CONFERENCE ON "CHRISTIAN AND MARXIST VIEWS ON THE MEANING OF BEING HUMAN"

By Leslie A. Muray

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A conference on the "Christian and Marxist Views on the Meaning of Being Human" was held August 23-28, 1988, in Granada, Spain. This was the third year in a row that New ERA has sponsored a conference on some aspect of the Christian Marxist dialogue. Participants came from Hungary, Czechoslovakia, Poland, Yugoslavia, East and West Germany, Italy, Austria, Norway, India, Canada, the United States and, for the second time, from the People's Republic of China.

The Eastern European participants were Dr. Peter Bihari of Budapest, Hungary; Dr. Helmut Fritzsche of Rostock, East Germany; Dr. Krystyna Gorniak of Poznan, Poland; Dr. Zagorka Golubovic of Belgrade, Yugoslavia; Dr. Ivan Hodovsky of Brno, Czechoslovakia; Dr. Janusz Kuczynski of Warsaw, Poland; Dr. Marko Orsolic of Sarajevo, Yugoslavia; Dr. Miso Kulic also from Sarajevo, Yugoslavia; Dr. Nikola Skledar of Zadar, Yugoslavia; Dr. Svetozar Stojanovic of Belgrade, Yugoslavia; and Ms. Vesna Terzic of Zagreb, Yugoslavia.

The conference had a fine start with an abbreviated and amended presentation of Professor Arthur F. McGovern's paper, "Catholic and Marxist Views of Human Development," retitled "Catholic and Marxist Views: Human Nature and Development." McGovern presented a helpful historical overview of the developing and changing understanding of the meaning of being human in Christianity and Marxism. He also attempted to provide a contemporary Christian answer to the Marxist critique, and raised the issue of whether or not there is such a thing as "human nature" and, if so, how we characterize it.

Dr. Svetozar Stojanovic of Belgrade, Yugoslavia, provided the Marxist response, which, like all the responses, turned into an independent contribution in its own right. Advocating a form of democratic socialism, he claimed that the two basic experiences of the twentieth century were those of 1) totalitarian evil, mainly in the first half of the century in the forms of Nazism and Stalinism, and 2) the threat to the sheer survival of the human race, either through nuclear holocaust or ecological disaster. Dr. Stojanovic suggested that there is a need to develop a planetary ethics, a philosophy and theology of survival more radical than the theology of liberation and more adequate for dealing with the relationship between the individual and the community, living as we do in a post-Christian and post-Marxist era in which the very survival of the human race is at stake. Dr. Helmut Fritzsche of Rostock University provided the Christian response.

Dr. Zagorka Golubovic of Belgrade, Yugoslavia, presented the second paper, "A Marxist Approach to the Concept of Being/ Becoming Human," which stressed the need for

Marxism to appropriate insights outside of its own tradition, such as cultural anthropology and psychology. She also stressed the previously mentioned question of "human nature" and its "essence," the problem of alienation and how to overcome it, and provided a critique of some traditional Christian doctrines, such as the doctrines of God and original sin, that she sees as antithetical to human fulfillment.

Dr. Wieland Zademach of Aulendorf, West Germany, provided the Christian response from a neo-orthodox perspective, stressing the transcendence of the Creator over creatures, sin, and the human inability to create a perfect utopia. Dr. Lujun Yin of Nankai University, Tianjin, People's Republic of China, gave the Marxist response, a very open one influenced by Neo-Confucianism and North American pragmatism. He summarized Dr. Golubovic's presentation as stressing the need for personal transformation as a necessary complement to the revolutionary praxis that overcomes alienation. Lujun Yin also advocated a more nuanced approach in understanding the relation between the Christian understanding of God and human autonomy. Reflecting on his own experience in the People's Republic of China, he pointed to the need to apply Marx's theory of alienation, developed in a historical context, to socialist societies, and advocated the spirit of open, undogmatic dialogue to further the realization of freedom.

The able moderator of the conference was Dr. Paul Mojzes of Rosemont College, U.S.A. The first day's session concluded with questions of clarification to the various speakers and respondents. During the next two days, the plenary meetings provided each participant with an opportunity to speak. Dr. Janusz Kuczynski gave several eloquent presentations on an inclusive Marxist philosophy under the influence of glasnost, entitled "The Meaning of Life in Universalist Marxism from a 'New Way of Thinking.'"

He and Dr. Stojanovic had several erudite and animated exchanges, both philosophical and political, regarding the relative effectiveness of being critical toward the system vs. standing within it. Despite their disagreements, each of them reflected respect and generosity of spirit, as well as sensitivity and appreciation toward the other's culture and geopolitical situation.

More informal discussions, including personal introductions, took place in small groups. In an interesting note on cultural differences, the North Americans, who are quite used to personal introductions as a technique in group process, took considerably longer and seemed to enjoy themselves, while the Eastern Europeans' introductions were short and they appeared uncomfortable.

During the evaluation of the conference on the last day, it was agreed that it would be helpful to have speakers respond to each other directly rather than allowing them to speak freely and randomly as long as their comments pertained to the subject matter.

Historic Granada was a beautiful site for the conference. Participants had ample opportunity to see the landmarks like the Alhambra and the Cathedral. One evening the whole group went to see two exhibitions of flamenco dancing. And, of course, the

discussions continued informally on long walks into the city, and in sidewalk cafes and restaurants.