

## **A REPORT ON A CONFERENCE ON THE ROLE OF RELIGION IN NEWLY PLURALISTIC SOCIETIES: THE CASE OF EASTERN EUROPE**

By Nicholas Piediscalzi, Visiting Scholar  
University of California, Santa Barbara

Forty-five individuals from Eastern and Western Europe and North America participated in an international dialogue sponsored by the New Ecumenical Research Association (New ERA) on The Role of Religion in Newly Pluralistic Societies: The Case of Eastern Europe. The meeting was held in Budapest, Hungary and the Law School of Eotvos Lorand University, May 22-26, 1991. Professors Tamas Foldesi (Eotvos Lorand University) and Paul Mojzes (Rosemont College) served as co-chairpersons.

This conference was a continuation of a series of meetings begun by New ERA in 1986 under the title Christian-Marxist Dialogues. With the overthrow of communist ideology, regimes and parties in Eastern Europe, Marxists no longer are available for dialogues. For this reason, the title of the series was changed to International Dialogues.

In his excellent description of the first four dialogues, Paul Mojzes stated:

The atmosphere at the meetings was exceptionally cordial and friendly....More remarkably, the sessions were characterized by absolute intellectual honesty, lack of posturing, and tolerance of radically differing ideas, many of which were unconventional. They were meetings that stimulated the mind and satisfied the heart, because one had the feeling that one was meeting authentic human beings, greatly concerned about truth and the future of humanity and deeply committed to the possibility of overcoming ideological, national, and religious barriers.\*

These same uplifting qualities marked the 1991 Budapest Conference. In addition, an exceptional sense of openness and trust prompted revelations of personal and national vulnerabilities usually not made in public gatherings. These revelations produced personal interpersonal reconciliations rarely experienced at such meetings.

The conference centered around three papers presented by Eastern European theologians--a Protestant, Eastern Orthodox and Roman Catholic--with responses by individuals from the West. (These papers were published in the October, 1991, issue of Occasional Papers on Religion in Eastern Europe.) There also were plenary and small group discussions which provided opportunities for the concerns of individuals from societies and traditions not represented in the major papers and responses to be voiced. In addition, members of the Hungarian Parliament and Hungarian church leaders conducted informative briefings on the current situation in Hungary.

The Protestant paper by Dean Jajub Trojan of Czechoslovakia began in the spirit of the Reformation with a prophetic criticism of Czech Protestant churches for failing to mount a

serious and effective resistance against the totalitarian communist regime under which they lived. He concluded by pointing out five areas which require the support of Christians: (1) The need to underscore that democracy is the responsibility of all citizens, not just the politicians. (2) The challenge to rehabilitate democratic, pluralistic traditions as Eastern countries seek to reform radically their economic systems. (3) As the economies are being reformed, Christians must commit themselves to providing social justice for every citizen. (4) Christians also must take an active part in protecting and improving the environment. (5) As Eastern European countries seek to solve their problems Christians must remind their leaders and fellow citizens that there are developing nations in other parts of the world which have needs greater than Eastern European countries and which require assistance from Western nations more than do the nations of Eastern Europe.

The Orthodox paper by S. Popov (a pseudonym for a Bulgarian lay theologian) opened with a lengthy analysis of the failure of Christian churches to "Christianize" Bulgaria and concluded with a call to introduce Christ to the process of perestroika. Without a prophetic Christ calling people to social justice, the attempts to establish perestroika and democracy will fail.

The Roman Catholic paper by Waldemar Chrostowski of Poland reviewed the social, economic, political, moral and spiritual bankruptcy of the Communist regime in Poland and its devastating effects upon the nation as a whole. He concluded by suggesting that the Church must guard against idolizing "the nation" and calling upon Christians to resist the temptation to resurrect old national and ethnic rivalries and to work unceasingly for a genuinely open, pluralistic and democratic united Europe in which the rights of all minorities are recognized and respected.

These papers, the responses to them along with the plenary and small group discussions highlighted six problem areas. These are discussed below.

First, it became clear that the nations of Eastern Europe lack agreement on the meaning of democratic pluralism. Some hold that democratic pluralism includes the recognition and acceptance of the different worldviews represented in its society and the guarantee and protection of the rights of their adherents. Others limit democratic pluralism to recognizing the plurality of worldviews without seeking to achieve mutual recognition and respect of each group. Those who espouse the latter view believe that exclusive, totalitarian, reactionary and radical groups are dangerous threats to newly emerging democracies and should not be allowed to participate in the political arena.

Second, newly emerging democracies in Eastern Europe are very fragile and may not be able to survive because many of them contain ethnic and national groups which are unwilling to lay aside their past conflicts and their suspicions, hatred of each other and desire for revenge. This problem is exacerbated by those individuals and groups conducting witch hunts against all former communist leaders and their supporters as well as those who collaborated with them.

Third, it is a mistake to believe that the establishment of democratic states guarantees the development and survival of democratic traditions and cultures. At the present moment, these institutions and traditions do not exist in most of Eastern Europe. In fact, they are not a part of Eastern European history and experience. For this reason, it is important to begin building these traditions and institutions without expecting instantaneous success. This is an area in which religious institutions can make valuable contributions--especially since many of them espouse ideals and values which support democratic principles.

It is also important to recognize that democratic institutions evolved slowly and not without difficulty and conflict in the West. Furthermore, many scholars point out that democratic governments emerged with the rise of capitalistic and Protestant institutions which supported individualism and freedom from absolute political and religious authorities. Until such institutions emerge in Eastern Europe democratic governments will not rest on secure foundations. This is not to say that everyone must become an unrestrained capitalist and a Protestant. It means, however, that religious bodies must provide sanctions and support for values and institutions which allow and foster the development of strong and educated middle classes and democratic traditions.

Fourth, it also is unrealistic to believe that the establishment of market-oriented economies guarantees automatic and equal prosperity for nations and their citizens. There are many complex and difficult problems to resolve before market-oriented economies can succeed and provide adequately for all of its members. In this area, religious institutions can draw upon their traditional resources to help establish economies based upon the principles of distributive justice.

Fifth, because communism was forced upon Eastern European countries by a totalitarian foreign power which deprived their citizens of their basic needs, wants and rights, most of their recently liberated citizens and leaders reject anyone suggesting that Marxist analytic theory may contain some valid insights about problems endemic to capitalistic, market-oriented economies and societies. Any dialogue on this topic must wait until bad memories, resentments and mistrust are overcome.

Sixth, the moral and spiritual bankruptcy of communism in Eastern Europe has left millions of people without an adequate and supportive worldview and ethos. While religious institutions can help their members overcome this malaise, they are unable to serve the spiritual and moral needs of the large number of secularists and former communists in Eastern Europe who find traditional religious dogma, symbols and rituals either mystifying or irrelevant. For this reason, the religious institutions must be willing to enter into dialogue with these groups as they search for foundations for new universal moral and spiritual values without seeking to convert or dominate them. Moreover, they need to drop their adversarial roles and become willing to participate in an open and unfettered search for the spiritual values which all human beings hold in common and which are found in the foundations of all religions. This means that religious institutions must forego the luxury of their triumphalisms and dedicate themselves to participating in the establishment of genuinely pluralistic democracies where all worldviews are respected and accepted by each other. More specifically, the religious bodies in Eastern Europe and their counter parts in the West must give up their current attempts to regain their former political and religious monopolies and dedicate themselves to respectfully and lovingly serving the needs of all people regardless of their religious or non-religious loyalties and affiliations.

The conference concluded with participants suggesting possible topics for future meetings: (1) Developing Respect and Dialogues Among Religions and Other World Views; (2) Has Dialogue a Future and Which Kind?; (3) National and Cultural Religions, Ideology and the New World Order; (4) The Modernization of Eastern Europe and Spiritual Values.

A large number of participants stated that future dialogues should reflect the religious pluralism of the world and that papers from a variety of religious traditions should be included in the program. They felt that the 1991 conference schedule did not reflect the religious pluralism of Eastern Europe even though the conference centered on the topic of pluralism.

All agreed that the most important goal of future meetings should be to insure, increase and spread the openness, honesty, respect, acceptance and reconciliation experienced at the 1991 Budapest conference.

ENDNOTE

\*"Reinvigorating the International Christian-Marxist Dialogue," *Dialectics and Humanism: the Polish Philosophical Quarterly*, Vol. XVI, No. 3-4, 1989, p. 13.