DOING THEOLOGY IN AN EAST EUROPEAN AND LATIN AMERICAN CONTEXT
by Ans J. van der Bent

Dr. Ans J. van der Bent (Reformed) is retiring this year from the position of librarian of the World Council of Churches Library in Geneva. For many years he was participant, observer, chronicler, and historians of many of the W.C.C. activities. The meeting in Prague was one of the last in this official capacity. We wish him a peaceful retirement in the South of France and hope he will continue to contribute to OPREE.

The Programme on Theological Education of the World Council of Churches gathered 57 theological educators—men and women, Orthodox, Protestant, Roman Catholic—to explore together the meaning of "Doing Theology in Different Contexts", especially Eastern Europe and Latin America, June 21-25, 1988, in Prague, Czechoslovakia. The major concerns were to share and challenge each other's understandings of the relationships between faith, theology, and ideology, to examine patterns of ministry and theological education in socialist societies, and to promote greater faithfulness through appropriate spirituality and spiritual formation in the diverse situations at this particular time and in the challenging years that lie ahead.

The ecumenical movement has come a long way to understand that there is not only one Christian-Marxist dialogue. There are many forms of Christianity and many strands of Marxism. Latin Americans pointed out that in their struggles for a more just and human society East European manuals on Marxism are of no help because they are abstract and dogmatic and deny the historical situation of Latin America.

When Orthodox Churches in East Europe speak about social ethics they primarily mean diakonia—the selfless service of the needy, the sick, the disadvantaged and the perplexed. A professor of the Russian Orthodox Church said that "the church considers the socialist system natural and providential, being freely chosen by the people of God, and where the principles of Christian social ethics are being implemented."

For Latin American Christians social ethics is first of all a continuous exercise in prophetic criticism of oppressive governments and unjust social structures. The force of their hope comes from the presence of the poor in church and society. Struggling with the great masses of exploited and marginalized people leads to the experience that God, who is on the side of the poor, powerfully overthrows destructive human powers.

The ecumenical movement has also come a long way in realizing that theology and ideology cannot be separated. Ideology as such is neither good nor bad, but a general phenomenon.
of human existence—a collective expression and instrument of social change or preservation. Ideology is also contained and reflected in the biblical-theological and historical-present contexts of Christian existence.

A two-fold truth must be faced. There is no "pure theology" without ideological presuppositions and implications. On the other hand, theology must constantly maintain the priority and critical function of the gospel towards any given ideology. This implies that it must also be self-critical of the abuse of Christian faith by certain ideologies—colonialism, racism, sexism, Armageddon-theology as a theo-ideology of the status quo of capitalist society. It is further possible that a particular ideology can become the prophetic voice to the church from outside the church.

Sitting in the largest lecture hall of the Comenius Faculty of Theology—theologians from Latin America on the one side and theologians from Central and Eastern Europe on the other side, surrounded in a circle by representatives from Western Europe, North America, Africa and Asia—engaged in a first exercise of questioning each other. Particularly Christians from Western Europe were not in a comfortable position since the whole of Europe is based on one religious and cultural tradition—Karl Marx was a German Jew—and the continent of Latin America owes much of its inspiration to the West.

The situation in Latin America has enabled Christians and Marxists to join hands and work together for liberation. The struggle for liberation is a total historical project presupposing a socio-political analysis of Latin America in terms of domination and dependence and proposing a revolutionary change in the direction of a socialist society. There is no contradiction between revolution and religion.

Traditional concerns of salvation which ideologically served as a tool of domination, as they spiritualized and individualized religion, must be rejected. Salvation begins in the present life and leads to eternal salvation in God's kingdom. Since God loves his children, particularly those who are suffering, he became a human being and suffered himself. Faith in the incarnation, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ precedes, but also relates to, the Marxist analysis of society in pragmatic terms.

Instead of speaking of "spirituality for combat" - a phrase coined at the WCC Assembly at Nairobi in 1975—or of "the liturgy after the liturgy"—a phrase coined in Orthodox circles—representatives from Latin America preferred to refer to "spirituality must be examined and judged by the criteria and fruits of the kingdom, such as righteousness, truth, liberation and reconciliation. Spirituality is a permanent exodus out of oppressive structures and an element of constant
pilgrimage. Any division between material and spiritual values is not in accordance with wholistic biblical thinking."

In Central and Eastern Europe Marxists are those in power and their imposition of Marxist ideology has often evoked a negative response from the Christian churches. Truly political involvement of the church in East European societies has been minimal. But political neutrality is Christian irresponsibility. Slowly churches are comprehending that socialism leading eventually to communism is not the kingdom of heaven, nor the empire of evil, but a historic step on the way of humanity achieving a greater degree of justice and equality. Marxism does disclose greed, vested interests and selfishness. And socialist regimes, on the whole, have shown solidarity with the poor, the powerless and the exploited, often more consistently than many Christians.

Crucial questions remain, however, wide open as to whether Marxist anthropology is profound enough, whether the Marxist concept of power is not conditioned by an unfounded optimism, and whether the problem of evil can be only interpreted as the result of mishaps in socio-political and economic developments. Any socialist society—as any other kind of society—cannot live without the dimension of love, forgiveness and reconciliation. Do churches in East Europe offer answers from the gospel to perennial human problems and do they state these answers publicly?

Some representatives from Czechoslovakia and the German Democratic Republic insisted that new ways of perception have to be learned: not seeing the Second World through the eyes of the First World, but looking at the Third World, then at the global problems, and then returning to the Second World. The observation of Latin Americans that there are no poor or beggars in Prague and that the city is relatively clean was rather embarrassing to them. And the remark of the Methodist bishop of Argentina that the whole continent of South America may become a vast Calcutta was a shock.

It remains to be seen how the Russian Orthodox Church in the Soviet Union, and other churches in socialist nations, will respond to Michael Gorbachev's invitation to participate in the enterprise of "glasnost" and "perestroika". The communist outstretched hand means primarily that the churches take up their Christian responsibility to be instrumental in solving problems of alcoholism, divorce, abortion, sloth and indifference. But do the churches' charitable and social tasks end there? Is it sufficient for the churches in the GDR to gain high social credit for caring since decades for the sick, the old, and the handicapped? Is this a spirituality which reaches the predicament of human community in depth? When these questions are not squarely faced churches
are in danger to drift back into old "unholy" church-state relationships. And their spirituality risks to be confined to the boundaries of the Christian communion.

Many felt that the walls which separate Christians and Marxists should be torn down. Christians should plead for the possibility of becoming members of communist parties in socialist states. At the same time they should make clear that, contrary to the past, they have no more intention of grabbing a share in power. The church is in the world, but not of the world. The practice of critical loyalty to the state remains a demanding and risky task and must be ever newly examined.

There was a general agreement that theological institutions should include in their curricula the study of social structures and ideologies, experiences that will help them to develop critical insight into those structures and ideologies, and biblical-theological analysis that will guide their pastoral work in relation to those structures and ideologies. This implies that competent teachers should assist theological students to discover what ideologies work for or against justice and human fulfillment, especially among the poor and marginalized. An answer to the question as to what elements and practices of spirituality can guide and undergird theological education and the nurture of congregations in the struggle for personal and social fulfillment according to God's will must be given. There was also a recommendation from a common heart and mind that theological students should live among the poor for a prolonged time to experience the shortcomings of their academic study.

As the consultation dealt with the relationship between faith, theology and ideology, it could not enter into a discussion on the relation between faith, science and technology. It has become clear, however, that ecumenism of liberation has difficulty coping with the challenge of the modern scientific-technological world-view. The liberation socialist view of science and technology is as anachronistic as the capitalist-technocratic approach. The assumption is that a just and liberated society will always know how to use modern science and technology responsibly. But liberation thinking itself has been wedded to the modern scientific-technological world-view of unlimited domination of nature.

Within the ecumenical movement liberation theologians have tended to downplay the importance of the question posed by modern science and technology. Insofar as they have addressed these questions it has been mainly to demand that the developing countries receive a just share of world scientific and technological power. The question of the future of societies dominated by such power has, for understandable reasons, been put aside in situations where social justice appears to be the primary issue. But in the larger ecumenical discussion the fact must be faced that 97 per cent of
all scientific and technological knowledge is located in Europe, North America, and Japan, and that even a minor share by two-third of the world's population in the Third World in the monopoly cannot be anticipated in the near future.

The conciliar process of mutual commitment (covenant) to justice, peace and the integrity of creation, which will lead to an ecumenical world convocation in 1990, is burdened with acute and intricate problems. The cry for justice in the Third World—the daily death of thousands of people is as real and tragic as an eventual nuclear holocaust—may be smothered by the anxiety of the First and Second World to be unable to reach an agreement on progressive nuclear disarmament. The ecological concern could be compromised to the extent that the developed nations continue to cling to the necessity of growth of their GNP. In this puzzle of world affairs the issue of ideological confrontation or ideological co-existence may well be played down. The results of the consultation in Prague would then be overshadowed by still more complicated, and seemingly unsolvable, problems of humanity.

In the encounter between theological educators of Central and Eastern Europe and Latin America one thing has become more evident. The ecumenical movement does not move smoothly to the manifestation of the unity of the church of Jesus Christ and its credible witness of salvation of the world. It moves through rapids and river-beds of discovery and joy and disillusion and anguish. The convictions that theology grows out of revelation and church tradition (Europe) and that theology evolves from the experience of people and their direct encounter with the gospel (Latin America) seem to contradict each other. The historical, cultural and political contexts of the continents and regions are so different that no single Christian community can cope with the bewildering global variety of collective and individual existence.

Yet through the sharing in faith and love of the oppositions and disunities of peoples and churches, Christians everywhere can glimpse, through the power of the Holy Spirit, that the Body of Christ incorporates the whole of humanity. Caught up in the ecumenical movement they learn that different faiths, theologies and ideologies, according to their search for truth, obedience, and commitment, are still adumbrations of God's inclusive reign.

At the end of a letter from the Prague Consultation to churches, institutions and persons concerned with theological education, Psalm 72:12-14 was quoted: "God rescues the poor and those who are needy and neglected, has compassion of the weak and th poor, saves the lives of those in need, and rescues them from oppression and violence, for their lives are precious."