

Prague VII Consultation - the Significance of Reforming and Prophetic Movements for Church and Society

Prague Nov. 28- Dec. 2, 2003

The Prague VII consultation, meeting in the Jan Hus House in Prague, in essence returned to the concern for reform of church and society, that was a common thread of concern within what has come to be understood as the First (Waldensian & Hussite) and Radical (Anabaptist) Reformation traditions. The major papers reviewed the way in which the temptations to a left or right wing extreme were resisted as an ongoing Reformation tradition developed; one could see the parallels for the Waldensians over half a millennia, the Hussite Movement or the Anabaptist movement.

Carlo Papini presented the Waldensians in essence as a movement of travelling preachers, committed to poverty and a rigorous ethic, who were sustained by a larger group of friends. They were mainly a penitential movement, stressing *sola scriptura* and *solus Christus*, not yet *sola gratia* and *sola fide*. They were the first to translate the New Testament into the vernacular in specific regions of France, Italy and Germany. They sought to reform the Catholic church, understanding their preaching as keeping the church from final ruin. All church practice must be tested by Scripture. Thus they insisted that the church should abstain from every coercive power, holding that the Sermon on the Mount is Christ's law, deserving absolute respect. Therefore they stressed absolute nonviolence, and wanted secular power to exact punishments that were restorative or curative justice. Participants noted the ways in which subsequent reformations took up similar reform concerns, albeit in distinct ways.

Charles Brockwell's later paper delineated parallels between numerous features of Methodist preaching renewal in the 18th century and the 13th century Franciscan *ordo* which help to recognize the persistence through Christian history of concerns to reform and renew church and society.

Milan Opočenský concentrated on the Taborite part of the Hussite movement which manifested a pronounced biblicism, a critique of sacerdotalism by stressing the priesthood of all believers and by taking the Eucharist in both kinds. But they resorted to violent defence of their reform. With the Taborites the eschatological orientation of the Czech movement reached its zenith, their concern for church renewal included attacking an unjust feudal order, as expressed in the widely disseminated *Confessio Taboritarum*. By the 1430s other leaders had called them to a moderate Hussitism. Thereafter the pacifist and biblicist teaching of Petr Chelcicky, deeply rooted in Taborite critique of the feudal social (estates) and political order, became a bridge to the formation of the Unity of Czech Brethren in 1457.

Another approach illustrated by Donald Durnbaugh, was to compare the extended legacy of prophetic impact on society of Anabaptist-Mennonites, Brethren and Quakers, who in the 1930s formed the Historic Peace Churches committee for common action. After World War II the HPC presence in rebuilding efforts in Europe resulted in the Puidoux conferences as the first (1955) serious theological encounter between magisterial and peace churches, since the Reformation.

By 1994 (Prague IV) representatives of the Magisterial Reformation had expanded the multilateral nature of the dialogue. This time therefore, Reinhard Boettcher's paper sought to assess in what way the Lutheran Reformation was a prophetic movement, and to note the ways in which by the 20th century the prophetic voices of Barmen and Bonhoeffer were taken up more by other churches.

Another broadening of the conversation was to hear an assessment of how the Roman Catholic church understands prophecy, as both a permanent and special function within the church. Msgr John Radano mentioned that Second Vatican Council became, in the words of Karl Barth, a reforming council. It had the characteristics of a prophetic event with an impact well beyond its own boundaries. The final document from phase two of the bilateral dialogue with WARC presents reasons why Rome in the 16th century resisted the reformers. Today numerous convergences in understanding have been identified through bilateral dialogues. The methodology of a historical review, Radano emphasized, needs more space in dialogues, because it draws attention to what was intended as well as what emerged in the end.

Finally a series of papers sought to show how the prophetic concerns of the Reformation movements were expressed in very different 20th century contexts. Those included inter-church efforts to rebuild in post-war Germany (Durnbaugh), including theological renewal, noting the testing of faith under Soviet rule and national security states (Sawatsky), and most recently through the challenge of the present system of economic globalization (Winzeler), and the domination of security interests as evidenced, for example, by the “Project for the New American Century”.

It appears that as a coherent series with a continuity of participants, the Prague Consultations have come to completion. The common platform for dialogue that was achieved can now be attempted in several new initiatives, in light of widespread financial constraints, such as study processes in preparation for observing the 500 years Reformation anniversaries, with the intent of appreciating the plurality of reformations that developed over the process of several centuries. The original initiators of the Prague consultations attempted an assessment of what had been accomplished.

The Prague Consultations created for the first time a platform for voices from the First and Radical Reformation traditions to be heard within the symphony of ecumenical conversation. The vision for such a visible sign of Christian unity, expressed in academic reflection, shared testimonies from separate histories, spiritual fellowship and deepened friendship, were in great measure attributable to the spirit and ecumenical heart of Milan Opočenský and his colleagues, and to the longstanding Mennonite concern for relationships to Christians in central and eastern Europe. We noted how regularly the sensitivity to the prophetic, forced a re-examination of theological understandings in the context of the burning social, economic and political issues of the day. Attempting to note perspectives differing due to the East/West divide, or due to North/South inequities, regularly brought a corrective to one-sided views. Numerous issues were listed for further study, such as seeing the Reformation legacy in mission, and reflecting on the way the laity has come to play a larger role in the continual reformation of the church.

Consultation participants underlined the importance of the way papers and discussions took place in the framework of worship. As we prepare for the commemoration of a half millennium of Reformation history, all sense the urgency of seeking a healing of memories, including a process in which the martyrdoms no longer serve the cause of Reformation partisanship, but a martyrology of lived witness, including those of the 20th century under settings of extreme testing.

The proceedings from Prague VI and VII will be published with the intent of fostering broad circulation among the participant churches and communities. Less known documents, such as the *Confessio Taboritarum*, may be published in English translation.

The planning committee for Prague VII - Milan Opočenský, Larry Miller, Odair Pedroso Mateus and Sven Oppegaard - along with Donald Durnbough will guide future communication and forms of dialogue to continue the interest expressed by the Prague consultations.