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CHRISTIAN-MARXIST DIALOGUE AT IGLS, AUSTRIA

Over the past twenty-five years, various groups and individuals have sought to bring Christians and Marxists together to promote dialogues which might set the groundwork for better understanding and lessened tensions. The Paulusgesellschaft sponsored the first of such dialogues in the 1960s; the New Ecumenical Research Association has renewed these efforts in the latter half of the 1980s. Their second dialogue conference took place August 12-15, 1987, in a conference at Iglis, Austria (near Innsbruck).

The conference opened with a "sharing" session in which the twenty-five participants, from a dozen different countries, related some important turning-points in their own intellectual journeys. Prof. Charles C. West, of the United States, then launched the dialogue with a paper on Christian-Marxist dialogue, subtitled "Building Confidence in a Time of Crisis" (the main theme of the conference). He first addressed the problems of dialogue. Dialogue must go beyond negotiations in which Christianity, represented by the church, and Marxism, represented by the Communist Party, seek to promote their interests and in their most strident forms try to coerce each other. Dialogue also involves more than cooperation on problems of mutual concern. Dialogue proper, however, faces its own set of problems. Both partners in dialogue must be willing to confront their own ideologies (e.g., Marxism its atheism, and Christianity its reliance on revelation) to find a common basis for trust. In the remaining sections of his talk, West outlined some of the reasons for dialogue (e.g., a shared history and shared values), and he indicated ways Marxists and Christians can learn from each other, especially in addressing the common problems created by alienating structures of politicoeconomic power.

Prof. Jozsef Lukacs of Hungary was slated to give the major talk from a Marxist perspective. His untimely death created a grave loss for Christian-Marxist dialogue, but his Hungarian colleague Dr. Tamas Foldesi admirably filled in at the conference, presenting a paper written by Lukacs shortly before he died together with his own ideas. Lukacs' reflections had begun with a response to an essay by the Catholic bishop of Pecs, Jozsef Cserhati. Both Lukacs and Foldesi agreed with the bishop on the need to view Christians and Marxists as partners rather than as enemies. The paper focused on several areas of concern: establishing a true sense of Marxist atheism (not a mechanistic materialism but a humanism that seeks to realize human fulfillment), finding a balance between individual interests and community, and recognizing the structures needed for human fulfillment.
After formal responses to each paper by both Marxist and Christian representatives, the conference opened up a dialogue in which every person at the conference participated. The discussions covered a number of issues, including the meaning of Marxist atheism. A related issue created considerable interest. The Yugoslavian delegation (including both Marxists and Christians) argued that Marx's dialectical method of social analysis in no way depended on philosophical, dialectical materialism. Several other interventions at the conference revolved around the role of the church in Marxist-Socialist countries: e.g., how churches should define themselves in respect to socialism (avoiding both hostility and complacent accommodation) and the need for a distinctive Second World theology.

In evaluating the conference, a participant from Poland commented that nearly all the questions raised were directed toward Marxism (e.g., the meaning of its atheism and its materialism) and rarely toward the meaning of Christianity. The conference moderator, Prof. Paul Mojzes (U.S.A.), noted also in conclusion that this was the first Christian-Marxist dialogue attended by a representative of the People's Republic of China. Most conference participants praised the tone, spirit, and liveliness of the dialogue.

Participating from Eastern Europe were Dr. Krystina Gorniak-Kocikowska (Poland), Dr. Milan Opocensky (Czechoslovakia), Dr. Tamas Foldesi (Hungary), Dr. Lubomir Dramaliev (Bulgaria), Dr. Marko Orsolic, Dr. Miso Kulic, and Dr. Vesna Terzic (Yugoslavia). From the People's Republic of China the participant was Dr. Mingzhov Che.

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