

CRISIS PAST ?

AN EVALUATION OF THE CHRISTIAN PEACE CONFERENCE

(Paul Verghese)

The Fourth All Christian Peace Assembly has just concluded in Prague, on October 3rd. It is widely known that the Christian Peace Conference has been sailing through rough waters even since the tragic events of Prague 68. The fourth ACPA was expected to become a decisive factor in the development and resolution of the internal crisis. To what extent has it succeeded? It may be too early to answer that question with any sense of finality. But even the tentative evaluation here offered can be understood only in the light of the answer one gives to three preliminary questions:

1. What is the nature of the CPC?
2. What are the facts about the crisis in the CPC?
3. How does the change in leadership affect the CPC?

I WHAT IS THE CPC?

The CPC is not a democratic world movement like the World Council of Churches, with proportionate representation for all Christian Churches. Thank God it is not! For if it were, (a) there would be no need for it so long as the WCC exists, and (b) it would be weighted in the same direction as

W.C.C. i.e. dominated by that strange blend of Barthianism and liberal-bourgeois ideology which characterizes the vocal wing of western protestantism today.

In fact the CPC exists as a protest against the one-sided ecumenism of the W.C.C. on political and international questions. In the WCC only such criticisms are made of the policy of western governments and systems as are usually being made within western secular liberal thought, most of the time in an infinitely milder form. Occasionally when the W.C.C. seeks to depart from normal liberal-bourgeois ideology by offering symbolic support to some liberation movements the storm of protest almost threatens to sink the ship.

The CPC is clearly a movement in which control of policy remains in the hands of Church leaders in the socialist countries of Europe. This explains the fact that Churches from socialist countries are members of the CPC as churches, whereas outside the socialist countries individuals and groups are accepted as members. Such a mixture ensures that, as a counter-weight against the liberal-bourgeois ideology that dominates the W.C.C., the CPC is dominated by a socialist, anti-imperialist ideology. Some of us feel ill at ease amidst both ideologies, but are convinced that if only one existed without the other, the Christian image would be ^{worse} distorted. Not that we subscribe whole-heartedly to either ideology; nor do we think that either of these ideologies are adequate to the depth of the Christian faith.

For example the CPC is able to take a much stronger stand against the oppressor and the exploiter than the WCC. The CPC is able to say, unequivocally, that the capitalist-militarist system of western Europe and America today constitutes the greatest enemy of peace and justice in the world.

Of course, the CPC is not in a ~~good~~ position to engage in the same radical criticism of the systems under which Christians in socialist countries have to live. They cannot express all their convictions about the suppression of individual freedom and creativity in their own countries. Nor can they speak about mistakes made by the governments of their countries until it becomes the official policy of these governments to do so.

These limitations are part of the reality of the world in which CPC has to live and operate, and there is really no room in the CPC for people who are not sensitive to this reality. The more CPC opens itself to Christians outside the socialist countries who have been brain-washed by the liberal-bourgeois ideology, (which includes most Christians in Africa, Asia and Latin America), the more it runs the risk of compromise with that ideology to which it is supposed to be a counter-weight.

The perilous existence of the CPC can be better realized when one sees that this is the only public platform

available to the churches in socialist countries. They can retain this platform only with the concurrence and support of their governments. There is a price to be paid for this support - namely active support for the policy of these governments. To be unwilling to pay this price would be to invite elimination.

The CPC is not a rival ecumenical movement to the WCC, and does not regard the unity of the churches its primary aim. Its specific area of concern is peace with justice for the whole world. It pursues this aim on the basis of a socialist or anti-capitalist commitment. It is limited by its inability to criticize the communist or socialist system. This inability constitutes an integral aspect of its existence and has to be accepted as such.

* The case of the Romanian Church is an exception. The policies of China, Albania, Yugoslavia, North Korea, etc are not relevant, since the churches of these countries are not members of the CPC.

II THE NATURE OF THE CRISIS IN THE CPC

The roots of the crisis in the CPC which began to develop with the intervention of the Warsaw Pact powers against the Dubcek regime in Czechoslovakia (Spring 1968), go back to two facts. First is the fact that the CPC in order to be effective in its educational task has to admit into membership people from the west and from the countries of the "Two-third world". This in turn makes the ideology of the CPC vulnerable to influences from the liberal-bourgeois ideology of the non-socialist world. Secondly, the very origin of the CPC was in a conviction that Christians and Marxists had something to learn from each other, symbolized by the towering leadership of Josef M. Hromadka in the CPC, which lasted from its beginning till spring 1968.

Most governments in the socialist countries believe that this "dialogue ideology" of Hromadka had a great deal to do with the development of events in Czechoslovakia prior to Spring 1968. The notion of "Socialism with a human face" crystallized in the context of the Christian-Marxist dialogue in Czechoslovakia and in countries like Italy and France. Dubcek's attempt to implement this idea, in itself rather attractive, failed to take into account certain historical and geographical features.

First of all Dubcek and his ~~and~~ ideologists were over-optimistic in the evaluation of their own capacity to lead the Marxist movement in a new direction against the wishes of the powerful ~~an~~ Soviet Government. There was too easy an assumption that the Soviet Union was a backward Asian nation lagging way behind in the advancing procession of human history, and that leadership had to move to Europe, which, in the short-sighted historical perspective of Dubcek and his friends, was always in the vanguard of social progress.

Since Czechoslovakia had, long before the western Reformation, given expression to the idea of personal freedom in the teachings of John Hus and the Hussite revolts, some Czechs thought that they could also lead in the Reformation within communism which, true enough, does appear to have developed some of the rigidity and authoritarianism of medieval Roman Catholicism. The progressive socialists in other countries like Poland and Hungary which also belong to the non-Slavic or western European tradition would then follow suit, there would be help from the powerful communist parties of Italy and France; perhaps the western powers also, who desire the downfall of Soviet hegemony, would lend support. Even the writers and intellectuals of the Soviet Union would be on their side.

History has proved Dubcek tragically mistaken. The only nation that tried to join the anti-Soviet revolt was neither Poland nor Hungary, but rather Romania. The massive revolt of Romania has at least temporarily and partially been checked by Soviet military power. The rumblings in Poland have also been dealt with, at least for the time being. The internal protest of writers and intellectuals within the Soviet Union is being suppressed with determination and ruthlessness.

What Dubcek and his friends failed to take into account was the fact that the authorities of the Soviet Union can not at the present moment afford the incursion of personal freedom of expression into the communist network without basically endangering the existence of that network. At present this network constitutes the bulwark of opposition to the western capitalist domination of the world. He was also wrong in hoping that the western powers would dare to support him in open defiance of the Soviet Union and risking the danger of a nuclear holocaust that could destroy humanity altogether.

Kremacka and Ondra, the President and the General Secretary of the CPC, were openly supporting the Dubcek ideology. So was CPC vice-President George Casalis of France supported by west Germany's Kloppenburg and Netherland's Johannes De Graaf.

Britain's David Paton was also for the Dubcek approach, and was represented in the CPC committees by Irene Jacoby, a lawyer well-versed in the art of rhetoric and scheming. The Latin Americans in the CPC with the exception of Cuba's Arce-Martinez, were also of the same basic orientation. Asians and Africans were generally inclined to support Dubcek, though there was one exception, and the degree of passion varied.

In view of this large anti-Warsaw Pact opposition, it is understandable that the Working Committee of the CPC when it met at Mass Masy near Paris a few months after the Prague Spring, found itself confronted with a demand to condemn unequivocally the Warsaw Pact action in Czechoslovakia. But the present writer could not understand how the western participants in the Working Committee could expect the members of the Working Committee and of the International Secretariat from Warsaw Pact countries to go back to their countries and continue to live and work, after such a resolution was adopted by the executive body of the C.P.C. Did my western friends expect that the people from the Warsaw Pact countries would then leave the CPC, so that the west and the Two-third World could take over the CPC? Or was the demand mainly an attempt to clear their own conscience and public image? Were there not wiser ways of doing that than seeking a working committee resolution condemning the Warsaw Pact Action?

The CPC could very well have ended at Masary in 1968. The situation was temporarily saved by a compromise draft which expressed both points of view about the Warsaw Pact intervention. But the Cauldron had only begun to boil.

Following this upheaval in the working committee there was a great deal of public debate about the events in Czechoslovakia, and about the crisis in the CPC. The American members of the Working Committee and International Secretariat felt specially embarrassed, since one of the charges raised in the debate was that the U.S.A. did not come to the aid of Dubcek because of U.S. interest in maintaining the Pax Russo-Americana. For the Americans in the CPC, not to side with the Czechs and the West Europeans would be to support the Pax Russo-Americana. I know of the intense mental struggle of the late Harold Row in this regard, and his temporarily taking sides with the West Europeans without conviction, and later changing his stand, before he died, in a letter of apology to the C.P.C.

In the meanwhile Hromadka and Ondra had been making speeches and giving press conferences unequivocally condemning Warsaw Pact action. This was courageous, even if misguided, on their part, for if the Dubcek experiment failed, as it was bound to, these two men could no longer play an active role either in the CPC or in their own country. After listening

to a Press Conference given by Ondra in my own home town, I came to the conclusion that Ondra would no longer be allowed to continue as General Secretary of the CPC, and told him so.

At the meeting of the Working Committee in Buchow, (G.D.R.) in October 1969, participants from the Warsaw Pact countries severely criticized General Secretary Ondra for not carrying out the directives of the Working Committee and for general inefficiency. None of these changes were justified, but it was obvious that the purpose was to force him to resign. Hromadka and others defended Ondra, and Ondra did not resign, at least immediately.

In a month however, Ondra resigned, no doubt under pressure. Hromadka resigned in protest, and soon after, died.

In February 1970, the Vice-Chairmen met in Moscow with Metropolitan Nikodin, the Chairman of the continuation Committee, presiding. The duties of the deceased President were taken over by a presidium composed of the seven Vice-chairmen - Metropolitan Nikodin of the USSR as Chairman of the presidium, the other six being Andriamanjato of Madagascar, Bartha of Hungary, Casalis of France, Arce-Martinez of Cuba, Kloppenburg of West Germany and Thamby of India.

negotiate with them the terms for their return. The absentee group chose three spokesmen (Casalis, de Graaf and France) and the negotiations over lunch were passionate. Finally reason prevailed, and the offer was made on behalf of the Working Committee that the absentees should come back on the condition that the first item on the agenda after their return would be a discussion of the circumstances of Ondra's resignation, and that they would be free to remain or go out after this discussion. This was the maximum concession that could be offered by the Working Committee.

When the three spokesmen presented the proposal to the absentees, the first reaction was in favour of accepting the proposed terms, I understand. I was not present and therefore cannot vouch for what happened. What I have heard from reliable sources is that a young person, who was only a substitute for a member and quite unacquainted with the inner dynamics of the CPC made a "revolutionary" speech, which unfortunately became so decisive for the future of the CPC. He wanted, I am told, that the absentees should regard themselves as revolutionaries in a struggle against the "establishment" represented by Nikodin, that it was of the essence of revolutionary theory that accepting a compromise on what appears like very favourable terms would be to blunt the revolutionary struggle, and therefore that the most fair terms offered by the Working Committee should be rejected.

The crisis blew up in the meeting of the Working Committee in Prague, on the 27th of February 1970. The presidium proposed the appointment of Polish Roman Catholic parliamentarian Dr. Janusz Makowski as Acting General Secretary. Some members demanded that there should be a discussion of the circumstances under which Ondra and Hromadka had to resign, but this was not conceded. The debate was furious and passionate. Finally, towards the close of the evening, Chairman Bartha forced a vote on the proposal to appoint Makowski as Acting General Secretary, and it was approved, with no one against, and only Casalis and Kleppenburg formally abstaining.

The next morning five members of the Working Committee (out of a total of 27) and four members of the International Secretariat (out of 13 - the Secretariat members have no vote in the W.C.) did not come to the session, and sent a letter announcing their temporary suspension of cooperation with the Working Committee and the International Secretariat.

When the letter was read in the Working Committee, the immediate reaction was that the members present should go ahead with the work without the absent members. On the proposal of the present writer, however, a commission of three members (Nikodim and Verghese from the Working Committee, Bassarak from the International Secretariat) was to meet the absent group and

There must have been some mental paralysis in the absentee group, for this latter view prevailed, and they sent a message to the Working Committee that they were unwilling to come back to the Working Committee, but would send one spokesman to explain the reasons ~~for~~ their absence. Since already there was a feeling in the Working Committee that the terms offered to the absentees were more than what was required, the negative reply of the absentees made them furious. The Working Committee decided to go ahead with the business without the absentees, since the meetings had to be concluded that evening. The absentees were free to come back if they wanted.

The subsequent developments were inevitable. A rival group in West Germany was recognized. The absentees who suspended cooperation in writing, were not invited to ~~the~~ subsequent meetings. They were told in writing that they could come back if they withdrew their letter of non-cooperation. Only Harold Row reacted by announcing his willingness to cooperate, but ~~he~~ he passed away in July 1971. The Working Committee in their meeting of March 1971 suspended cooperation with the French regional committee for their anti-OPC activities.

The Fourth ACPA has declared its willingness to reaccept the dissidents if the latter are willing to resume cooperation. That is where the matter now stands.

III THE NEW LEADERSHIP

The Fourth Assembly has unanimously elected Metropolitan Nikodim as President of the CPC. The Continuation committee, meeting on 4th October, 1971, has also unanimously, without even any abstentions, elected Dr. Karoly Toth, former General Secretary of the Hungarian Council of Churches, to be General Secretary of the movement. The new vice-Presidents are: Hoshalski (West Germany), Andriamanjato (Madagascar), Gartha (Hungary), Thampy (India) Hellstern (Switzerland), Arce-Martinez (Cuba), and Makowski (Poland).

How does this change in leadership affect the CPC?

Hronadka was a reformed theologian widely respected and trusted in the west. It is understandable that Nikodim, being Orthodox and a citizen of the Soviet Union, would not enjoy the same degree of trust. But was there any other realistic option?

Toth is an able organizer and speaker and was the best possible choice in the circumstances.

There was no American in the presidium before, and there is none now. But it is technically possible to elect an American Vice-President. There is no reason why this should not be done.

There are some who argue that the CPC has become less democratic with the new leadership. I find no basis for this argument. Of course western Europe and North America will not be allowed to dominate the CPC, but this was the case before. The "two-third world" is playing a larger and more influential role in the CPC, and this tendency seems likely to grow. The main leadership is concentrated in Eastern Europe. The dominance of Czech reformed theology is now being replaced by a similar variety of East German theology which seems no worse. There is no danger of Eastern Orthodox theology dominating, since it lacks the intellectual power necessary. In the Czechoslovakian participation itself there is a shift from the dominance of the Czechs to that of the Slovaks. The intellectual leadership is now in the hands of East Germans and Slovaks.

My own impression is that the CPC has matured in the process of coming through the crisis, and greater and more understanding participation of North American and west European Christians can only strengthen the CPC's limited contribution to peace in the world. The waters seem to be calmer, and the CPC seems to be making slow headway though the tail-wind is still strong.

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The Spiritual Dimension of Peace.

Strangely enough all countries of the world are now operating on the basis of political ideologies developed in a Christian or post-Christian Western civilisation. This applies even to countries like India, Pakistan, Ceylon or Japan where there may be a dominant tendency towards other than Christianity like - Hinduism, Islam, Buddhism or Shintoism. Even China, the Soviet Union, the Democratic Republic of Vietnam and other Asian countries following a Marxist ideology must not forget the fact that they are following a civilisation which was born within a Judaeo-Christian culture.

Communism from the Judaeo-Christian tradition ideology has many of its values drawn political methodology are original. Though its economic analysis and were produced within a highly westernised culture even these original ideas are drawn from a Judaeo-Christian culture.

If all ideologies are historically conditioned, how can there be one ideology that is supposedly scientific? When there is a willingness on the part of Marxists to deabsolutise their ideology and make it open to change through more creative hypotheses which are more true to reality, it may become more scientific. The true nature of a scientific ideology is that it is open to continuous revision in the light of experience, so that the experience can corroborate or call in question the hypothesis.

Marxist economic analysis basically remains the most scientific of economic theories both on the domestic and in the international fields, though there too minor alterations have to be continuously made.

But economics is not the whole of human existence, as Marx himself, whether early or late, would have readily admitted. To him the cultural superstructure was of paramount importance, and the importance of the economic was derived from the fact that the economic was the base of the social-cultural pyramid.

Today, however, dialogue between Christians and Marxists, which I regard as essential to a full peace strategy in Asia, has come to a sorry plight. In countries such as Czechoslovakia where such dialogue was eagerly embraced by Marxists as a new step forward, this very move was utilized by reactionary elements to sabotage the socialist system from within. As a result, dialogue has become a bad word among Marxists in many countries. What should have been a creative experience for both Marxists and for Christians has now begun to be seen as a dangerous enterprise opening the door to bourgeois liberal reactionary thought entering within the socialist system and undermining it from within, by opening it up to Capitalist exploitation.

But Christian - Marxist dialogue is absolutely essential both for Christians and for Marxists, if they are to remain open to the sum-total of reality without fear. Precisely, however, because the Christian side is often unconsciously open to infiltration by reactionary elements, it becomes important to be vigilant that the dialogue should not be limited to Christians whose loyalty to the socialist system is beyond question. I do believe that there are such Christians in Asia, though they have to be sought out from obscurity, for, given the feudal-bourgeois structure of the churches in Asia, it is highly unlikely that people with a socialist commitment would be formed in large numbers among the official leadership of the churches. It becomes thus imperative to scout out Christian laymen with a socialist commitment and sufficient intellectual formation in Christianity, with which type of Christian laymen Marxists may engage in dialogue without fear.

This is the new direction for the Christian Peace Conference itself - to change its strategy and look for laymen with socialist commitment outside the Socialist countries who can be participants with us in seeking a strategy for Peace in Asia as well as elsewhere in the world. The selection of such laymen should not be on the basis of whether they are pre-Soviet, or pre-Chinese or pre-any other country or region, but because they are sincere Christians with a genuine socialist commitment.

title

The word "Christian" in the title of our movement is important. The extent to which we become unfaithful to that commitment

to Christ, and turn our movement into a political tool of any power-bloc, would be the measure of our failure as a Christian movement. We shall never be ashamed of our commitment to Christ, and our commitment to socialism can only be an integral part of that commitment to the God-Man Jesus Christ, our Lord and Saviour.

But Christians are just as much in need of correction in their ideas and values, and Marxists are in a position to convert many Christians to a more consistently socialist commitment. There is no need for Marxists to suppose that Christians will give up their commitment to Christ as a result of dialogue; neither should Christians expect that Marxists would become converted to Christianity by dialogue. The purpose of dialogue is to bring together all the progressive forces to work for peace, and to correct each other by exposure to reality as experienced.

Here perhaps lies another area for the Christian Peace Conference to work on. The theology and the worship of the Church has to be penetrated again with the concern for peace with justice for all mankind. The consciousness of the Church should take up again incessant prayer for peace and justice in the world. For it is God alone who can bring peace, as men dedicate themselves to pray and work for peace with justice. The spiritual dimension belongs integrally to humanity, and any genuinescientific humanism will be unfaithful to itself if it ignores that dimension. If the Christian Peace Conference is also sucked into the secularist whirl pool of the decadent West, then some of us would begin to lose interest in it. For it is in the name of Christ who became incarnate, died, rose again and is yet to come to judge all history that some of us are in in this movement. The partial and temporary blindness of western civilization to the transcendent values of the Christian faith should not be allowed to dominate the Christian Peace Conference, whose specific quality for many of us has been that it is notdominated by the west. The CPC has only recently won a battle against that domination. May Christ continue to use the CPC as a major instrument of his glorious purposes for Peace with justice in the whole of humanity.