

The Christian Peace Conference Criticized

BRIAN NORRIS

Last year I attended the Fifth Assembly of the Christian Peace Conference (CPC) in Prague as a British delegate. I sat in for an absent member of the drafting committee which helped draw up the many propaganda tracts issued by the Assembly. We sat in a back-room of the Hotel Pariz and a patchwork of Kremlin-type policies was stitched together with pious words and a sprinkling of biblical peace texts.

That the CPC is a pro-communist movement seems to me to be self-evident. There is no need to wade through all the reports, statements, analyses and sermons emanating from the Prague headquarters, to have any doubts about the CPC's Marxist stance. Of course, theoretical Marxism, in particular dialectical materialism, is not advocated by the CPC. Rather, "anti-communism" is attacked, the undefined "democratic and peace-loving forces" are applauded and the governments of the Soviet Union and her allies invariably treated with respect and admiration.

The western supporter of the CPC, provided he is not politically naive, may say: "Well, of course, we know they are restricted but much genuine Christian work is going on under the surface . . ." This kind of disarming remark does not bear the weight which it might once have done. Since 1968 the creative, if precarious possibilities of the CPC have given way to an uninspired uniformity of subservience to Soviet policies. Unless one is willing to interpret Christianity in a wholly politicized and this-worldly manner, it is difficult to discern any real religious perspective at all.

The word "peace", as used by the CPC, cannot be taken at its face value. Like "democracy" and "freedom" it acquires special characteristics in the East European context. Anybody who doubts, or does not understand, the way in which "peace" is used in Marxist vocabulary cannot understand the underlying strategy of the CPC. The peace that is advocated (apart from occasional generalized references to peace on earth) relates to countries and situations outside the Soviet bloc and other "progressive" parts of the world. Thus Rhodesia and South Africa, but not Uganda or Mozambique, would figure on the CPC's list of "hotbeds of crisis". There is a fight for peace in Puerto Rico and South Korea, but not

in Estonia or Latvia; "imperialist" governments are a threat to peace but never, under any circumstances, the Soviet government.

The peace problems identified by the CPC lie far from the borders of the East European States. This enforced kind of schizophrenia is widely understood, but the public denial of it, the fiction that all is well with Christians (not to mention others) in the socialist countries, are at the root of the deception. A young Czech Brethren pastor who ran foul of the state authorities for his criticism of the CPC (he lost his licence and now stokes a furnace) wrote recently to Dr Toth, then the CPC's general secretary:

. . . I reproach you for one thing: that you say "peace, peace" where there is no peace. You claim that here you have no concerns, that you have to go elsewhere to find discrimination. Before the concrete victims of despotism you run away from our place and time into exotic countries, into a different world, as far as the Third World. And when you have to speak on home affairs . . . you have only condemnation for brothers who thirst for justice and call for respect towards human freedom – we are slandering the homeland and support the Cold War. How can one believe that you care for people far away (to whom you readily offer the Revolution for instance) if you run away from the people near you? (See RCL Vol. 6, No. 3, p. 173.)

Real conferences should be places where people confer, discuss matters in an open atmosphere and arrive at freely agreed conclusions. CPC gatherings, however, proceed towards detailed goals, known well in advance; they are carefully orchestrated affairs and there is little opportunity to deviate from the score. At Prague there was only one impassioned critical voice raised – by a British observer. Within seconds the amplifying equipment developed its only breakdown of the five-day Assembly.

Many western and Third World delegates and observers are impressed by the lavish hospitality laid on by the CPC in East European capitals. Following the Fifth Assembly, many of them travelled to Moscow and stayed for a week at one of the best hotels, all expenses paid. At least one of them felt a sense of shame when he realized that the state-imposed Peace Fund, levied on the Soviet churches, was paying for the junketing. And he recalled the words of a Hungarian priest in Prague: "You are being used".