

Eschatology and social transformation

Prague II, 1987

A second consultation called by representatives of the churches related to the First and Radical Reformations took place at the Comenius Faculty of Protestant Theology in Prague from 23 to 28 June 1987. The theme of the consultation was *Eschatology and Social Transformation*. Thirty-two persons from eight nations attended, representing the following confessional groups: Church of the Brethren, Czechoslovak Hussite Church, Evangelical Church of Czech Brethren, Hutterian Brethren, the Mennonites, the Moravian Church, the Religious Society of Friends, and the Waldensians. Professor Harry M. de Lange, The Hague, (The Netherlands) and Professor Bertold Klappert, Wuppertal, (West Germany) were invited to make presentations in order to broaden the ecumenical context of the consultation.

Professor Josef Smolík, Dean of the Comenius Faculty, led directly to the central theme with his opening meditation on 1 Cor 2.1-11. Speaking on the theme of strength through weakness, he characterized all groups represented in the consultation as those who have traditionally looked at history from the bottom. He concluded that groups viewing history from below should have a unique perspective in understanding the plight of those on the margins of society.

Professor Milan Opocenský brought words of welcome that made the group aware of the ecumenical significance of the gathering. For example, a present sense of stalemate over the restrictions placed on the original plans for the Council on Peace and Justice announced at Vancouver in 1983 make the deliberations of the consultation even more important.

The keynote paper by Prof. Opocenský, *Eschatology and Social Change*, appealed to the participants to revive as matters of faith (*status confessionis*) original Reformation themes on eschatological thought, which still challenge the present generation to join the struggle for global economic justice, peace and peacemaking, and the integrity of creation. Citing Bohemian reformers Petr Chelcický and Milic of Kromeríz the paper developed an interpretation of the character of Antichrist. Antichrist not only distorts and destroys life by working through the secular powers, but also by existing within the body of believers. The same greed and avarice that have led to massive imbalances of wealth, vast stockpiles of weapons, and destruction of the environment, is also alive and active within the life of the churches. A response by Murray Wagner and the discussion that followed raised questions about anthropology (human nature) and competing concepts of history. On the one hand is a dominant view that is pessimistic to the point of believing that "there will always be wars and rumours of war", given the fact of human sin. On the other hand is the more hopeful estimate that human life has "the residual capacity of sinners for justice and genuine concern for the neighbour".

Group opinions ranged from a tragic view of human nature caught in the brokenness of sin to a hopeful view for human prospects in the eschatological conviction that the kingdom already reigns among those who see the signs of God's grace. Professor Opocenský's reply stayed within the assertion of his paper. "In spite of our sinfulness and fragility, in spite of demonic powers which are at work in the world, we are called upon to change the world. We are considered worthy of becoming God's co-workers in the process of the humanization of this world."

1>Professor Amadeo Molnár opened the day on Thursday with a meditation on Num 20.21-31, the story of Balaam's ass. Using an exegesis by Jan Hus, for a sermon prepared for the very time he was forbidden to preach, Professor Molnár encouraged the group to be ready to hear witnesses to the truth in unexpected voices.

Professor Marlin Miller's paper, *The Church in the World as the Community of the Kingdom*, distinguished between types of eschatological belief that informed various 16th century Anabaptist groups. The influence of eschatology can be seen in the "explicit" engagement of militants to change an oppressive order and institute a new order through direct action, including violence. Eschatological impulses also can be detected in the practice of the Anabaptists who located God's transforming activity primarily in the community of committed believers in the world. These Anabaptist groups represent an "implicit" engagement for social transformation through the existence, witness, and nonviolent service of the Christian community as a sign of the kingdom in the midst of the world. Professor Paolo Ricca's response spoke directly to the distinction between "implicit" and "explicit" forms of protest by distinguishing between two types of social alienation. One form has made us quit history and separate, i.e. to withdraw from the world, not to stand against it but for it, as an exemplary community. A second type sacralizes history in a militant attempt to replace the powers with a new Christian order.

Participants questioned whether either form of protest is a fitting response to Reformation eschatologies. Does social transformation require that the church be more than a model? Ricca argued that it must be more. Separation represents the primitivist motive of the First and Radical Reformations. However, social transformation is possible only if history is affirmed. Only if the church engages directly in political action can the challenge of the Second Reformation be answered. This means the church must "soil its hands" in the political arena of public power. Still, the two Reformations must not go their separate ways, sectarian communities in one direction, transforming churches in another. They must not mutually exclude each other. Instead, they must remain in constant conversation so that a more complete witness to the gospel might be made and mutual support might be extended to all Christians.

Professor Harry de Lange presented a paper taking up the theme of social transformation in terms of economic justice. Appealing to the biblical tradition of "jubilee", Professor de Lange issued a call for Christians to assume responsibility in restoring human relations broken by the sins of economic greed and exploitation. Continuing with the biblical witness, he contended that justice is not a mere set of rules but a way of living in covenant with God and the neighbour. Destructive to the human community and the entire structure of justice are the current trends in economic development that cause massive poverty, world-wide hunger, exhaustion and waste of natural resources, and exploitation of less-developed nations. Professor de Lange drew particular attention to the environmental deterioration that results from economic expansion. In

exploring means to transform society, he cited a report by Dag Hammerskjöld recommending reduction of meat and oil consumption, more economic use of buildings, greater durability of consumer goods, and more limited use of private automobiles. He concluded by asserting that redistribution of power and wealth is not an act of charity, but a recognition of the rights of the poor and powerless. Underlining the direction of the entire paper was the economic wisdom of Mahatma Gandhi: "the earth provides enough to satisfy everyone's need, but not everyone's greed." The response by Wolfgang Harms largely supported the main points of this paper by adding a point of substantiation. He reaffirmed the theological position of Professor de Lange by stressing that we urgently need to consider ways that can help restore relationships broken by economic injustices.

Pastor Jindrich Halama, Jr opened the Friday sessions with a meditation on Rev 14.1-3. From his own experience, he told how he gradually adjusted to the noise of howling dogs, just as we can become deaf to the cries of millions whose suffering comes as judgment upon us.

The following discussion on economics began with an attempt to spell out the boundaries of "sufficiency". That proved difficult for the world context, but attention was drawn to the suggestion made by a group of economists in The Netherlands that minimum and maximum net income should be no greater than a ratio of one to three. Participants affirmed that the satisfaction of minimum human needs is declared by Jesus in Matthew 25 to belong to the criteria employed in the last judgment. The consultation group was also told that the fundamental issue is one of meeting basic human needs while also meeting basic security needs for all without the massive expenditures for arms that drain human and natural resources. Numerous voices then affirmed the suggestion that this group of representatives covenant together to seek, in the course of the next ten years, acceptance of the guideline that there be no more than a one to three income differential in our churches. Many supported this small step in order not to be overwhelmed by the world context. There was less readiness, however, to discuss the question of applying this guideline toward economic distribution, whether between our groups, or on a world level. Some consultation participants also restated the traditional position of several Radical Reformation groups that we do not control history, and that, in contrast to the Quakers, it was usually not our intent to achieve economic justice by exerting political influence on state authorities. In that context, Professor de Lange repeated his call that we do not shirk our political responsibility toward the Third World and all future generations.

Professor Klappert's presentation, *Peace, Nonviolence and Justice*, tried, by means of an examination of major 20th century Protestant voices - Bonhoeffer, Barth, Barmen Declaration (1934), the Darmstadter Wort (1947) - to demonstrate how the Second Reformation was beginning to draw on the insights of the First Reformation. He suggested that justification must be understood in the concept of the Exodus and must have a social dimension. But Professor Klappert also appealed to us to draw from Second Reformation insights, especially those illustrated in point five of Barmen, namely, that we assume a readiness for political mediation and social responsibility. This led the witnessing community (Brüderschaften) in the tradition of the Confessing Church to make a strong commitment to nuclear pacifism in post-war Germany. The speaker accepted the integrity and validity of the historic peace church position, but he called for cooperation and mutual respect between those Christians engaged in political responsibilities and those who take a more separatist stance. Both wings of the Reformation have to understand each other as

necessary parts of the one body of Jesus Christ in their respective historical contexts.

The subsequent round of discussions began to identify numerous points of difference that need to be acknowledged and understood if dialogue between the First and Second Reformation is to be promising for each. They included the observation that the term "First Reformation" was being used too loosely, that we are working with an ahistorical typology, that the "Second" or "Magisterial Reformation" took place within a Constantinian world-view and that the Reformers always retained a sense of responsibility for social structures by relying on physical power. Further questions drew attention to fundamental differences in understanding the church and the state, and it was noted that the Radical Reformation groups were not anti-statist in principle. The experiences of history cause these groups to ask what kinds of power are appropriate to a Christian community. While the Barmen and Darmstadt statements were spoken of with admiration, it was recognized that this wing of German Protestantism did not take over leadership after 1945 (Evangelische Kirche Deutschlands, EKD), but is still influential in witness communities with strong ecumenical involvement. The response of Hans Meier provided the reminder of a witnessing community that first acts to put its own fellowship under the discipline of Christian love, including economic equality, before it attempts to act as a conscience for the secular order.

From still another perspective, Professor Gerald Shenk presented a sociological analysis. The group heard a description of "grid and group factors" to account for the remarkable continuity of the small groups represented at the consultation. A key point was the observation that these First and Radical Reformation groups did not recognize the state as ultimate, but rather as a limited reality dependent on the assent and legitimation of the ruled. These groups have demonstrated greater interest in "church" and "society" as important categories. That is, the interest is in *social transformation*.

Some affirmations

1. We affirm our desire to stay together and to grow together into a deeper and more committed fellowship.
2. We affirm that, having jointly returned to our roots, drawing on the experience of our respective communities throughout the centuries, we now intend to learn from our different stories. We believe they will become a continuing source of encouragement and inspiration for today and tomorrow.
3. We believe that our ultimate hope comes from Christ who has conquered. In the light of that hope and faith by which our ancestors in the First and Radical Reformations lived, we see that we cannot solve the present predicament of humankind through human effort.
4. We believe that the kingdom of God - the reign of peace, justice, and love - is already present in this world. True discipleship today calls us to bear witness to this reality.
5. We believe that the Holy Spirit moves us to see that God is already at work in history. Our eschatological hope prompts us to join God's action towards justice, freedom, and peace, knowing that God challenges every *status quo*.

6. We confess that the fact of children and adults starving daily throughout the world challenges our faith and our Christian existence to its very core. We ask ourselves whether we as churches can, in fact, still live in Christ if we do not commit ourselves to alleviating global economic injustice.

7. We commit ourselves to a simple lifestyle as a sign of our longing for a thorough structural change. We believe that the demands of the gospel to feed the hungry, clothe the naked, visit the sick, free the captives are reasonable demands if a humane civilization is to survive.

8. We believe that the issue of nuclear weapons, and of war in general, challenges the very integrity and foundation of our Christian life. We commit ourselves to make clear to our communities and churches that by our stance in respect to weapons of mass destruction we either affirm or betray the gospel.

9. We are called to be responsible for the integrity of creation. We believe that the transformation and taming of nature should occur out of cooperation and communication, not out of exploitation and plunder.

10. We must confess that we who come from diverse dissenting traditions are also heirs of a post-Constantinian world. We confess our temptation to seek power and influence. Yet we are learning again from our past that a Christian existence is fragile, uncertain, and risky. While we do not glorify poverty and suffering, we know that we may be called upon to join the marginalized and suffering. Our faith in Jesus Christ lets us see that we in all our efforts are sustained by God's forgiveness and grace.