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PEACE THEOLOGY IN BUDAPEST
by Bill McSweeney

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Since the onset of the Cold War, theology has suffered no less than other forms of
communication from the mutual sensitivities of East and West. At the level of doctrine—of
biblical scholarship and dogmatics—it has been possible to keep open the channels of discussion
in a reasonably creative way, subject to the physical constraints imposed by the political
authorities on both sides. At this level, obstacles to mutual understanding have arisen as much
from denominational barriers separating Christians worldwide as from the ideological curtain
separating the two power blocs. But whenever theological inquiry shifted from the doctrinal to the
ethical level, whenever the understanding of God's word was made contingent upon the contextual
circumstances in which it was to be understood, then the normal difficulties of language where
compounded by the complexities of political rivalry. Listening to God's word in simultaneous
translation is difficult enough; discovering together what it means in the context of East-West
politics is quite another matter.

In some ways, the effort to do so is an instance and a poignant symbol of the ecumenical
problem in its traditional sense. At the most general level of abstraction, a mixture of goodwill
and scholarship has succeeded in clearing away the obfuscations of centuries, due, in large part, to
the mini-Cold Wars in Europe before and after the Reformation. But when it comes to translating
that agreement between elites into practical and pastoral reality for those who make up the body of
the various churches, then the real difficulties arise. More often than not, the agreement must be
frozen in ambiguous formulae which permit each of the parties to it to understand it as an
aspiration for the future. Its implementation in the concrete would entail fundamental change in the
churches, not only with respect to liturgy, but also with respect to social action and to the exercise
of authority.

But at the level of action, the stimulus of the ecumenical movement in the West has
prevented, or at least limited, the freezing of theological agreement into general formulae.
Committed Christians involved in the movement have anticipated the structural changes called for
and have crossed denominational boundaries in order to discover a fellowship with like-minded
Christians of other traditions which integrates doctrine and ethics in an authentic way. This
horizontal community is not confined to 'left-wing' Christians who believe that solidarity with the
poor is the overriding obligation of the church today. Fundamentalist Christians, too, have been
moved by the ecumenical spirit to play down ancient doctrinal quarrels in the interests of pursuing ethical ideals in common with others. As a consequence of such 'horizontalism', the sharpest ecumenical divisions are today being manifested between 'right' and 'left' within the denominations, while the separation of the Christian churches in the traditional sense is no longer arousing the same concern, except among theological elites engaged in the necessary task of clarifying points of tension at the doctrinal level.

It is in this context that the initiative taken in Budapest in September 1984 must be understood. Since the 1960s, the need for a theology of peace, which would adequately confront the issues which impinge most on the consciousness of those who feel threatened by the policy of nuclear deterrence, has been expressed largely by Christians on the left of the political spectrum. Their involvement in the protests against government policy with the peace movements in the West has given rise to counter-movements of Christians expressing support for nuclear deterrence—from the more moderate forms of support in Europe to the fundamentalist movements surrounding the Reagan Administration in the U.S.

In Eastern Europe, the political realities imposed severe constraints on any agenda for a theology of peace. The marginal position of the churches in the socialist countries makes it near-impossible for them to address any questions which fall outside the definition of 'religion', narrowly defined by the religious ministries of the state. The critique of conditions affecting social justice, religious liberty or human rights in general in their own countries is proscribed. Since the state is, by definition, the 'peace movement,' any criticism of deterrence policy must be directed towards Western governments. Peace activity, therefore, must conform to the lines laid down by the state, otherwise it is likely to be suppressed on the grounds that the church is concerning itself illegally with political matters.

Clearly, this limitation confined ecumenical dialogue across the East-West divide to private conversations or to the coded messages between the lines of conference declarations. The problem is exacerbated by the general consensus that peace in the biblical sense cannot be restricted to the absence of war and the discussion of peace cannot stop short at the discussion of military disarmament, through these are sensitive enough areas in their own right. Shalom relates also to the positive conditions for peace, to questions of social justice and political freedom.

One of the major obstacles to even a limited dialogue on such matters between theologians East and West has always been the vulnerability of legitimate organizations in Eastern Europe to censorship by the state. For the most part, dialogue could only take place in the gaps which individuals could discover or create in the formal political structure. For this reason, the first Budapest conference was organized outside the normal organizational platform for such an
international event. It was a risky experiment, politically and financially, to invite 120 theologians, from East and West, to open dialogue on what was tentatively called 'Towards a Theology of Peace.'

At the immediate level of the experience of the participants, the experiment was a major success. The courage of the organizers encouraged the participants to respect the sensitivities of the occasion and this tacit agreement to tread carefully in fields where previously they had been forbidden to enter was the key to unprecedented dialogue. Heated discussion on the relations of disarmament and development echoed the clash on justice and peace at the Vancouver Assembly of the WCC. If the question of human rights as an inalienable element of the peace issue was muted, it was also so in the Vancouver Assembly and most participants accepted this as a small price to pay for the possibility of dialogue.

The same organizers—Bishop Karoly Toth of the Hungarian Reformed Church and Stephen Tunnicliffe, an Anglican peace activist from Great Britain—called the second Budapest Conference on the same subject at Raday College, 14-19 December 1987. Thirty-eight countries and eight denominations were represented among the 140 contributors, among them Bishop Albrecht Schnönherr, Archbishop Kirill of Smolensk, Professor Jürgen Moltmann, Ulrich Dülchrow, Canon Paul Oestreicher.

The formal discussions at the conference were divided into three themes, but it would be more meaningful to describe them as converging on the question of a theology for justice and peace. Most of the work was done in work-groups on topics such as 'The Dilemma of Just War', 'Violence and Pacifism', 'Enemy Images', 'Covenanting and Church Unity'. The last of these provided a link with another topic to which all were invited to contribute: 'The Conciliar Process for Justice, Peace and the Integrity of Creation' (JPIC). This cumbersome title stands for the initiative which has gained ground rapidly in the churches since the Vancouver Assembly and which, in its origins and practical implications, fairly bristles with the complexities of church and state politics already referred to.

It is not all clear whether the conciliar process referred to is, and should remain, an initiative from the top down, under the control, that is, of the various leaderships of the churches involved, with the task of organization left to the WCC in Geneva. This elitist understanding is challenged by articulate and organized groups who feel that the process, to have any hope of achieving success, must confront the divisions within the church rather than gloss over them.

An important intervention on this question by Peter Schüttke, an MPhil student of the Irish School of Ecumenics, focused on the way in which the term 'covenant' was assumed to be unproblematic in the discussions within the churches. The emphasis on the Exodus sense of
covenant stresses the empowering of the people to take action; the Exile sense encourages passivity. The former lends itself more to the encouragement of lay initiative; the latter to the elitist view of the conciliar process.

It is clear that one important motivation in launching the JPIC process was to resolve the tensions in the churches which surfaced dramatically at the Vancouver Assembly by creating a new program which would link justice and peace inextricably at the formal level and, in the process, might also provide a focus for consensus in a fraught situation. In crude terms, this tension can be located geographically in the difference of experience and interests between Christians in Europe, worried about a future war, and Christians in the Third World, who see their present sufferings as the consequence of economic policies supported by their brothers and sisters in Europe and North America. The JPIC process was an important part of the Budapest discussions. But, in a sense, it represents what Budapest itself was about—how to relate the ethical imperatives of disarmament with those of development—and it implicitly raised some of the same questions in microcosm.

Are the tensions in the church to be resolved by a genuinely conciliar process which openly confronts the divisions, or are these divisions too difficult or too dangerous to be tackled and must, therefore, be glossed over, at least temporarily? Vancouver and Budapest are at one in emphasizing the inseparability of justice and peace. Given the preponderance at Vancouver of Third World and Western theologians, it is easy to see how the problem of Shalom became focused on the two elements which reflect the interests of the two major groups.

But Budapest was a meeting of theologians from East and West. As in 1984, the question of political freedom and human rights as an inseparable element of Shalom was scarcely raised and the culpability of Western capitalism for most of the ills of the Third World was affirmed in sweeping generalizations.

It was still a remarkable experience and a unique event in an Eastern European context and it seems churlish to enter a reservation. But there has not been any perceptible movement in opening up the area of freedom for debate between Budapest '84 and '87 and this despite the dramatic reforms associated with policies of glasnost and perestroika. It is one thing to reject the attitude of conservative Western and Christian commentators who see political freedom in Eastern Europe as the only question linked to disarmament and who ignore the problem of social justice as it is exemplified in the Third World. It is quite another to keep silent on Eastern Europe.

The experiment may be repeated a third time in years to come and, doubtless, it will be a refreshing and stimulating experience once again. But Budapest needs to be more than a pleasant stop on the international conference circuit. Its credibility requires that it should be seen, and not just believed, to open up a little more the space for freedom of dialogue left by the political
authorities. It would be nice to believe that the state in Hungary is more tolerant of open debate than it was, say, a decade ago and that this is the reason why there was no sign of tension between the political authorities and the seminar in Budapest. In a country more liberal than Hungary in matters of religious freedom—East Germany—it is the visibility of tension between the Federation of Evangelical Churches and the state which encourages widespread popular support for the churches. When these churches speak about peace on the borders of faith is not the shrug of indifference or cynicism. These churches have won respect for the concept of peace by their readiness to take calculated risks in its defence, both with and, at times, against the state. In Hungary, 'peace' is a slogan of the state and of its subordinate institutions. If the Budapest seminar means something more positive and closer to 'shalom' than that, the knowledge has not yet reached radical Christians in Hungary.

The key to the success of Budapest was said in 1984, and repeated this year, to be the fact that no church or peace organization, but rather committed individuals, were responsible for it. It is probably time now for a community of Christians, drawn from East and West, to take the experiment to the next stage. This will certainly require a covenanting to provide the spiritual and psychological support needed for a dialogue which takes Gorbachev at his word. It may be that Raday College, the seminary of the Hungarian Reformed Church, is not the appropriate symbol for the next stage. But it has provided an exciting context for the beginnings.