Report and Interpretation of the World Conference of Religious Workers for Saving the Sacred Gift of Life from Nuclear Catastrophe, Moscow, USSR; May 10-14, 1882

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Several persons long active in CAREE had the privilege of participation in the inter-religious conference on nuclear disarmament held in Moscow May 10-14, and we owe our colleagues and the readers of OPREE a description and interpretation of that event which can penetrate the miasma of media misinterpretation that has almost totally distorted the American perception of it. We also place in your hands in this issue of OPREE the three documents that emerged from the work of the conference as Appeals: 1) An Appeal to the Leaders and Followers of all Religions; 2) Appeal to all Governments of the World; and 3) Appeal to the Second Special Session of the UN General Assembly on Disarmament. We think them worthy of study and discussion.

Lamar Gibble, Peace and International Affairs Consultant for the Church of the Brethren, Elgin, Illinois, shares his experience and evaluation of the conference, as well as his critique of the efforts of the U.S. government and media to distort and politicize it. James Will, Professor of Systematic Theology and Director of the Peace Institute at Garrett-Evangelical Theological Seminary, Evanston, Illinois, shares his systematic reflections about the conference.

H. Lamar Gibble

When I accepted the invitation to attend the World Conference of Religious Workers at the invitation of Patriarch Pimen, head of the Russian Orthodox Church, I never dreamed it would attract so much attention on the part of the U.S. media, or for that matter, the Reagan administration. But it did grab much more attention than any other similar disarmament conference initiated by Christian and/or interreligious leaders in recent times.

In this report I will not bother to give details about the final formulations since they speak for themselves in the Communique, the Appeal to Leaders and Followers of all Religions, the Appeal to All Governments of the World, and the Appeal to the Second Special Session of the UN General Assembly on Disarmament-1982. In this report I will simply summarize my impressions, criticisms and commendations of the conference along with a few asides and happenings which color such an event.

The conference followed the East European pattern of speeches and more speeches...some mainly greetings, some quite focused on the theme, and some merely ideological rhetoric, grasping at an opportunity to give attention to one's religious group, denomination, or organization. That went on for most of the conference and many of the delegates were getting quite impatient by Wednesday when greetings were still being interspersed with the main speeches, the conference was falling behind its schedule, and persons wanted to get on with the tasks in the working groups. Many were so impatient with the drone of the speeches and some of the rhetoric that they (we) began interrupting some persons with table pounding and groans when speakers went overtime or simply were scoring 'brownie' points with the Soviet government. I do not know if it was reported in the press but
there was not a polite and quiet acceptance on the part of the delegates of these few incidents of strident political rhetoric.

There were some notable and good speeches. The Patriarch's speech got quite a bit of attention in the news releases we received almost daily from the U.S. Embassy. It was probably the longest speech and was filled with biblical and theological wanderings but it concluded with a rather short section which could be characterized as political. It was this section alone, I think, which was picked up by the press and exploited although most of us saw this as mild political rhetoric and likely the minimum he could get away with in return for the approval of the state to organize such an interreligious conference.

Billy Graham's speech was well done, I thought. I was pleasantly surprised. While he was not as bold as some of us would have liked, he brought attention to the gravity and dangers of the nuclear arms race in an acceptable biblical/theological context and, I think, was genuinely appreciated by most all present (Christians at least). Even his last minute insertion (not in the printed text of his speech) on human rights and religious liberty issues was set in the context of CSCE/the Helsinki Final Act and was tastefully and helpfully done.

There were other rather good speeches too. One of the problems was that the good material soon became repetitive. I felt Dr. Arbatov, Director of the Institute for the U.S. & Canada of the Soviet Academy of Sciences, gave a good and balanced speech given the necessity of a pro-Soviet bent because of his position. I was equally interested that he politely challenged Billy Graham's comments that linked "the last, all destructive war," with the "second coming of Christ." Arbatov then went on to enunciate a position that might be closer to mine in that regard than to Billy Graham's. A Japanese woman, Michio Kurokawa, a survivor of Hiroshima bomb gave a very moving account of her harrowing experience and made a plea for nuclear disarmament. Arie Brouwer's speech was short, powerful, and did honor to the U.S. delegation. JoAnne Kagiwada's speech (our current ICIC chairperson) was warmly received, as much for her interpretation of the 1,000 cranes (folded paper cranes connected in lei form and given by the Japanese woman to Patriarch Pimen without explanation) as for her interpretation of the current status of the peace and disarmament movement within the U.S. churches.

Although the conference was grossly monotonous for much of the time, it had its moments of stimulation, confrontation, and backroom negotiation. Two times the conference speeches were interrupted on behalf of the InterChurch Peace Council (IKV) of the Netherlands, whose representative came with the understanding that he would be able to address the conference, but then was denied the privilege and told by the chair that he would have the floor in the working groups. With all of the other speeches and greetings many of us could not understand why he was denied.

Even given some real dissatisfaction on my part related to some of the structure and format of the conference, I came away with a quite positive overall view of the conference. The final documents, affirmed by consensus, were much better than I expected. They are no more "radical" or "reactionary" in my estimation than the proposals emerging from the disarmament movements in the U.S. and Europe. And the process of producing these final statements was not all that bad and
certainly not the "closed and Soviet manipulated" operation that the Western press presented it to be. At the presentation of and in response to the first drafts of these documents, there were over 100 verbal and written interventions for change or modification which were considered before the final drafts were presented in the closing plenary. It is my impression that there were genuine and successful efforts via the interventions, corridor lobbying, and consultations by the drafting committee to negotiate acceptable modifications of the texts. Therefore, when the final texts were presented on Friday there was a consensus to accept them as proposed.

My main criticism and irritation related to matters not central to the conference but certainly related to it. My first irritation relates to the role the Reagan administration chose to play vis-à-vis the conference. Before I left the United States I had a long letter from Representative Fascell and Senator Dole, critical of the conference, filled with inaccuracies, and asking that I raise human rights and religious liberties issues in the conference. The day before I left I had a call from Hugh Simon of the Human Rights Bureau, Department of State, asking me to press the Soviet government while there to release the "Siberian Seven (now six)." In my absence another letter arrived from a different person in the Human Rights Bureau raising similar concerns. While in Moscow we learned that delegates from at least three other countries (we have documentation from Canada and the Netherlands) were called by U.S. Embassy staff in those countries urging them not to attend the conference. Even before we left the U.S. the press had reported the efforts on behalf of the Administration to convince Billy Graham not to go to the conference. While many of us have been to many other such conferences of rather major importance, never before have we had this type of pressure and activity on the part of our government. We also know that the U.S. Embassy in Moscow was "doing intelligence" on the conference as it was in its planning stages and that that information which was shared with Washington from these sources apparently was the basis of some or many of the inaccurate statements in the government press releases and letters we received. (If the U.S. intelligence work in general is as poor as it was on this international conference, then what can we believe!) In short, I was extremely irritated by all of this and believe strongly that many of these actions were inappropriate and plans are underway to officially lodge this sentiment with appropriate persons, departments, and agencies of government. I came away from the experience feeling that there seemed to be a profound ignorance on part of most of the embassy staff about the nature of the conference. Furthermore, there seems to be an abysmal ignorance of most staff at the U.S. Embassy of the daily life, witness, and history of the Christian Church in the U.S.S.R. It appears to me as if they are primarily interested in and tuned in only to the religious dissidents and the points at which the church is in tension or conflict with the state. Their knowledge and work, it seems, focuses primarily on matters which suit the U.S. political agenda.

Another major irritation I had was with the press. No sooner had I arrived in Moscow than I learned that the Chicago Tribune Moscow correspondent wanted to meet with the three Chicago area delegates. From his opening questions in the interview it was obvious that he had predetermined his focus for the story. It would be about our reactions to Graham's presence, human rights concerns, and whether or not we felt we were being used as tools for Soviet propaganda. And from what we learned of the U.S. electronic and print press corps in Moscow, this was pretty true to form. What is deemed newsworthy is predetermined in advance and
the questions (interrogations) never allow you to get to your experiences or the announced agenda of the conference. By the time I got back to the U.S. I was so irritated by this and the loaded questions thrown at us that I responded to an AP interviewee's question, "Do you think Billy Graham was used by the Soviets for their purposes?", as follows: "No more than you or the Reagan Administration have used Graham for your/their purposes." I have become more cynical about the press through this experience than I have ever been before. The things I have read since I have returned have convinced me further that they reported on their biases or on the basis of what would sell rather than having knowledge or experience of what the conference was about, what happened there, and what the final papers stated. The harsh critique of Patriarch Pimen's address, I feel, could only have been written in ignorance (not having heard or read the speech) or with malice (intentionally distorting and taking a short statement out of the larger context of the speech). Furthermore, the U.S. press in Moscow seemed appallingly ignorant of the life of the churches in the U.S.S.R., maybe even more so than the Embassy crowd, and even more blinded by their focus on and contacts with the "dissidents."

Still another irritant related to the focus on Billy Graham. Without it being his intention (I think and hope) the focus of the conference (nuclear disarmament) got lost in the glare of international attention given to "Billy." When it was announced many months ago that he might be invited, some of us raised this very concern and I have been told that the concern was raised during the planning process, but apparently "the Russians" really wanted him there. I am glad he went. I am happy he is concerned about nuclear disarmament (I think genuinely so). But a price was paid in the process in that the media's focus shifted primarily to a person and not nuclear disarmament. Indeed if there was an "issue focus" in the media, it was on human rights and religious liberty issues and not on nuclear disarmament. Therefore, it is difficult to discern who won this round, the Soviet government or the U.S. government. Therefore, if some of these assessments and intuitions are correct, maybe Bishop David Preus's appeal in the conference to keep the conference within the confines of our religious concern and preventing it from becoming a "political forum," is an impossible dream. For how can we avoid the political dynamics and realities? And if we could, would not the governments and the press of both great powers impose their political agendas and biases on such an event anyhow?

I came away from the conference again convinced that there is a genuine and abiding and deep concern for peace and disarmament on the part of the Soviet people and church leaders and that it is not simply being fabricated to subvert us. I came away convinced again of the continuing need for meetings and dialogue between Christians and other religious leaders in these types of fora. There are certainly better ways of working for peace in the West than through such a big cumbersome, and costly conference, but given the Soviet setting, I am not sure that anything much better could have been done than was done and so I am generally positive in my evaluation and estimate of the event and very happy to have been invited and a part of it.
I. Presuppositions of the Conference

A. Shared presuppositions of the planners and participants:

1. Human life is a sacred gift, which requires responsible safeguarding despite and in the midst of all historical ambiguities of national security, competing ideologies, and international injustice.

2. The globally destructive character of nuclear weapons requires dimensions of concern and action that go beyond the national to the universal. Though no one of the world's religions can speak for all of humanity, they all ground this universal concern and together may give it powerful expression.

3. Not only the potential use of nuclear weapons but the very threat of such use goes beyond all limits of ethical justification. The Christian theological tradition's criteria for just war require opposition to nuclear weapons.

4. The current deterioration of east-west detente, the failure of arms negotiations, the development and deployment of new weapons systems which destabilize the supposed balance of forces on which a precarious deterrence policy has been based, on the one hand; and the emergence of broadly-based peace movements at the time of the Second Special Session of the UN General Assembly, on the other hand, make this historical period a "kairos" for religious forces to express their commitment to disarmament.

B. Apparent presuppositions of the Soviet Hosts:

1. The sponsoring of such peace conferences is both an authentic witness of the peace concern of Soviet churches and other religious groups, and necessary for their legitimation in Soviet society.

2. The spectacular form and international scope of such conferences impresses participants, especially those from the Third World, with Moscow as a world center and the Russian Orthodox Church as an ecumenical center for world order.

3. The ecumenical experience of the Russian Orthodox church, plus the growing world-wide consensus of the peace movements, make it possible to provide a more balanced and open process in this conference than has been true in some peace conferences previously hosted in the Soviet Union.

C. Presuppositions of U.S. participants:

1. The consultative planning process for this conference gives promise that the "mistake" of aligning religious forces with the official "peace policies" of the Soviet government, as expressed by previous religious conferences with venue in Moscow, would not be repeated in this conference.

2. Concern for human rights and religious freedom in countries with communist governments, while legitimate and needing
to be expressed in appropriate fora, should not preempt this conference's proper focus on universal support for nuclear disarmament.

3. The obvious tension that participation in this conference creates between the churches and the present administration of the U.S. government is accepted as an unintended consequence of the necessity of creating a universal witness against the nuclear arms race.

II. The form and content of the conference

A. The leadership of the conference in the Presidium and Steering Committee was relatively balanced, although there was more eastern than western representatives. Third World leadership was prominent and important.

1. The Steering Committee, unfortunately, met only once during the conference. It did not decide the most difficult issue the conference faced in determining whether the representative of the Dutch Inter-Church Peace Council, Dr. Willem Bartels, would be allowed to speak to the plenary. It is not clear how, and on what basis, the decision was made to deny him this opportunity, which he thought had been guaranteed him before coming. His withdrawal from the conference was unfortunate, and the ambiguity of the decision making process related thereto is a cloud on the democratic and open nature of the conference process.

2. The Drafting Committee functioned in a creative and open way. The texts prepared beforehand were discarded. This had the disadvantage of a diverse group having to begin with blank pages. The result was something less than poetry, but is an authentic expression of the mind of the conference. Only two issues were negotiated "subrosa" because of the Muslim insistence on criticism of Israel's policies and the U.S. insistence on balanced references to U.S. and U.S.S.R. disarmament initiatives. Arie Brouwer and Bruce Rigdon of the U.S.A. played a creative role on this committee.

B. The content of the papers prepared and (partially) delivered, on the whole, was at a high level theologically, ethically and politically.

1. This must be especially affirmed of Patriarch Pimen's address, which was maliciously reported in the U.S. press as "lashing out" at the U.S. In eleven pages of profound theological and ethical discussion, there was only one sentence commending the Soviet decision to introduce a moratorium on the deployment of medium-range missiles in the European part of the Soviet Union, and three sentences deploring the NATO decision to deploy American medium-range missiles in Western Europe. The gentle conclusion of that only political paragraph was that this problem must "be settled at the table of open and candid negotiation rather than through further spiraling of the arms race."
2. The addresses of Arie Brouwer, Billy Graham and JoAnne Kagiwada of the U.S.A. all were excellent, despite the incoherence of an apocalyptic element in Dr. Graham's address that had little relation to anything else he said.

C. The most clearly negative content of the conference came in the almost endless series of formal greetings—forty in all—that were given during the plenary session. Though this is an old orthodox tradition, it has little justification in an ecumenical conference. They provide opportunity for some to enunciate political diatribes whose only apparent function is to be quoted in partisan newspapers back home. Such "greetings" not only have a negative effect on the ecumenical ethos of the conference, but create such time pressures on the plenary schedule that addresses commissioned at the invitation of the planning committee cannot be adequately delivered, and there is no time at all for plenary discussion.

D. The conference thus woefully lacked opportunity for creative public interchange. From this standpoint it hardly deserves this honorable designation; there was all too little public conferring. There was genuinely creative interchange in private conversations outside the plenary sessions. But language barriers severely limit these possibilities because the elaborate translation facilities are available only during the formal sessions.

III. The Results of the conference:

A. The documents adopted by the conference are good and useful. As Bishop David Preus said, they are "clearly even-handed." It is important to emphasize his evaluation, because his statement on the second day of the conference, when he took the chair to preside at the plenary, was widely quoted in the U.S. press: "the conference is in danger of becoming a political forum heavily tilted against the West." This was an appropriate warning at that time, particularly in response to some of the "greetings." But at the end Bishop Preus said, the final documents "can be transmitted to any of our churches for study and action without apology." I think this was the evaluation of the entire U.S. delegation. These documents articulate the moral consensus of the world's religions opposing the nuclear arms race as a threat to the sanctity of human life.

B. The media attention given to Billy Graham's participation must be judged ambivalently. Without him, U.S. media may have paid little or no attention to the conference at all. On the other hand, the focus on some of his ill-advised comments seriously distorted the reporting of the conference. The media focus became what our government wanted it to be: human rights rather than nuclear disarmament. This parallels the dichotomy in the Helsinki process, where the U.S. opposes our national concern for human rights to the Soviet concern for disarmament. These two concerns must become complementary in the policies of both governments.

C. U.S. churches should use the results of this conference as an important part of the process now gathering momentum in our society and churches
for peace and disarmament. The media distortion may be creatively used to teach that there is a positive correlation between detente, disarmament and the realization of human rights. Public protests of human rights violations also have a proper place, but the churches must show that finally it is the increase of trust and the decrease of military tension which provides the better climate for internal change in any society. This is precisely the focus of The Churches' Human Rights Programme for the Implementation of the Helsinki Final Act, sponsored by the National Council of Churches in the U.S.A., the Canadian Council of Churches and the Conference of European Churches.