

TIMOTHY YATES

Conference Report

'God and Mammon: Economies in Conflict' A Report of the Ninth Conference of the International Association for Mission Studies

IT IS ARGUABLE that the most challenging issue facing the church universal today is how it reacts to a world economy so structured that, by general consent, the rich get richer and the poor get poorer. As the Roman Catholic writer Aylward Shorter asks, 'How far are the churches guilty of colluding in, and helping to maintain an economic structure which benefits the wealthy nations at the expense of poorer peoples, and are therefore in a profound sense instruments of oppression and of loss of hope?'

The latest IAMS Conference in Buenos Aires last April, with representatives from all corners of the planet and all major Christian bodies, was made to face these issues. As preparatory reading we had been encouraged to study *Christian Faith and the World Economy Today* (WCC, Geneva 1992), which can be commended to *Anvil* readers as a cheap and helpful introduction to the subject. It shows that, according to World Bank figures,

1.2 or 1.3 billion of our fellow human beings live in absolute poverty; that according to UN figures, 14 million children die of hunger annually; from 1982-1992 the global product share for rich nations rose from 70% to 82%; in the same period the share of the poorest nations sank from 2.3% to 1.4%; to service their debts the poorest nations were paying a staggering \$1,345 billion in 1992; by comparison, Marshall Aid to Europe was a gift of \$70 billion at today's rates; in 1992 the poorer nations were 61% more indebted than in 1982.

Figures stark enough to induce despair. It is against this background that there are calls to make the year 2000AD a year of Jubilee, when international debts are waived, so that economic hope can be provided for the new millennium.

In the first of three Bible studies on Leviticus 25, René Padilla underlined this loss of hope. In order to meet the strict requirements of the World Bank upon Argentina, people were working for 20 *pesos* (the *peso* has parity with the \$US) for a twelve hour day, twenty-nine days a month: was this not slavery? Without Jubilee there could be no *shalom*, well-being in the biblical sense. As one Latin American tag puts it, 'External debt is eternal debt' and, without some structural change to the system, so it would be. In the keynote address, Professor Ulrich Duchrow from Heidelberg, a theologian who has mastered much economic writing, described the present situation as a form of capitalism that has become 'wild without a human face'. Much had hinged on fateful decisions taken at the Bretton Woods conference on world economy in 1944, when Maynard Keynes' recommendations, which could have given a more balanced development, were refused by the United States:

Keynes had suggested that nations with a positive trade balance should pay a tax towards a redistribution to those with negative balances, an approach which would have given a very different basis to the IMF.

Since 1980, the rich nations who make up the G7 summit powers have used the IMF, the World Bank and GATT to push poorer nations into so-called Structural Adjustment Programmes (SAPs), which meant money stability for the owners of capital but social degradation for the dependent and working majorities. Such policies were having 'devastating effects on the poor' on the single criterion of maximising profit. Against this, Professor Duchrow endorsed Christopher Wright's view, expressed in a preparatory paper, that Israel was to be seen as a paradigm for the nations, chosen by God to be such, counter-cultural to the empires around her, in which kings and courtiers dominated and the best land was taken by them. Jesus' proclamation of the kingdom of God could be seen as the rejection of the power structures of Rome and her client kingdoms, and the early Christian communities, with their generosity and care for the poor, were in marked contrast to the 'slave economies' of the Hellenistic and Roman systems. Churches today, faced, in Karl Barth's terms, with 'masterless powers' needed a multiple strategy against global capitalism and its effects, and most of all the willingness, illustrated by Daniel and his friends, to say 'no' to absolute power. It was recognised in the workshops that, even given debt cancellation in some kind of Jubilee, without systemic change from the rules under which world trade operated at present, the situation would recur. Africa, for example, could again become indebted at the rate of four billion dollars per annum.

Well-arranged 'exposure' experiences led to some further awareness of the problems of the economy as it affected Argentina. One was a visit to a 'barrio' on the outskirts of Buenos Aires, slum housing where the rate of unemployment was 70% among often skilled male workers. The school and community centre run by the church were materially poor but rich in dedicated and warm staff, who provided cells of hope to the surrounding population. On a different occasion the whole conference visited ISEDET (Instituto Superior Evangelico de Estudios Teologica) an institution with a library of 100,000 books and a record of support for human rights in the dictatorship of the 1980s, which had paid the penalty with police harassment and an arson attack that had lost them 20,000 volumes.

Professor Robert Schreiter from Chicago spoke for many in his summary statement at the end of the conference when he regretted the lack of economic expertise in confronting global questions (there was no professional economist present like, say, the British Christian, Brian Griffiths or various Dutch equivalents). He caught well the combination of Christian anxiety at the impact of neo-liberal economics on the poor and the unwillingness to demonise economic organisations: 'markets', he wrote, 'are a creation of human culture. As such... they can be used to good and evil purposes. Consequently, to condemn them as utterly evil or to exonerate them from any possible wrong-doing is to engage in the same totalising discourse that we are trying to overcome. The markets are necessary but they cannot become an end in themselves. When they are allowed to become such an end, this totalising tendency, strengthened by the power of communications

technology, creates an idol that is profoundly antihuman, demanding all and consuming all, undermining other human values' (p 4 Summary Statement).

Readers of *Anvil* may be glad to know that, in the new executive of IAMS, the Cambridge missiologist, Graham Kings, has been elected to represent Europe and will share in planning with the treasurers, Martin Conway and Andrew Kirk. The new President is the Korean theologian, Professor Chae Ok Chun, who recently preached the CMS annual sermon. *Anvil* readers who are interested in the British equivalent, BIAMS, are encouraged to write to its secretary, Canon James Anderson, 15 Cotswold Drive, Coventry, CV3 6EZ, who will supply details.

The Revd Canon Timothy Yates is a member of the Executive of BIAMS and Chairman of the Editorial Board of *Anvil*

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