

## **PUBLIC THEOLOGY IN CENTRAL EUROPE**

Charles C. West

*Dr. Charles C. West, Stephen Colwell Professor of Christian Ethics Emeritus at Princeton Theological Seminary, and an active leader within CAREE throughout its history, is Associate Editor of REE. He presented this report to CAREE.*

What social theology can guide the church in its ministry to the countries of central Europe that until a few years ago were dominated by Marxist ideology and Communist control? This is the question which a group of 26 theologians gathered in Prague in June 2003 to discuss. The consultation was sponsored by the Center of Theological Inquiry of Princeton NJ, with European collaborators. It was designed to initiate a conversation between theologians from that part of the world and western, mostly American, colleagues, from which both sides might learn and which they might continue.

It was a promising first step. Though the number from each side was equal, the encounter was less so. Papers from the west were offered by established scholars in their field: Denise Ackerman from South Africa, Jean Bethke Elshtain and William Schweiker of the University of Chicago, Max Stackhouse of Princeton Seminary, Konrad Schmid of the University of Zürich, James Skillen of the Center for Public Justice in Annapolis Maryland, Donald Shriver of Union Seminary New York, Ronald Thiemann of Harvard Divinity School, and Michael Welker of the University of Heidelberg. Of the central Europeans only two were veterans: Milan Opočenský, who, though Czech, has straddled east and west for years as General Secretary of the World Alliance of Reformed Churches, and Janos Pasztor of the Theological Academy in Budapest. The others were articulate younger theologians from faculties all over the area: four from the Czech Republic, three from Poland, two from Hungary, and one each from Bulgaria, Lithuania, Slovakia, and Germany (east). Tamas Kodácsy of the Theological Academy in Debrecen, Hungary, the only other central European presenter, filled in at short notice for an older colleague.

On the whole the dialogue consisted of central European responses to six American (plus one German and one South African) social theologies. It was also a largely Protestant conversation, though two Roman Catholics from Poland made important contributions. There were no Orthodox participants.

The whole proceedings of the consultation will eventually be published under the auspices of the Center of Theological Inquiry. Three papers with a primary central European focus - Opočenský, "Theology between Yesterday and Tomorrow"; Kodácsy, "The Church and Democracy in Central Europe; and Schmid, "In the Name of God? The Problem of Religious or Non-Religious Preambles to State Constitutions in Post-Atheistic Contexts" – appear in this issue of *Religion in Eastern Europe*. Certain themes, however, emerged from central European perspectives, that may point the way toward future dialogue. Among them, which this participant perceived, are the following.

### **1. Critical Interaction with Human Society from Perspective of God's Word and Action**

The search for what eastern German participant Heinrich Bedford-Strohm called critical interaction with human society in all its dimensions from the perspective of God's word and action, underlay almost all that central Europeans reported and said. Ronald Thiemann's concept of connected critics found general resonance. Some expressed it in terms of Bonhoeffer's posture of penultimate responsibility determined by the ultimate. Others, especially the Czechs, drew on Josef Hromadka's theology and witness which, despite the events of recent years, still inspires and guides them. Martin Zikmund of Prague, for example, spoke of Hromadka's understanding of the church as a *communio viatorum*, a community on the way, responsibly involved in this world while anticipating the reign of God which has already broken into the world in the resurrection of Christ. Therefore he was, he said, critically loyal to the Czech state. Others put it differently, but all were seeking a theology and church witness at once relevant to the political and economic future and critically transcendent in the hope of the present and coming reign of God.

### **2. Memory of Communist Society Still a Deep Influence**

The memory of Communist society still influences these European colleagues in ways that many of us in the west cannot fully understand. For the older generation it was personal experience; for the younger it is social history with which they still live, even if subconsciously. This memory expresses itself in many ways.

One of the most important is a profound awareness of ideology in all its post-Communist forms. Market economy, nationalism, globalization, and utopian ideals, were among those mentioned. Another is the concept of Central Europe, which was intended by many who spoke to indicate a society that still defines itself over against the ideological alternatives of the past both east and west, concerned with social values rather than market forces, but with free democratic participation, not a command economy. A third is acceptance of a secularized pluralistic society, which was their response to the breakdown of Communist ideology, even while Communist control continued in its later years.

### **3. What Defines a Nation**

Given all this, what defines a nation, what is its role, and how can the church help it to discern both its function and its limits? It was clear that national experiences are quite different. Elzbieta Osewska from Poland spoke of the historic role of the Roman Catholic Church in maintaining a Christian value system and Polish identity through the Communist time, but warned that today it should continue to teach and worship, not become a political interest group in a new democratic society. Still, she said, reference to God in the preamble of the Polish constitution was natural and appropriate, an opinion strongly disputed by a Lutheran compatriot who sensed in the God reference a Roman Catholic claim to dominance.

Tamas Kodácsy from Hungary saw no point in a constitution mentioning God. Religion is too closely identified with the Hungarian nation, a dangerous situation when half of the linguistically and culturally Hungarian people live outside the boundaries of the state. The church faces a great temptation to conform to reigning politics and culture, not to struggle for an independent witness to the society. Jindřich Halama regretted the polarization of church and state in the Czech Republic, a heritage of centuries of Roman Catholic Austrian domination. What positive cultural self-understanding, he asked, do we have as a nation? The questions raised were not answered but they simmered and flavored the whole discussion. They are agenda for a future meeting.

#### **4. Facing, Resisting and Overcoming Oppression?**

How is oppression to be faced, resisted, and overcome? What are the possibilities of repentance and reconciliation? Papers by Denise Ackerman of South Africa on the Black Sash resistance movement against apartheid, and by Donald Shriver on remembering the oppressed in American racial history, produced interesting responses. Our problem in central Europe, said Marian Hamari of Slovakia, is that our historical memories often conflict with one another. What for one group is oppression is for another liberation.

The history of modern central Europe, Jindřich Halama continued, is too often an attempt to right injustices by separating the offending or offended peoples. But it cannot be done that way. How, asked Heinrich Bedford Stroh, are East Germans to sort out the relation between oppression inflicted in Nazi times, and oppression suffered under Soviet invasion and Communist rule? How can repentance, forgiveness and reconciliation work in these complex situations? That they must work is clear, as practical politics and as witness of the Church to the reign of Christ. But each complex story of ethnic and ideological conflict presents a different challenge.

#### **5. Confronting Secularization**

What is secularization and how do we confront it as Christians? This is more a question for some Europeans than for others. One, a Bulgarian evangelical, describes herself as “a marginal representative of Generation X, whose trans-contextual identity is profoundly impacted and shaped by the technological achievements and all-encompassing digital currents of the global information society.” She believes that “cyberspace is the emerging ‘open society’ of the post-modern generations.” She may be an extreme example, but such a combination of evangelical faith with cyber-society linked by the internet is a challenge to all the patterns of religion and culture that are traditional in central and eastern Europe.

For others the break with tradition is not so great, but is nonetheless real. The Czech Republic is the most secular society in that part of the world. Is this to be accepted as the final breakdown of