

THE DULLES-HROMADKA ENCOUNTER REVISITED

Two Churchmen Anticipated some Current World Changes

by Paul Bock

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In 1948, not long after the "iron curtain" had fallen, the World Council of Churches held its first assembly in Amsterdam, Holland. To portray the church as a body that transcends political differences, the Council leaders invited two speakers, one from each side of the curtain, to address the assembly on the day reserved for deliberation about international relations. For the representative from the West they chose John Foster Dulles, the prominent Presbyterian layman and international lawyer who had provided dynamic leadership for the Federal Council of Churches' wartime study on "A Just and Durable Peace." For the representative from the East they chose Dr. Josef L. Hromadka, noted East European theologian from Prague, who was taking a positive attitude toward the Communist government in his country.

Now in 1990, not long after the "iron curtain" has been lifted, it is worthwhile to look again at the statements made by churchmen from the two power blocs in the early years of the cold war. Their speeches at Amsterdam were considerations of longer articles published in the preparatory materials for the assembly under the general title "Christian Responsibility in our Divided World."

It is worth noting that there were a number of points where the thoughts of the two men converged. Both favored peaceful co-existence and peaceful competition, and both wished to avoid war. Both acknowledged weaknesses in the western heritage along with its strengths. Both recognized the Church's unique role in creating conditions conducive to peace and justice. Both foresaw the possibilities of changes in Communist countries. Yet along with these agreements, they voiced significant differences.

Dulles saw the hope of the future in reliance on moral law. He believed that this law was respected only in the western world and that it was most clearly embodied in the U.S. constitution and in the U.N. charter, the latter of which he helped to write. He lauded the free society which in its political form would be democracy but which could take on a variety of economic forms. He anticipated the emergence of many more free societies as colonies were becoming independent of their European masters. He believed that Germany, Japan Italy, and China could develop into free societies. "A survey of the globe," he said, "shows that it is possible for upwards of three-quarters of the human race to develop peacefully and quickly-- say within one or two generations-- the use of free institutions." In retrospect we can see that, except for China, his anticipations were confirmed.

But totalitarian societies, in his view, did not rest on moral law. He was referring now especially to Communist countries. In those lands the end justified any means, particularly violence. He presented sharp contrasts between Soviet practices and Christian values.

He acknowledged that the success of Communism was rooted in failures of western societies and called not for defense of the status quo but for peaceful reform. He predicted a change in the Soviet Union if justice through peaceful means is achieved in other nations. The following statement seems to fit the events in the late 1980s: "That demonstration (eradicating evil by peaceful means) is already gaining momentum, and as that momentum grows, the Soviet menace will become innocuous and Soviet leaders themselves will probably abandon, or at least definitely postpone, their efforts to produce change by violent means. Probably they will not do so as a matter of conviction, for the conception of violent change is deeply ingrained. But they can be expected to alter their tactics as soon as there will no longer be available to them in different countries of the world sufficient support for successful revolutionary measures. Soviet leaders are realists."

It seems apparent that what Dulles said about possible change in the Soviet Union has been realized to a large extent under Gorbachev's leadership. And it also seems apparent that it was the development of dynamic free societies and the competition they presented that caused the change to take place. In his speech of 1948 Dulles said nothing about defeating the Russians through an arms race. He deprecated the emphasis on the military. He was not then the militant cold warrior that he became later as Secretary of State. He looked forward to European economic and political unity and expressed hope that atomic energy would be brought under international control. While the first hope has been partially realized, the second obviously has not.

Josef Hromadka was more forthright in pointing to the failure of the West and to the depth of the world crisis. To him World War I, the harsh peace treaty, and World War II were all signs of the weaknesses and frailties of the modern, free, civilized society. "The whole human race is sick," he said. The cure according to Hromadka, was for the west to acknowledge its weaknesses and to adjust itself to cooperation with the Communist movement, which was engaged in an important social transformation, even though the Communists came to the hour of decision in the guise of "new barbarians."

He saw the United States and Soviet Union as newcomers just entering the stage of world architects. He saw America as a nation which was a projection of the Western Christian and humanistic tradition with its emphasis on human dignity, freedom of the human personality, etc. But he said that many in the world see America as a symbol of power and money, no longer the promised land of freedom and progress. He expressed hope that the West would recover and renew its heritage, but he found widespread doubt. "Its not a material, economic interest on the part of the 'big' industries and financial concerns looming behind all the high-sounding slogans of 'a free democracy'?" he asked.

Hromadka viewed the changes in eastern Europe not simply as Soviet machinations but also as expressions of resentment against reactionary regimes. "There exists the grave danger that the western democracies are -- justly or wrongly -- identified with social and political reaction, and that they will lose all political and moral authority." He found it tragic that western nations are united in nothing more than "anti-Communism." The west desperately needs to recover its humane heritage, and, if it does, the whole world will benefit."

He felt that Westerners have serious misunderstandings about the Soviet Union and eastern European countries. There are times, he said, where nations need strong governments in order to bring about social transformation. Nations with no democratic experience cannot be judged by democratic standards. For many people social equality and liberation from poverty take precedence over personal freedoms, at least for this time. Furthermore, Communism is not to be put on the same level as Nazism. It has a concern for the poor and a constructive social program. "What I have in mind is to interpret the dictatorial regime of the Soviet system as a historical necessity in a country consisting of multiple ethnic, and in the past culturally backward elements, and in a nation which for many reasons had not been privileged to enjoy political liberties and popular education." This statement makes interesting reading in 1990 when ethnic rivalries are tearing the Soviet Union apart.

While not agreeing with dialectical materialism, Hromadka saw it as a useful unifying factor for the time being, but he also foresaw the possibility of change in the dominant ideology. "The Marxian and Leninian ideology has penetrated into all realms of the social and cultural activity. However, after the new social and political order has been thoroughly rooted and entrenched and adequately secured, and after the 180 millions of Soviet citizens have been educated and come of age, the official ideology will undoubtedly undergo--as it actually is undergoing--a process of transformation from within." This transformation could come about because of the heritage of thought expressed in the writings of such men as Tolstoy and Dostoyevsky. The Russian Orthodox Church, too, he thought, despite its limitations and restrictions, could be one of the channels of potential spiritual regeneration of the nation.

Like Dulles, Hromadka felt that the best contribution the West could make would be to be true to its heritage. Reliance on profits and atomic bombs is hardly adequate. Capitalism by itself cannot meet human needs. "Freedom and political liberties without social security and a new, more organic fellowship of man are, today meaningless."

While expressing his concerns about the West's failures to live up to its heritage, Hromadka expressed his misgivings about Soviet expansionism, about the philosophy of historical materialism, and about the dangers that this materialism brings to the human personality and freedom. He called the church to exert her spiritual influence upon the materialism on both sides of the political division.

Looking now in retrospect upon the "prophecies" of both speakers, one has to acknowledge that both men showed considerable insight. Both saw, for example, that the

churches could be influential in providing a deeper perspective on world affairs and in serving as a reconciling agency. The churches have not been as effective as they might have been due to the increasing secularization of the modern world and due to their declining influence. But they did make a contribution. In spite of various difficulties churches on both sides of the iron curtain have remained in contact with each other through confessional and ecumenical world bodies and have maintained a sense of solidarity through prayers, aid, and fellowship. One thinks, for example, of the strong contacts between churches of East and West Germany and of the extensive peace action that has taken place in both countries. Likewise, one can point to the visitation of Russian Orthodox Church leaders to western churches and vice versa. Or one can mention the churches' insistence that the western emphasis on civil and political rights needs to be supplemented by the eastern emphasis on economic and social rights.

Both Dulles and Hromadka foresaw the possibility of a change in Communism. Hromadka saw it more clearly. He lived to see the Prague Spring of 1968, but he died a disillusioned man after the Warsaw Pact invasion crushed the "socialism with a human face" advocated by Alexander Dubcek. It took twenty more years before the real changes took place.

Neither speaker foresaw that the change would come about because of the inherent inefficiency of a system that combines totalitarianism with socialism. It may be, though, that this was what Dulles had in mind when he spoke of the western system proving itself to be superior. Dulles did expect the change to come as a result of competition from the West. Hromadka saw the change coming about due to new political thinking within the Soviet Union. No doubt the current changes are results of both pressure from without and change of thought within.

Dulles expected the ultimate victory of western values because they were based on the "moral law." It would be perilous to attribute the current western political victory entirely to western moral superiority. The West has supported corrupt, reactionary regimes and has placed much reliance on armaments. But it is apparent that many people of the Communist lands have yearned for the western spiritual values even if the West did not live up to them. At the same time it is also apparent that many people in those lands were primarily interested in the economic prosperity of the west.

Hromadka expected a great and lasting influence of the Soviet social experiment on other nations. Things did not turn out that way. For some years many Third World people admired the Soviet Union and found its system more appropriate for developing countries than the western system, but that admiration did not last. China, too, was an important model for awhile. Today most Third World nations are looking to the West for support even though in many cases they are critical of it.

Dulles hoped that the United Nations would help to avert wars and that it would bring about great advances in regard to respect for human rights. There have been numerous wars since the U.N. was founded, though some were averted or ended with U.N. help. The U.N. could not enforce human rights. Still, the emphasis on human rights has

increased all over the world. Public opinion and economic pressures have helped to dethrone many violators, whether they be tyrants such as Marcos or advocates of apartheid.

Neither Dulles or Hromadka anticipated the crisis in population, ecology, or the nuclear arms race. These were to become dominant threats in later years.

Both of them manifested a desire for philosophy that would provide a unity for society. Dulles looked for a revitalization of western values, a religion of democracy to be a unifying factor for the time being, even though he recognized the falsity of much of the theory. While Dulles placed no faith in the Soviet system because it violated moral law, Hromadka placed too much faith in it, engaging at times of wishful thinking. Today dialectical materialism is no longer a unifying philosophy. In Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union nationalism is a far stronger force than dialectical materialism; in some areas religion is stronger than it. What can be said about a unifying philosophy in the western world? It received a severe jolt in the Vietnam era. To some extent it can be seen in the shared values of the western alliance, but anti-Communism has also been a factor holding western nations together. Perhaps the future will tell more clearly to what degree a faith in democracy is a strong unifying philosophy.

Dulles saw some value in the challenge that comes from the Communist countries to western nations in the competition for the minds of world's peoples. One wonders where the challenge and competition will come from now. Will the nations of the north be less interested in the nations of the south? Who will now present an effective challenge to the excesses of capitalism and neo-colonialism?

In each moment of history Christians need to discern the signs of the times and to seek God's will for national and international affairs. Dulles and Hromadka shared their best insights into the events of their time and many of these have proved to be valid. With the end of the cold war an epoch has ended. Now we need new insights for the present and for the period ahead.