The Washington Christian-Marxist Dialogue

Leonard Swidler
Temple University, Philadelphia
THE WASHINGTON CHRISTIAN-MARXIST DIALOGUE

By Leonard Swidler

Dr. Leonard Swidler (Roman Catholic) is professor of religion at Temple University, Philadelphia, PA. He is the editor of the Journal of Ecumenical Studies, a prolific writer and participant in many interreligious and interideological dialogues. He has visited Eastern Europe on numerous occasions. Professor Swidler was the convener and moderator of the Washington conference.

In the 1980's, although it was a time of severe tensions between East and West, a series of dialogues between Christian and Marxist scholars was initiated by the New Ecumenical Research Association (New ERA). The participating scholars came from Eastern and Western Europe, North America and even China, representing a wide variety of disciplines and expertise.

Now that the tensions between East and West seem to have disappeared, or at least to have been greatly diminished, it can be asked whether the need for such dialogues persists. This question was doubtless posed by the organizers of the dialogue series when they, in conjunction with the Journal of Ecumenical Studies published at Temple University, launched the latest in the East-West dialogue series: CHRISTIAN, MARXIST AND OTHER VIEWS ON HUMAN RIGHTS: AN AMERICAN-HUNGARIAN--YUGOSLAV DIALOGUE, held in Washington D.C., September 29 - October 5, 1989.

Unlike the previous dialogues, this time the participants were mainly from the U.S.A., Hungary and Yugoslavia, although participant-observers from the GDR, China and Poland were also actively present. The Hungarian participants at the conference were, professors Tamás Földesi, János Kelemen, Lászlo Solyom, Mária Ludassy, Károly Pröhle, András Sajo, Gyöngyi Szabo-Földesi, and Pál Bruno Turnay. The Yugoslav participants were professors Trivo Indjic, Zagorka Golubovic, Marko Orsolic, Vesna Pesic, Vesna Pusic, and Vladan Perisic.

Also new in this conference, and highly appreciated especially by the visiting scholars, was the fact that in addition to the presentation and discussion of scholarly papers on human rights, the participants also had the opportunity to visit a large number of Washington agencies and institutions deeply concerned with human rights. These consultations--which
took place in small groups, thereby providing for an intense discussion by all participants—were with such agencies as the Human Rights Commission of the U.S. State Department, the Sub-Committee on Human Rights of the House of Representatives, the Hungarian, Yugoslav and Polish embassies, and a large number of non-governmental organizations active in human rights issues.

Each of the participating scholars prepared ahead of time a research paper in a specific area, so that in addition to their being intensively critiqued and discussed at the conference, the papers will all be published in revised form in a forthcoming book.

In the discussion the changed, and changing, political situation was vividly reflected, making clear that not only has the need for East-West dialogue not been lessened, but rather, has been greatly magnified.

At the end of the dialogue the participants felt it was important that they record both for themselves and other persons potentially interested in human rights, their areas of agreement, disagreement, and where they believe further intense dialogue is urgently needed. Their joint statement is follows: