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THE CHRISTIAN PEACE CONFERENCE--PROPAGANDA?...OR PROPHECY?

by Paul Stefanik

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PROPAGANDA: The systematic propagation of a given doctrine or of allegations reflecting its views and interests.

PROPHECY: Inspired utterance, viewed as a declaration of Divine will.

A discussion of the pronouncements and activities of the Christian Peace Conference usually divides the disputants into those who charge "Propaganda" and those who maintain "Prophecy." However, the distinction is probably not that simple.

Before embarking on a narration of the Christian Peace Conference and its operations, it would be appropriate to introduce another consideration: Whether it seems to be an agent of propaganda or of prophecy, the Christian Peace Conference should not be judged by its apparent characteristics alone. One should look deeper, in an effort to separate those elements that are merely incidental from those that are instrumental, as the Christian Peace Conference goes about achieving a goal that is considered fundamental.

Let us examine the Christian Peace Conference--how it appeared when it was founded as compared to what it seems to be today, in the light of its All-Christian Peace Assembly, and then let us try to evaluate its pronouncements and proceedings against its goals.

It will be helpful to some to point out that the All-Christian Peace Assembly is the "General Assembly" for the Christian Peace Conference--
much as the General Assembly serves the United Nations. It is a forum, a sounding board, without significant authority in the policy-making field. Like the United Nations General Assembly, it receives wide publicity. And like that General Assembly, it engages in extensive rhetoric.

The Fifth All-Christian Peace Assembly (ACPA) of the Christian Peace Conference (CPC) met in Prague June 21-27, 1978; more than 600 participants from 86 nations were present, primarily theologians and academicians. Reporters and cameramen were also on hand in large numbers, recording their impressions of the proceedings and photographing the impressive array of clerical garbs and the trappings of religiosity. The lavish pomp bordered upon ostentation.

Political personalities were few; such as were present came solely to bring greetings to that Christian gathering. But most of those political figures represented atheistic governments committed to the restriction (of not, indeed, the elimination) of the Church—a strange group of well-wishers that included Kosygin, Castro, Honecker, and Arafat, through their representatives.

Business and commerce were marked by their absence, as might be expected. But it seemed a startling omission when considering the amount of time the Assembly devoted to world economics and to criticism of the way the world's trade was being conducted. Without a "voice," this "observer" could only marvel at the judgments and condemnations heaped upon "Business" by the participants. It called to mind Edmund Burke's observation about those who are "...wholly unacquainted with the world, in which they are so fond of meddling, and inexperienced in all its affairs, on which they pronounce with so much confidence." The Assembly's extravagant denunciations of "Business" recalled Burke's judgment about "...the passions they excite." And passions the 5th CPA did excite, with not a single participant either qualified or able to moderate their excesses—not a voice raised in protest, explanation, or refutation.

Thus the gathering of Christians—mostly theologians—receiving greetings and "good wishes" from some who are bent on destroying them, and bitterly denouncing those whose rôle they do not comprehend. "False witness," according to the Eighth Commandment! How did this anomaly come into being?

It is necessary to go back to October 1957, when a small group of
theologians, nearly all professors from two seminars, gathered in the small town of Modra, Slovakia, to ponder the depressing heritage of the Cold War. The threat of nuclear devastation hung ominously over humanity and humanity itself was deeply torn apart by hatreds and suspicion. Even members of the clergy gave voice to rejection and suspicion of each other; at international church conferences one would hear remarks such as "any clergyman functioning behind the Iron Curtain has to be a Communist or he'd be in jail."

So, the theologians gathered in Modra to ponder the question of war and peace as a theological concern, and to see if the church might contribute to a resolution of the political problems, and to an improvement in understanding.

The meeting in Slovakia was favorably received, and was quickly expanded; all the churches of Czechoslovakia (CSSR) were invited to participate in ongoing discussions. Only the Roman Catholics did not join. And so it was that in December 1957 the Ecumenical Council of Czechoslovakia met in Prague to consider the question of "the struggle against thermo-nuclear armament as a rôle of the churches." There they agreed to "convene in the next year a conference of several leaders of world Christianity, without regard to Confessional or National identification" to consider the establishment of a "Christian World Council."

Their effort resulted in the First Christian Peace Conference (so named to avoid confusion with another movement). The Conference was held in Prague, at the invitation of the Ecumenical Council of the CSSR, in June 1958. The 40 participants who came represented all the Eastern European countries except Poland; additionally, only West Germany was represented. The Czech theologian Hromadka, who was to lead the CPC for a decade, called attention to the need to "ask whether our theology is rooted in the . . . Prophets and Apostles or whether it has not become a kind of man's ideology." It set a lofty tone, but the reference to human ideology proved to be prophetic of later developments. The deliberations of that 1st CPC were almost entirely limited to atomic weapons and mass destruction.

From these deliberations, it was seen that there was clearly a need to cross "Cold War" lines so that more of the "divided world" would become involved. This resulted in significant expansion and the 2nd CPC,
held in 1959, included participants from, among others, Great Britain, The Netherlands, and the USA, as well as from Poland, thus rounding out the Eastern European (Soviet) bloc. The attendance increased from 40 persons to 90, and from 7 countries to 16. However, the central discussion topics remained Disarmament and Nuclear Terror.

The movement continued to grow. The 3rd CPC, in 1960, attracted over 200 people; pastors, theologians, and the historical Peace Churches (Mennonite, Quaker, Brethren) accounted for most of the growth. The theme of the 3rd CPC was "How far and in what sense does our being Christians impel us to work for peace, and what directives are given to us in the Gospel?" Such lofty and challenging themes and slogans were to become the hallmark of the CPC/ACPA.

It is important to stress the deep rift that characterized that period. "Western" Christians were opposed to the atheistic dictatorships of the socialist/communist East, and too often felt that in a Marxist society the clergy become either martyrs or traitors, with no other possibility. On the other hand, the Eastern Christians thought they could stay out of politics and maintain the true faith, while regarding "Western" Christians as being really little more than just a lot of capitalists. A broader world representation continued to be promoted, and the 3rd CPC concerned itself largely with calling together an ALL-Christian Peace Assembly, inviting all Christendom to join the effort. Preparations for it became wide-ranging, including promotional visits by CPC leaders to 16 African countries.

In June 1961, the 4th CPC was convened, and after many years of virtual isolation Protestants, Catholics, Orthodox, Peace Churches, East and West, Third World, and even China gathered in Prague to deliberate the theme "... and on Earth Peace!" A spirit of penitence and reconciliation prevailed. Some 600 participants came from 42 countries. The First All-Christian Peace Assembly was launched!

But intervening world events made great changes that had an impact on the CPC, too. A new force entered into the 1st ACPA. African nations had gained independence. Many new countries had been formed, and the 600 representatives from 42 nations introduced many new considerations into the deliberations. Those from the Third World focused on the imperialism of the colonial powers, and associated Christian mission with that
colonialism and imperialism--"... a rotten Church betrayed its legacy [in Africa]" and was now expected to mobilize the necessary forces for "social, economic, and political change." A new era had dawned.

The CPC then fairly exploded in organization with expanded Advisory, Continuity, and Study Committees and Commissions, an International Secretariat, etc. Dr. Hromadka became President. This distinguished and dedicated churchman enjoyed a supportive international reputation and acceptance. His service as a lecturer at Princeton Theological Seminary during World War II had earned him the high esteem of the profession. Unwavering dedication to Christian principles marked his entire career. Much of the early acceptance of the CPC was owed to his person and reputation.

The 2nd ACPA was convened in 1964; its theme was "My Covenant is Life and Peace." This time 1000 came, a level of participation never again achieved. About 100 were from the Third World, emphasizing their problems, getting attention away from peace, as such. However, Christians from Western Europe and North America still predominated, and so the threat of atomic annihilation, and the East/West--Cold War--Divided Germany problems remained central. "Living together" was stressed at the 2nd Assembly. But the Third World had other convictions: the main problem was neo-colonialism--hunger, justice, human dignity. To this was added the "need for mastering technology" on a world-wide basis.

The CPC expanded to meet the new "needs" (or "opportunities"?) with seven vice-presidents, enlarged Work and Advisory Committees, five Commissions, and a Study Department. But again world events changed the CPC's thrust. It condemned the war in Vietnam as imperialism aggression by the U.S.; the CPC actively participated in all the many organizations "dealing" with that problem. The Six-Day War of 1967 also brought condemnation, but only upon Israel, resulting in some controversy within the CPC itself. Many other changes occurred: the East-West tensions had greatly eased, and so disarmament, European security, and the German question received much less attention. The Third World, revolution, neo-colonialism, imperialism and related issues were the new points of interest as the Assembly rejected President Hromadka's suggestion to discuss what the participation of various members, living under different social conditions, would mean for the common struggle for peace.
The CPC spoke of "one world," and many of its members disregarded the differences that resulted from various political, economic, and social situations. But the Third World had emerged and unceasingly promoted its problems and recommendations. Peace took a back seat to revolution; attacks on neo-colonialism and capitalist imperialism replaced discussions of "one world" as a prerequisite for peace.

The 3rd ACPA, in April 1968, was a rare occasion—the "Prague Spring" and "Socialism with a Human Face" produced mixed reactions. Many participants came with great expectations. Attendance was limited to 600 (down from the previous 1000) to guarantee the "working" ability of the Assembly; 200 came from socialist and capitalist countries. Over 100 from the Third World doubled their previous ratio of representation. There were more Catholics, more observers (as against delegates), several Vietnamese. The theme and slogans were stimulating: "Seek Peace and Pursue It. Save Man—Peace Is Possible."

The growing Third World influence was clearly evident in the 3rd ACPA's pronouncements. "Peaceful existence does not exclude the need for national liberation struggles . . . the status quo in Asia, Africa, and Latin America is unacceptable. Political, military, and administrative powers are derived from economic powers--these powers must be brought under international control."

Some opposed confining Christian faith to a social humanism; some warned against adoption of socialism by Christians; some objected to diverting attention from disarmament and imperialism. But "Dialogue must be continued in the interests of peace; ending it only helps the enemies of peace—the imperialists."

As a measure of their growing importance, Third World representatives gave the opening address and the two main addresses, and the 3rd ACPA's "Message to Churches" exhorted the churches not to oppose the revolutionary processes needed for a new society, but to encourage Christians to participate in the struggle.

And then—the deluge!—the Russians invaded Czechoslovakia "because [as noted by the CPC] the socialist system embodied in its Constitution was in danger." That split the CPC. Prague was no longer the bridge between East and West. A new crisis occurred. There had been other crises—in 1961, the CPC had even condemned Soviet atomic tests; that
shook the organization. The war in Vietnam and the condemnation of Israel in 1967 had also created critical internal dissensions, yet somehow the members of the CPC found a way then to continue their work, united for the goal of peace.

But Prague in August 1968 was something else. This time the antagonism was directed toward the heart of socialism—the USSR. It was one thing to pontificate against Western capitalism and to denounce the imperialism of the U.S., but to speak out against the Soviet Union? Inside the Iron Curtain? Hardly. A discussion of the events in Czechoslovakia was arranged in Paris, in October 1968, but for the first time in CPC history it was impossible to arrive at a standpoint satisfactory to the opposing factions.

A complete change in leadership came about. Joseph Hromadka resigned in protest, J. Ondra, the General Secretary, was blatantly removed, and the vice-presidents put in Metropolitan Nikodim of Leningrad and Novgorod as chairman of the Continuation Committee to perform the president's tasks. Working Committee members stayed away in protest. The International Secretariat had difficulty functioning.

A dissident group tried to organize a meeting in Great Britain to discuss possibilities of cooperation; it was denounced as illegal by Nikodim. Other attempts at unification also failed. The central governing bodies of the CPC then set out to convocate a 4th ACPA in 1971 with this re-assessment of future activities and objectives:

- to increase our movement's contribution to the solution of urgent current questions: the consolidation of European security; the ending of the US aggression in Vietnam, Cambodia, and Laos; overcoming the tension in the Middle East; the struggle against racism in the Republic of South Africa and in Rhodesia; and questions of the development of the Third World countries.

A significant change in direction and purpose had taken place. There could be no doubt of the heightened "leftist-orientation." The work for peace became "a struggle against imperialism in all its manifestations" and was not to be waged only in the Third World but was considered in a world-wide context. As a result, the CPC was "everywhere" with its Commissions--International Questions, Youth, Theology, Palestine, Portuguese Colonies, Vietnam, African and Asian Solidarity, etc. All of these
enjoyed CPC attention and involvement. The activity in 1970 and 1971 was nothing short of amazing; the effort, with all the travelling, occasioned a lot of expense, but there seemed to be no lack of funds nor any retrenchment from programs because of budgetary considerations. The CPC was clearly adequately financed (as was also apparent at the recent Fifth Assembly).

The CPC did not lack "political skill" either. The Working Committee met in Budapest in 1970 and summarily appointed new members, replacing those who had "abandoned" their work in the guiding Committees and Commissions, "so that the work of those central Committees would not be 'blocked'." With cooperation thus "assured," the 4th ACPA came into being. The Assembly gathered in Prague during September/October 1971; its theme was especially lofty and noble: "Our common responsibility for a better world. Mercy and truth are met together; righteousness and peace have kissed each other." But the occupation forces remained in CSSR.

It was determined that, to make sure that the "conditions would be 'right' for intensive work," the number of participants should be limited to 250. There clearly was not the level of interest that existed in 1968 or 1964. Some 40 persons came from the "Western" world, Europe and North America. One half of the participants were from the Third World, increasing its participation both in number and in ratio over 1968. But the greater impact of its presence was seen in that it gave about two-thirds of the addresses, and submitted the same high ratio of the questions for discussions. The "two-thirds World," as it was called, dominated many aspects of the proceedings.

In the usual closing "Message to Churches," the 4th ACPA stated that "The greatest threat to the life and peace of mankind comes from political and economic imperialism." In an address on "The International Situation as Surveyed by the CPC," a German churchman stated: "By imperialism we mean the attempt of internationally interwoven concerns and their political exponents to subdue and exploit nations or whole areas by economic, political or military schemes, or by the combination of these methods. The ramifications of imperialism are colonialism and neo-colonialism." The exploitation of people's lack of understanding of economics had begun in earnest, and it would increase.

The 4th Assembly appealed to all Christians to participate in anti-
imperialist solidarity; it declared its readiness to serve with everyone in the "service of peace"; and (perhaps most significant) it stressed the importance of peaceful co-existence as the starting point. If Christians are earnest about peace and social justice, they must reject anti-Communism. "... Many Christians are being misled by anti-Communist propaganda."

Metropolitan Nikodim was elected president. (He became the Honorary President at the 5th ACPA in June, then passed away very suddenly from a heart attack while attending Papal ceremonies in Rome.)

It took seven years to "bring around" the 5th ACPA, but it was not for lack of funds. Chartered jets brought delegates from Moscow, a kind of "staging area" for Third World participants. Delegates from Western Europe were invited to return "via" Moscow, with a two-day all-expenses-paid visit there, and no charge for the travel "detour." All these expenses were reliably reported to have been covered by the Russian Orthodox Church, which issued the invitations.

The surprising absence of any representation at the 5th Assembly from the Vatican was "outweighed by the presence of the highest representatives of the Orthodox Church," clearly an appealing euphemism. There were 200 Third World representatives (Asia, Africa, and Latin America), 186 from Socialist countries, 139 from Western Europe and 35 from the United States. Participants from other countries (Australia, for example), members of various organizations (WCC, LWF, etc.), newsmen and guests accounted for the balance. Dr. Martin Luther King, Sr., was accorded what was undoubtedly the most generous applause of the entire Assembly--an honored guest! Close behind was the ovation given the Vietnamese.

The renewed expansion resulting from the Prague sessions is further testimony to the financial solvency of the CPC. In addition to an expanded Presidium, the effective "collective" governing body, there was a great increase in Committee and Commission memberships. It is significant that the key Continuation Committee was increased from 100 to 137 members. The Working Committee was more than doubled, from 22 to 45. The International Secretariat increased from 12 to 18 members. "In all CPC bodies," according to an official account of the Assembly, "clergy and lay representation from the Third World is at a very high level" (Not
Unlike the development in the United Nations).

The theme of the 5th APCA was widely publicized in prior releases and church periodicals as "God's Call for Solidarity--Christians for Peace, Justice, and Liberation." The un-Biblical "solidarity" was represented as all-humanity's part in the transformation/creation of the human being, society, and nature. Christians are "in solidarity" with all humanity, demonstrating it in the transformation of institutions and in their participation in acts relating to the structures of society. (Small wonder that they received greetings and approbation from the atheistic socialist governments, whose objectives are the same!)

The theme was theologically extended in an 18-page address (by a Third World representative) declaring solidarity to be "a modern complement of the New Testament." His remarks included this summarization:

Democracy, economic justice, distributive justice within each nation, a New International Economic Order, the transfer of technology, the struggle against all forms of inequalities due to the backward situations inherited from regimes of exploitation...--this enumeration... obliges us... to rediscover and redefine Solidarity.

Although these charges, and the many others on "oppression, persecution, exploitation, etc.," could be read to condemn elements of the Second (Communist/Socialist) and Third Worlds, as well as the Western World/USA, there was no mistaking how the Assembly was "hearing" the speakers, judging by the timing and volume of applause, and its sources. Multinational corporations and the neutron bomb were accorded the most extensive condemnation, by far; the charges ranged from ridiculous to preposterous, and were clearly intended to arouse, not to enlighten. (Somewhere in the Slovanský Dum where the assembly met there should have been a large sign reading: People Who Live in Glass Houses...!)

It is impossible to condense the 5th ACPA proceedings into a few paragraphs; there is a risk of over-simplification in summarizing what required over 200 pages of prepared texts, messages, etc., not to mention the many pages of notes covering the dozens of hours of debate and comment. Nor was it possible for any one person to participate in all sessions, since several working groups met concurrently. But this much can be stated with certainty: The Assembly's pronouncements, whether in worship service or in working session, were lofty, appealing, challeng-
ing, and stimulating. The unconscionable waste of resources on armaments; the specter of starvation confronting hundreds of millions of people; the despotism inflicted upon whole nations and races by unscrupulous and tyrannical powers; the tremendous economic gap between peoples... these global situations were repeatedly emphasized and decried. The Assembly certainly was not lacking in identifying the problems of humankind. And which of these world concerns can anyone reject, whether Christian or not? The Golden Rule has its counterpart in all the world's great religions. (It is professed by Marxism/Communism, too!)

Without a doubt, the Assembly's pronouncements of the world's ills were appealing--to the emotions. And they are, indeed, the world's ills. Ours, too. But the Assembly's biased analyses thereof, their prejudicial assignment of responsibility therefor, and the absence of impartiality in their solutions thereto, were NOT appealing--not to reason. "The depressing restraints of reality and reason" were simply not reflected in the Assembly's rhetoric. Its recommendations were largely without merit; its convictions lacked credibility. "The ideologically-inspired misinformation" that was so much in evidence affected the judgment of both the speakers and the listeners.

The Assembly's conviction, its ultimate recommendation, the panacea to bring the world out of its unhappy situation was socialism. None of the world's difficulties is attributable to it, and it alone can provide the way out of all the dilemmas. How pitifully absurd in the light of socialism's performance!

The CPC professes to believe in the Supreme Being, and to be in solidarity with everyone. But there is only one way--theirs! That, surely, is not "The Way" of the Gospel, but they insist on having "their" way with a zeal reminiscent of the Inquisition, and just as violent. There, too, is the hallmark of their socialism--the "uncriticizable" abuse of power.

Notwithstanding the appealing phrases and slogans, the lofty pronouncements, and the challenging expressions of solidarity, the Assembly's narrow and biased protestations (whether they are propaganda, or not) were extravagant and unreasonable. They may indeed have been "inspired" utterances, but hardly "declaration of Divine will." More likely, they are declarations "inspired" (or required of the CPC) to

- 55 -
placate, if not appease, those rulers who "suffer" its existence in the atheistic societies.

Yet, even as such, the CPC pronouncements are, at least, "instrumental," assuring the continued existence of the organized church and enabling it to fulfill its "fundamental" mission of worship and witness—and the "extravagant" and "unreasonable" protestations may be discounted as merely "incidental."

It is too bad that the CPC must remain suspect. Christianity, as Solzhenitsyn said, remains the only alternative. The world needs a Christian approach to its problems, but it must be a realistic, reasonable, and intelligent approach. The 5th APCA did not observe those guidelines.

The Assembly, in its Divine services, repeatedly sought "the prophet of the Most High... to guide our feet into the way of peace" (Luke 1:79). But heart and mind seemed to be out of step.