to manifest one’s religion or belief in worship, teaching, practice, and observance.”

The Geneva session of the CHR was an important learning experience for Nolde, as he later described in his report on the session. He had noticed that bringing in the reactions of the constituency of the CCIA had had considerable weight in the discussions of the CHR and strengthened his position as an advisor. It had become clear that the CCIA staff could make representations to the UN secretariat on human rights issues. Nevertheless, Nolde felt that he could not achieve the desired results alone. Churches at a national level had to make their position clearly known to governments and

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13. Nolde, *Universal Declaration*, 18–20; Peiponen, “Ecumenical Action,” 229.

14. United Nations Digital Library Report of the Commission on Human Rights 2nd Session Doc E/600 (17 Dec. 1947), <https://digitallibrary.un.org/record/599974?>; Peiponen, “Ecumenical Action,” 246.

15. Nolde had to face the fact that the Convention on Human Rights would not be adopted by the Paris UN Assembly as planned. UN Covenants on Political and Civil Rights and on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights were not adopted until 1966.

16. Frederick Nolde, *Free and Equal: Human Rights in Ecumenical Perspective* (Frankfurt am Main: World Council of Churches, 1968), 38; Nurser, *For All Peoples*, 155; Peiponen, “Ecumenical Action,” 251.

state officials, who mandated their delegates to act upon their advice.<sup>17</sup>

*Nolde threw himself actively into the discussions at the UN Paris Assembly*

The adoption of the human rights documents was scheduled to take place at the Third Regular Session of the UN General Assembly in 1948. Altogether, 58 member states gathered in Paris amid an atmosphere of tension, for the Berlin blockade was increasingly straining relations between the Soviet Union and the United States. Nolde served as the accredited representative of the CCIA at the Paris Assembly.

In Paris, Nolde's main aim was to ensure the retention of the provisions for religious freedom as contained in the draft declaration, which was dealt with by the Third Committee of the Assembly. It was obvious to Nolde that the decisions on the human rights documents in Paris, culminating in the fate of Article 16 dealing with freedom of religion, would test the effectiveness and utility of the CCIA.<sup>18</sup>

During his stay in Paris, Nolde could base his arguments on the WCC and IMC's new Joint Declaration on Religious Liberty. This was adopted by the 1st Assembly of the WCC that was held in Amsterdam prior to the UN General Assembly in Paris. After its adoption, the main branches of the modern ecumenical movement were thus clearly behind Article 16. In addition, he could also refer to the WCC's other deliberations on international affairs, as the final report of Section IV of the assembly in Amsterdam had given guidance to the CCIA on its mandate for contributing to the discussions in the UN arena.<sup>19</sup>

Active lobbying was the method to which Nolde resorted. As the UN assembly in Paris opened on 21 September 1948, Nolde and Kenneth Grubb,<sup>20</sup> the executive chairman of the CCIA who was based in London, transmitted

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17. WCCA CCIA UN Memoranda 428.18.2 Nolde, C:2 Second Session Commission on Human Rights, 30 December 1947; Peiponen, "Ecumenical Action," 251.

18. WCCA CCIA UN Memoranda 428.18.2 Nolde, C:4 Preliminary Report on Human Rights, 13 November 1948; Nolde, *Free and Equal*, 43; Peiponen, "Ecumenical Action," 318.

19. Official Assembly Report, The First Assembly of the World Council of Churches held at Amsterdam August 22nd to September 4th, 1948: Man's Disorder and God's Design. The Amsterdam Assembly Series, Vol. V, ed. W. A. Visser 't Hooft (London: SCM Press, 1949); Nurser, For All Peoples, 163–64; Peiponen, "Ecumenical Action," 318.

20. Sir Kenneth Grubb was chairman of the CCIA based in Britain from 1946 to 1968.

a copy of the WCC and IMC's Joint Declaration to Trygve Lie, the first Secretary-General of the UN. In the covering letter from the WCC and the IMC, it was stated that human rights were a matter of such deep concern to churches that a Declaration of Human Rights was the bare minimum required. Nolde had also addressed a personal letter to most of the assembly delegates. In his letter, Nolde repeated the importance of the WCC's and the IMC's role in the work of the Paris assembly on human rights. Enclosed in the letter were copies of Section IV's resolution and the Joint Declaration on Religious Liberty.<sup>21</sup>

In Paris, Eleanor Roosevelt regularly consulted Nolde and took his advice into account. Nolde was an invaluable resource in explaining matters of religious liberty to her. An illuminating example of Nolde using his influence with the chairperson was that, while speaking at a session of the Third Committee, Eleanor Roosevelt made a statement on behalf of the US government strongly supporting the retention of the text of Article 16 as adopted by the CHR. Roosevelt used Nolde's reasoning word for word to reject the amendments which had been put forward by the Soviet Union and some other countries.<sup>22</sup>

Nolde also commented on other articles of the draft declaration. As to Article 1, expressing the basic concepts of dignity, liberty, and equality, he commented on the proposed amendment to insert the name of God or Creator into the declaration. Nolde was clearly opposed to the mentioning of God, as for him the UN represented the world of nations, wherein widely differing convictions were held. Nolde was convinced that the insertion of God into the declaration would conceivably be hypocritical or meaningless because of differing convictions. He also stressed that it was the distinctive task of churches to bring people to faith and to a profession of that faith; it was not the task of the UN. What the UN could do in the field of faith was

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21. WCCA CCIA Human Rights 428.3.24 Grubb & Nolde, Resolutions on Human Rights, WCCA CCIA UN Memoranda 428.18.2 Nolde, C:4 Preliminary Report on Human Rights, 13 November 1948; Nurser, *For All Peoples*, 163–64; Peiponen, "Ecumenical Action," 318–19.

22. WCCA CCIA Human Rights 428.3.24 Nolde to Roosevelt, 6 November 1948; WCCA CCIA Human Rights 428.3.24 [Eleanor Roosevelt], Draft Statement on Article 16, Peiponen, "Ecumenical Action," 322–23.

to make it possible for religion or belief to be practised.<sup>23</sup> Nolde's fingerprints are thus visible in Article 1, which now reads: "All human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights. They are endowed with reason and conscience and should act towards one another in a spirit of brotherhood."

*Disagreements about human rights kept Nolde in suspense*

Toward the end of November 1948, the wording of Article 16 had again become a matter of controversy in the Third Committee. A heated debate took place on the "freedom to change one's religion or belief." The fight to remove this clause was led by delegates from countries dominated by a single religion, such as states with a large Muslim population. Furthermore, representatives of other countries were sympathetic to deleting "freedom to change" because they felt there was an implicit right to change one's religion or belief if the text embodied and ensured freedom of thought, conscience, and religion. Nolde could not accept this argument; in informal meetings in the corridors and at luncheons and dinners, he made every effort to convince the delegates that it was an absolute necessity to maintain the provision on "freedom to change" in the text.<sup>24</sup> By the beginning of December, it appeared to Nolde that despite the attempts to change Article 16, the original wording would be preserved.

Before introducing the final proposal to the plenary session of the Paris assembly, the Third Committee agreed on the title: Universal Declaration of Human Rights. The reason for using "universal" was to shift attention away from the authors of the declaration, which were states and their representatives, toward the target of the document: human beings around the world.<sup>25</sup> Therefore, the official name of the declaration is neither United Nations' nor International Declaration, but Universal Declaration of Human Rights.

The change of name was positively received by Nolde, as it was in full agreement with the intentions and aims which he and the CCIA originally had for the declaration.<sup>26</sup> The universality of the declaration also encompassed

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23. WCCA CCIA UN Memoranda 428.18.2 Nolde, C:4 Preliminary Report on Human Rights, 13 November 1948; Peiponen, "Ecumenical Action," 323–24; For discussions on Article 1 see, e.g., Mary Ann Glendon, *A World Made New: Eleanor Roosevelt and the Universal Declaration of Human Rights* (New York: Random House, 2001), 143–49.

24. WCCA CCIA UN Memoranda 428.18.2 Nolde, 324–25.

25. Morsink, *Universal Declaration*, 33; Glendon, *World Made New*, 146, 161; Peiponen, "Ecumenical Action," 326.

26. Nolde, *Free and Equal*, 38.



another core issue that Nolde had emphasized throughout the drafting process. As a later colleague of Nolde's, Richard M. Fagley, said at a memorial service for Nolde in 1972, Nolde's determined aim had been to make the declaration applicable to all nations and peoples, not only to predominantly Christian societies or countries in the Western bloc. He had insisted that Christian pronouncements on world order should not speak exclusively to active Christians, but to all "men of goodwill."<sup>27</sup>

Having worked on the document for more than two months, the Third Committee reached an agreement on the wording of the declaration on 7 December 1948. It adopted the draft declaration with 29 votes in favour, none against, and 7 abstentions. The draft was thus submitted for adoption and proclamation by the plenary session of the Paris assembly.<sup>28</sup> Every article of the draft declaration had been debated in the Third Committee's over 85 working sessions, and nearly 170 amendments had been proposed by the delegates. Given the voluminous and thorough preparatory work, it was expected by all parties involved that the draft declaration as it then stood would be passed by a substantial majority at the plenary session.<sup>29</sup>

However, despite the declaration's approval by the Third Committee, Nolde felt himself by no means certain that the declaration would pass at the plenary. Nolde's worst fears were realized when the proposed declaration was presented for discussion at the assembly plenary session on 9 December. The Soviet Union and its allies were exceedingly critical of the entire declaration, which, according to them, represented a formulation of Western politics and ideals. The Soviet Union and its allies went on to propose a number of amendments to the declaration because they felt that the phrasing of the declaration reflected the values of the capitalist system.<sup>30</sup>

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27. WCCA CCIA Nolde Papers 428.10.2.5 Fagley, O. Frederick Nolde, 21 June 1972.

28. Charles H. Malik, "The Universal Declaration of Human Rights," in *Free and Equal: Human Rights in Ecumenical Perspective*, ed. Frederick Nolde (Frankfurt am Main: WCC, 1968), 7–13, at 7–8; Nolde, *Free and Equal*, 4, 42; Morsink, *Universal Declaration*, 11; Peiponen, "Ecumenical Action," 327.

29. WCCA CCIA UN Memoranda 428.18.2 Nolde, C:4 Preliminary Report on Human Rights, 13 November 1948; Nolde (1968); 45–46; John F. Sears, "Eleanor Roosevelt and the Universal Declaration of Human Rights," 4–11, at 10–11, <https://www.fdrlibrary.org/search?q=sears>; Peiponen, "Ecumenical Action," 327.

30. Sears, "Eleanor Roosevelt," 11; Peiponen, "Ecumenical Action," 329.

The Eastern bloc emphasized throughout the almost 13-hour discussion that human rights could not be conceived outside the state and that the very concept of justice and law was inextricably linked to the state.<sup>31</sup> During the discussion, the representatives of the Eastern bloc directly criticized the US and its Western allies. They referred to the poor human rights situation in the US, where Afro-Americans did not enjoy civil rights. As their amendments were not seconded or were rejected by the other delegates at the plenary discussion, the Soviet conclusion was that “the Anglo-American bloc” had prevented the efforts of the Soviet Union and its allies to “introduce progressive ideas into the declaration.”<sup>32</sup>

When Article 16 was discussed at the plenary session, Nolde still had one concern, as he was anxious about the right to change one’s religion or belief. To his relief, the debate was brought to a sudden close by the speech of Sir Mohammed Zafrullah Khan, the foreign minister of Pakistan, who defended the right to change one’s religion or belief based on the Koran. Article 16, which encompassed freedom of thought, conscience, and religion, was thus adopted with its essential provisions intact.<sup>33</sup> The article did not generate such heated controversy at the plenary because those who opposed it disagreed even more vehemently with the principles on which the entire declaration had been based.

*The CCIA proved to be an efficient instrument in contributing to human rights*

At 3:00 a.m. on 10 December 1948, the General Assembly of the UN came to a final decision on the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, formally adopting the entire text with 48 votes in favour, none against, and 8 abstentions. The abstentions came from the Eastern bloc, Saudi Arabia, and South Africa.<sup>34</sup>

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31. UN GAOR 3rd Session, 852–935; Morsink, *Universal Declaration*, 21–28; Glendon, *World Made New*, 168; Sears, “Eleanor Roosevelt,” 11; Peiponen, “Ecumenical Action,” 329.

32. UN GAOR 3rd Session, 852–935; Sears, “Eleanor Roosevelt,” 11; Peiponen, “Ecumenical Action,” 329.

33. UN GAOR 3rd Session, 852–935; Nolde, *Free and Equal*, 45–46; Peiponen, “Ecumenical Action,” 330.

34. UN GAOR 3rd Session, 852–935; Korey, *NGOs and the Universal Declaration*, 43–44; Glendon, *World Made New*, 170.

Nolde and the CCIA had good reason to be delighted with the results of the Paris assembly as far as the human rights documents were concerned. The article of religious freedom, as finally adopted in the face of strong initial opposition, incorporated the essential point which the CCIA had been stressing.

Article 16, which was renumbered Article 18 after its adoption, and Article 19 were the most crucial from the perspective of Nolde and the CCIA. They read in their final form as follows:

Article 18:

Everyone has the right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion; this right includes freedom to change his religion or belief, and freedom, either alone or in community with others and in public or private, to manifest his religion or belief in teaching, practice, worship and observance.

Article 19:

Everyone has a right to freedom of opinion and expression; this right includes freedom to hold opinions without interference and to seek, receive and impart information and ideas through any media and regardless of frontiers.

Nolde had been instrumental in drafting the declaration, especially with respect to the provision on religious freedom and the rights related thereto. In particular, Article 18 could “largely be attributed to Nolde,” as William Korey states and John Nurser confirms in their studies of the history of the UDHR.<sup>35</sup>

However, in the final analysis, it was due to the existence of the CCIA that Nolde and the whole modern ecumenical movement could contribute to the content of the human rights documents and be an influential voice in drawing up the UDHR.<sup>36</sup> Seen in this light, Nolde’s significant contribution to the drafting process of the Declaration was made possible only because the CCIA existed and had been granted official status within the UN. Without such a body and the status granted to it, the Christian contribution would have presumably come from other players or NGOs.

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35. Korey, *NGOs and the Universal Declaration*, 46; Nurser, *For All Peoples*, 173–75.

36. Frederick Nolde, *The Churches and the Nations* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1970), 12; Nurser, *For All Peoples*, 846.

Nevertheless, the positive outcome for the declaration was not exclusively the result of the CCIA and Nolde's active participation in the drafting process. Clearly, it was also thanks to the determined effort made by the WCC's assembly in Amsterdam. A comparison of both documents reveals that, with respect to religious liberty, the link between the Joint Declaration of the WCC and the IMC, which was a statement formally approved by the 1st Assembly in Amsterdam, and the UDHR is clear and undisputable. It is therefore correct to argue that the CCIA proved an efficient instrument for giving an ecumenical response to world politics at that early stage of its existence. Furthermore, the creation of the CCIA increased the WCC's awareness of world politics and made it vigilant in expressing Christian views in the international arena.<sup>37</sup>

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37. Peiponen, "Ecumenical Action," 337–39, 357.