A Report

New Impulses for the Christian-Marxist Dialogue

Paul Mojzes

The dialogue between Christians and Marxists still displays much vitality. This was evident during the symposium on "Peaceful Co-Existence and the Education of Youth" held at Rosemont College, January 10-13, 1977. Despite the many ups and downs caused by the political pressures to which this dialogue is susceptible, it has now made its first appearance in the United States. Of course there have been a number of dialogues in this country between individuals of both persuasions, but this was the first time that a large number of Marxists and Christians gathered in an international assembly. The symposium is not the only evidence of the reawakened interest in the dialogue. After a long pause of eight years the Paulus-Gesellschaft held a symposium in Florence, Italy, in October, 1975. The Paulus-Gesellschaft congresses captured the public imagination, but now a different dialogue has developed, one that has not received much public notice, but which is in many ways more promising.

Since 1971 the Institut für Friedensforschung of the Roman Catholic Theological School of the University of Vienna has organized symposia in cooperation with the International Institute for Peace, also located in Vienna but with primary accountability to Eastern Europe. These cooperating groups were led, respectively, by the Reverend Dr. Rudolf Weiler and Dr. Vladimir Brukov. Four symposia were held in Europe—in Vienna, Moscow, Salzburg, and Munich—on practical questions concerning a search for peace and usually involved no more than thirty East and West European scholars of Christian or Marxist convictions. In the winter of 1975, I agreed with Drs. Weiler and Brukov to undertake a joint symposium in the United States. The result was the Rosemont Symposium sponsored by the Institute for International Understanding of Rosemont and the two aforementioned institutes, with the cosponsorship of Christians Associated for Relationships with Eastern Europe (CAREE) and the Journal of Ecumenical Studies.

For a period of four days, eleven Eastern Europeans, ten Western Europeans, and thirty-five North Americans (from the U.S. and Canada) met for a dialogue that was one of the most forthright East-West meetings in the experience of most of its participants. Each of the contingents contained both Marxists and Christians. Even then, there was a tendency for conversations to drift into an East-West, or even a Soviet-American constellation, but this was perhaps due to the fact that two major papers were delivered by an American and a Russian—social ethicist Charles West of Princeton Theological Seminary, a Presbyterian, and Professor Yuri Zamoshkin of Moscow University, a sociologist with the Institute for the USA and Canada. (Both speakers were well equipped by their many experiences with the "opposite" bloc and its ideologies and were able counterparts.) The two main respondents were Professor Christoph Wulf of Giessen, West Germany, and Monsignor Rudolf Weiler of the Catholic Theological School of the University of Vienna. The discussion never lagged; this unique experience evoked ready responses from the participants.

Among the six Soviet participants was a Russian Orthodox archbishop. One of the three East Germans was a Roman Catholic lawyer who was also a member of the GDR parliament as a representative of the Christian Democratic Union. The group of five West Germans contained a member of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of Germany. There was a specialist in Soviet philosophy from the Vatican and a Hungarian Marxist professor of philosophy who is a specialist on Christian thought. Other people with unusual credentials were a Swedish Lutheran professor presently teaching in Finland, a Roman Catholic nun from the Dominican Republic who teaches in New York, and a French-Canadian professor with years of experience in the Paulus-Gesellschaft dialogues. This diversity did not stand in the way of cordial relationships and constructive
A number of Western participants raised the issue of human rights as critical to the understanding of peace. Their colleagues from the Socialist countries attempted to demonstrate how in their countries the social structures supported peace and international cooperation and wondered what the corresponding reality was in the West.

As might be supposed with an initial dialogue, each group had its misgivings and expectations. The Eastern Europeans must have been apprehensive about what a meeting in the United States would bring. Would it turn into a confrontation in which delegates from Socialist countries were held guilty for all the problems of their society? The Western participants wondered whether the Marxists would hold to scripts prepared in advance, merely delivering a series of propaganda slogans. None of the apprehensions was justified. The participants from Socialist countries did not display the kind of self-criticism one expects in Western circles, but neither did they maintain overly defensive or aggressive positions. The Christians' stance was characterized by creative and positive criticism as well as by the desire to learn about current Marxist views on peaceful coexistence. Marxists manifested the same curiosity about Christian developments.

Like its four European predecessors, this particular dialogue differs markedly from the former Paulus-Gesellschaft conferences in which the ideological dialogue was dominant. Here the questions of practical cooperation for peace were emphasized. The desire for more theoretical dialogue was prominent among the Christians, but it was not totally absent among the Marxists. (As a generalization, the Marxists are currently less eager to dialogue about theoretical matters.) The selection of the participants at least partially accounts for the difference between the two groups. The vast majority of Christian participants were theologians, philosophers, or from some other field of the humanities. The Marxists, on the other hand, tended to be from the social sciences (economics, political science, and sociology). Such a constellation would tend to bring about variances in emphasis. The expectation is that ideological dialogue naturally emerges as one seeks to explore the ramifications of practical issues.

After the formal closing of the symposium a short, half-day conference on "Aspects of Détente" was held. The keynote speaker was Dr. Alan Geyer, Dag Hammerskjöld Professor of Peace Studies at Colgate University and a former editor of Christian Century, who presented a theological critique of détente. This was followed by a series of brief position papers with practically no discussion, but in the evening the conference turned into a dynamic dialogue as the circle of those present got smaller and acquaintances grew closer.

After the symposium the European visitors were given a tour of the U.N. and a briefing and reception at the Church Center for the U.N., and with that a week of intense encounter was at an end.

To this writer (not unbiased, since he was the main organizer of the symposium), this form of dialogue is promising for the future, provided expectations are not unnecessarily high. General agreement has already been reached to follow the Rosemont Symposium with other symposia. Tentative sites are Yerevan, Soviet Armenia (perhaps in 1978), and Stockholm, Sweden. It will be of paramount importance that American Christians and Marxists send able participants to such meetings. Both the Institute for International Understanding and CAREE will welcome any suggestions as to how this can be achieved.

The next few years should bring more dialogues of various sorts. In April, 1977, in Dubrovnik, Yugoslavia, there will be a postgraduate course taught by Christians and Marxists called "The Future of Religion: End or Renewal?" From September 4 to 10, 1977, the Paulus-Gesellschaft and the Italian Communist Party will sponsor a European Congress on the "Future of Europe," to be held either in Strasbourg or Salzburg. A major American Christian-Marxist Conference is being planned by the Task Force for Christian-Marxist Encounter of CAREE for January or May, 1978. These all present possibilities for those who are interested in taking part in such activities. As chairperson of CAREE's Christian-Masxist Encounter Task Force, I will gladly provide the necessary information if those interested send their inquiries to me at Rosemont College, Rosemont, Pennsylvania 19010.