

EUROPEAN RENEWAL: A CHRISTIAN CONTRIBUTION?

By Paul Peachey

Some fifty people assembled in Augsburg, Germany, August 30-September 3, 1992, for a symposium on "The Political and Cultural Renewal of Europe: the Contribution of the Christian Social Teaching." Participants came from nine Central and East European (formerly "socialist," countries) and three West European, and the USA. The local host was the *Institut für internationale Politik und Völkerrecht of the Universität der Bundeswehr München*. The meetings were held in the commodious quarters of the Bavarian Roman Catholic Academy.

This symposium was the 19th in a series begun in 1971, then under the general rubric of "*Christians and Marxists in Dialogue About Peace*," now reformulated as an "*International Dialogue on Justice and Peace*." Initiators of the effort in 1971 were the Center for Peace Research, located informally in the Roman Catholic theological faculty in the University of Vienna, and the International Institute for Peace, also in Vienna. The latter agency was founded at the end of the 1960s under the auspices of the Soviet Peace Committee as a means whereby scholars from the Soviet domain might participate in the peace studies conversations that were emerging internationally. By the end of the 1970s, members of an independent American group, Christians Associated for Relationships with Eastern Europe, became acquainted with the symposium. Thereupon they formed a new agency, the Institute for Peace and Understanding, which then became the third co-sponsor of the symposium series.

The Cold War, of course, was the occasion and the context for "Christian/Marxist dialogue." There were skeptics on both sides. Some criticisms were philosophical--Marxists are "materialists," Christians are "idealists." These conceptions are irreconcilable, hence dialogue is futile. Other objections were practical or political. Marxist-Leninist hostility to religion, for example, was well known. How, then, could dialogue be serious?

Marxism as a theory, however, has humanist foundations, assumptions that are at odds with some dimensions of his work, and much more so, with the Leninist and Stalinist implementations of the theory. Marx himself, whatever his inconsistencies, had after all been nurtured in West European humanism. Repeatedly, during the 70-year Soviet era, Marxist and non-Marxist scholars sought to explore the common humanist legacy, at times intellectually, at times practically. Bridges somehow had to be built. Given Cold War realities, such efforts repeatedly came to grief. Skeptics had a point!

Though there were difficulties and disappointments, the above dialogue series survived. But now that the Marxist partner has effectively disappeared, what next? Should the venture be disbanded, especially since there is now a proliferation of new exchanges between the European East and West, exchanges not immediately burdened with the frustrations of the past? Or do groups who tried to reach out during the Cold War decades now have a particular contribution to make in this time of transition? In any event, already during the Gorbachev era, the Soviet-sponsored partner in the dialogue, the *International Institute for Peace*, began its own *perestroika*, and has now become independent, both economically and institutionally. Though retaining strong Russian ties, the Institute is now administered by an independent international board, headed by a retired Austrian diplomat. In orientation, however, it remains secular, carrying forward elements of its socialist past.

The decision on whether or not the series will continue turned heavily on the possibility, first of maintaining continuity with its basic intention while refocusing the Christian/ Marxist delineation of the conversation, and second, of broadening and renewing the participation. As the Augsburg meeting demonstrated, both conditions can be met. The break-up of the Soviet empire did not mean the sudden resolution of all the problems revolving around the legacy of Marx, much less, of secular thought generally. The conversation can and must continue. Similarly, though many new faces appeared at Augsburg, broadening the participation must continue. Always there have been asymmetries in the participation, and these remain to be overcome--almost no church participants from Russia, and very few "secularists" from the West, especially from the USA.

Though upheavals in Europe today are most dramatic in the lands formerly under Soviet rule or hegemony, instability and uncertainty grip the West as well. The topic of the Augsburg symposium--the contribution of the Christian social teaching to European renewal (or reconstruction--both terms were used)--reflected a fundamental change in religious expectation in recent decades in the West. In the formal presentations, the voice of the Roman Catholic Vatican II Council reverberated strongly, particularly the affirmation of human dignity and rights, and of the independence of the churches in modern pluralist societies. That independence frees both churches and political bodies each to fulfil their own calling. By witness and service, along side other groups and persuasions, Christians contribute to the common good. They do not monopolize, dominate, or control, as in medieval Christendom, nor do

they seek to do so.

Nonetheless, as indicated, memories linger. Religious institutions, practices, and consciousness bear the imprint of earlier centuries. Beyond that, here and there, in both East and West, one can hear voices that hark back to the era of Christendom, when churches, whether Orthodox, Catholic, or Protestant, were embedded in the political structure of their respective societies. And in some instances, the restorative religious impulse is compounded and confused with ethnicity and nationalism.

Meanwhile, Pope John Paul II, in travels throughout Europe for more than a decade, has admonished Europe, in a manner reminiscent of the angel's message to the seven churches in St. John's Apocalypse, to recall its "baptism," its Christian roots. Elsewhere, ecumenical discussions concerning a "new evangelism" in Europe are underway, stimulated in part by the Pope's initiative. What, in fact, do such ruminations portend?

Intimations such as these arouse anxiety in some quarters. Are Christians or churches aiming to revive some form of Christian or churchly hegemony in European societies? In this symposium, Dr. Rudolf Weiler, professor of Christian ethics in the Roman Catholic theological faculty in Vienna and co-convenor of this event, was reassuring on this point. The "new evangelism" in Europe seeks to evoke faith, he maintained, not to regain majority status for Christianity. The social teaching put forward, he averred, though rooted in faith, is nonetheless understandable apart from faith. Nonetheless, uncertainty remains and as we shall note presently, ambiguity as well.

In the ambience of the Augsburg symposium, Christian social teaching in effect was reduced to Roman Catholic teaching. Presentations and discussions dealt primarily with the papal encyclicals of the past century, beginning with a statement issued by Pope Leo XIII in 1891, entitled *Rerum novarum* (1891). This, and the rich series of encyclicals that followed over the ensuing century, reflects the Roman Catholic attempt to come to terms with modern social, economic, and political developments.

One of the most fertile ideas introduced in the papal encyclicals, and discussed in some detail at Augsburg, is the concept of *subsidiarity* as a principle in social and political organization. The formulation appeared originally in the encyclical, *Quadragesimo anno*, issued by Pope Pius XI in 1931, marking the fortieth anniversary of *Rerum novarum*, and has been discussed increasingly in recent years. Wrote Pius XI: "Just as it is gravely wrong to take from individuals what they can accomplish by their own initiative and industry and give it to the community, so also it is an injustice and at same time a grave disturbance of right order to assign to a greater and higher association what lesser and subordinate organizations can do."

This statement goes to the heart of societal modernization. Historically, in the West, modernization unleashed two seemingly opposite processes--one toward the dispersion and decentralization of social initiative and the other toward increasing centralization. On the one hand, tasks subdivide and specialize endlessly. The number of actors, both individual and collective, grows correspondingly. On the other hand, the scale and scope of social interaction and interdependence extend indefinitely, as do the mechanisms of coordination and control. The resulting centralization of power, however, tends to stifle the very autonomy and initiative that modernization unleashes in the first place. To be sure, the opposite peril also arises--anarchy or conflict where coordination (centralization) fails. The concept of subsidiarity obviously aims at the moderation of both impulses, centralization and decentralization. The autonomy appropriate to each level is the ideal. Its realization is another matter. How does one determine and implement the autonomy of action that is appropriate to each level in the ordering of life in society? In any case, the concept of *subsidiarity* appears highly pertinent in the wake of the crushing centralism of the former Soviet regime.

Meanwhile, the Augsburg symposium was not without its own ambiguity. The Europe that is to be renewed, and in some manner united, from the Atlantic to the Urals, contains the major Christian traditions: Eastern Orthodox, Roman Catholic, Protestant and, to a lesser extent, the "free church." And while as indicated, the body of Catholic social teaching deserves consideration in its own right, this particular symposium series, employs the term Christian generically, or if preferable, "ecumenically." To focus on Catholic teaching alone will hardly encourage participation of persons from other traditions, especially the Russian Orthodox. Healing Christian breaches might well be the major Christian contribution to European renewal and unification. Subsequent symposia might thus similarly examine the other Christian traditions. Or is a generic or fundamental "Christian" frame of reference possible, revitalization at the common center of the faith?

The symposium also provided opportunity for reports from various countries in the former Soviet Union and region. These reports ranged from reports of social surveys of religious beliefs in sampled localities in Russia to relations among different church traditions in Ukraine to church-sponsored childrens hostels in Bulgaria. There were echoes in the papers, speeches, discussions, and corridors of the turmoil, the frustrations, and the hardships in many

areas in former Soviet lands. With regard to Western Europe, the fate of Maastricht Treaty was the dominant issue.

These concerns contrasted starkly with the affluence and cultural richness of the Bavarian setting of the symposium. Augsburg, however, with a 2,000-year history, taking its name from the Roman Emperor Augustus under whose reign the city was founded some 2,000 years ago, was a stimulating setting. The hosts of the symposium used the city's history effectively to provide both perspective and challenge. The contrast between the grandeur of Europe, exemplified in Augsburg and Munich, and the misery of Europe, surfacing in Sarajevo, several hundred miles across the Alps to the southeast, from which there were eyewitness reports, added poignancy to the discussions. Without creative and conciliatory action, other tragedies may arise. The symposium adjourned after offering an open mandate to the organizers to prepare for the next meeting a year hence. The work of European renewal has only begun.