Reflections on the Budapest conference

Bob Goudzwaard

The *Ecumenical Review* 53:4, October 2001 pp .512-517.

The Budapest conference on the theme "Serve God, not Mammon" in June 2001 was one in a series of ecumenical meetings organized by the World Council of Churches (WCC) and the World Alliance of Reformed Churches (WARC). This series of meetings began with an initiative by WCC and WARC (in response to the call from Harare that the two organizations should do something together on the issue of globalization) and has expanded to include other partners (for example, the Pacific Conference of Churches, Conference of European Churches) as appropriate. These meetings seek to find a responsible ecumenical response to the challenge of globalization.

The first in the series was the symposium in Bangkok, 12-19 November 1999, co-organized by the Church of Christ in Thailand and the Christian Conference of Asia. This meeting discussed the consequences of the so-called Asia crisis -- seen by all participants as directly related to the present pattern of globalization -- illustrated especially by the testimonies of poor women from the inner city, fishermen and farmers. Budapest was the second major regional conference on the effects of globalization; it was organized by the Conference of European Churches (CEC), the World Association of Reformed Churches (WARC) and the World Council of Churches (WCC). Other regional conferences are planned in the near future: one in Fiji in August 2001, organized by the Pacific Conference of Churches and the WCC, and another for the region of Western Europe in the Netherlands in June 2002, probably to be organized by the CEC and the Lutheran World Federation. In 2003 two conferences are foreseen: the first in Accra, Ghana, a South-South meeting to bind together the experiences of globalization from Asia, Latin America and Asia; the second in the USA, probably in Holland, Michigan.

What links these meetings together? And was the Budapest conference just one in the series, or did it have its own specific purpose and significance for the future?

© Bob Goudzwaard

Economy as a matter of faith

The ecumenical "logic" behind this series of conferences is based on three interconnected factors.

First, the WCC's eighth assembly in Harare in December 1998 chose the process of globalization as one of its main areas of study and concern. Harare saw globalization as a possible form of structural (economic) violence, and felt that dealing with it was an inalienable aspect of "being church" in this time.

Secondly, the World Alliance of Churches had already in 1997 invited its member churches to Debrecen to begin a so-called "process of confession" in relation to economic injustice and environmental degradation in today's world: This process includes the need for further information and the education of the churches through regional input. The WCC assembly recommended that its own member churches join this process where possible. This last decision also paved the way for further concrete forms of cooperation between the staff of the WCC and WARC in organizing regional meetings on the issue of globalization.

A third reason can perhaps be traced back to a regional WARC conference in Kitwe, Africa, where in 1995 the question was raised whether, in relation to the serious injustices in the present world economy, the time had not come for the churches to speak and act jointly from the very heart of their Christian faith. This conference rejected in clearly confessional terms the present dominance of money and economics in world society, and also invited churches to do the same. This initiative led, for instance, in the WARC meeting in Debrecen to a close cooperation between the African and Asian churches; in the so-called "evening of the South" these together challenged the richer churches of the West to come to a clearer stand on globalization, debt and environmental destruction. But other forms of worldwide dialogue were to follow. The Bangkok

symposium of 1999 drew up an intriguing letter to all the churches in the North. The recent Budapest conference addressed its main message not only to the churches in Central and Eastern Europe, but also separately to the churches in the West and those in the South. And it is highly probable that something similar will happen in the coming South-South conference. No doubt the South as a whole will then speak openly to the Northern churches, societies and institutions.

This linking of church conferences all over the world is a new form of ecumenical dynamics. It is quite clear that these letters and messages do not emerge from the need simply to be friendly and polite: they are born out of an inner necessity. And this is increasing in intensity, parallel to the growing insight of faith into what the present process of globalization really implies. The successive conferences urge the participating churches to see the present developments increasingly in the light of their Christian faith, and this also moves them to address their sister churches in other parts of the world. It strengthens them in courage, faith and hope, but also helps them make sometimes critical remarks about attitudes and life-styles, as members of the same body of Christ: for if One member suffers, then indeed the whole body suffers.

In this series of meetings something like a common understanding is growing about the relevance of Christian faith vis-a-vis the present process of globalization. This understanding centres on the deep shared conviction that the kingdom of God can never be associated with the principle of the survival of the fittest which is so clearly manifest in the present situation of increasing globalization. Healing the weak and caring for the environment is seen as among the essentials of the kingdom of God, and therefore it is demanded from all churches that these activities should become clearly visible in their life and activities -- even if that implies major changes in their own materialistic life-styles.

The Budapest conference proved to be an important and vital link in this dynamic ecumenical chain of dialogue between churches. It fulfilled its role with care and dedication. The conference chose as its central theme the words of Jesus, "Serve God, not mammon." And starting from there, it assured the churches of the South of continuing

solidarity by stating, "Our part of Europe bears a considerable measure of responsibility for many developments ... in Southern countries." The churches in the West were also addressed: they were openly asked to resist all destructive forces in their part of the world, and to persuade decision-makers in politics, economics and other sectors of society of the necessity "to stop the exploitation and exclusion of the majority of the population of the world and the destruction of the world by the `golden billion' -- the population of Western industrialized countries". The critical message of Bangkok to the churches of the North was also strongly underlined by Budapest. The conference even added a remarkable request: "We ask the churches [of the West] to help their members to rediscover the traditional Christian values of self-restraint and ascetism ..., and propagate these values in their societies as a way of counteracting individualism and consumerism." But rediscovery is only possible if something is lost, and people are aware of that fact; is that really the case for Western Christians and Western churches?

Budapest's specific significance

The Budapest conference was a significant event in several other ways.

The first way relates to how the conference dealt with the issue of the sharp increase of poverty in the region, and with various forms of people's suffering. The countries of Central and Eastern Europe are very diverse in their background and circumstances and therefore also in their economic development. But participants were aware of a remarkable increase of poverty in the region as a whole, which led to a desire to seek the underlying causes and possible solutions. Almost all delegates from Central and Eastern Europe also saw the importance of the need for a further "transformation of society"; some even stated that the need for this transformation arises from more than the primarily "external" factor of a growing globalization.

The following debate was extremely useful, and conclusions were unanimous. It became very clear that "transformation" stands in general for far more than a mere shift to another type of economy. It was, and is, seen as a highly responsible process of reshaping

an entire society towards more democracy and better juridical institutions, as well as the creation of markets which not only function well, but are also characterized by the socially responsible behaviour of all participants so that criminality, for instance, has less chance of spreading. However, such a "restructuring" of societies can never be carried out without the state taking an active role.

Exactly on this point the challenge of positive transformation and the ideology of ongoing economic globalization clash. As Robert McIntyre stated explicitly: "The diminishing role of the state is the hidden core of globalization." The state's ideology speaks only in terms of market mechanisms, and abdicates its own responsibilities, thus giving more room for rising criminality. If we add that the ideology of globalization also suggests that no alternatives are available (TINA: There Is No Alternative), then it becomes very clear that the present dominant form of "hard" economic globalization destroys remaining possibilities for a good and successful transformation of society in Central and Eastern Europe, and contributes to the sharp increase of poverty and commercial criminality.

In this light, the central message of Budapest becomes quite understandable: "our meeting reached the unequivocal conclusion that no authority in- or outside the region should ever escape its responsibility to do justice to the poor and the needy by claiming the unavoidability of the requirements of globalization". This is indeed a remarkable statement. For the general tendency in the conference was not to condemn the process of globalization as such. The final document even states, "When globalization refers to growing possibilities for genuine cooperation between nations and peoples, or opportunities for communication and common action, it has a positive connotation." But this was immediately followed by a crucial correction and caution, "[globalization] has negative connotations where it refers to the dominance exercised by an ideology legitimizing and promoting the unrestrained activities of players in the global markets ... This neo-liberal project ... is driven by powerful economic interest ... [and] commercializes human and institutional relationships and the very sources of life." It is obviously the clear rejection of this dominating "project aspect" of the present style of globalization which led the conference to make its

unequivocal and truly ecumenical statement.

A second point of real significance was the important positive role of the Russian Orthodox representatives at the conference. They spoke and acted fully in line with the recent "Bases of the Social Concept of the Russian Orthodox Church" -- which states clearly that the danger should not be underestimated "of differences that may emerge between people's will and international organization's decisions". The document then continues, "These organizations may become instruments for the unfair domination of strong over weak countries, rich over poor, the technologically and informationally developed over the rest. They may also practise double standards by applying international law in the interests of more influential states."

It is mainly due to the intervention of the Orthodox delegates that the aspect of power and its misuse played an important role in the conference. It led in the final report to the use of expressions such as "the unprecedented concentration of power in the hands of self-appointed rulers" in the description of the ruling neo-liberal ideology. Archpriest Vsevolod Chaplin, of the department of foreign affairs of the Russian Orthodox Church, spoke in this context even of "globalism".

This input from the Russian Orthodox no doubt strengthened substantially the possibilities for addressing governments in- and outside the region, as well as international institutions. It removed the veil of anonymity which is so often laid over the present process of globalization -- as if it has nothing to do with present hard economic and political power-plays. It is no accident, of course, that this dimension was especially laid bare by delegates from Russia. No open reference was made to the possible role of "vital interests" from the USA or companies based there, but the point was clear. In our view this can also be seen as a substantial gain from the Budapest conference. The neo-liberal project of globalization has, so to speak, "lost its innocence".

The last point has a more subtle character. Every regional ecumenical conference is to some extent also an exercise in intercultural communication. Sometimes it is thought that

in our growing "global village" cultural differences, which include differences of insight, are now more easily overcome than in the past, but in fact the opposite may be true. Time is becoming more scarce in the present global dynamics, and this diminishes the patience needed for careful listening. But in this conference the time and the willingness to listen to each other were really there. And I think this led to a partial bridging of the intercultural "communication gap", arising from clear differences between the prevalent Western European and the common Central and Eastern European appreciation of the life-situations of ordinary people.

This seems at first sight to be a matter of secondary importance. But we must remember that the staff of several ecumenical institutions such as the WCC, WARC, CEC and LWF are all located in Geneva; however "mixed" their composition may be, they are continually influenced by modern Western ways of observing, thinking, acting and educating. To see "Geneva" as a kind of sub-culture of the West may appear to be a mistake -- if not an insult -- but it is obviously not far removed from the view which many Christians in Central and Eastern Europe, and in other continents, have of this special "enclave".

Something of the cultural gap between Central and Eastern Europe and Western Europe came to the fore when some of the regional delegates began to react to mainly "Western" remarks that the churches in Central and Eastern Europe should play a stronger critical role vis-a-vis their own governments. This was certainly not denied, but it led also to the comment: Do not forget that for so many years we were taught to remain silent, and that only by not openly criticizing the government was it possible to survive. This argument was in general well accepted; it certainly prevented a Western "schoolmaster's" attitude and especially so if these reactions were made in combination with another, even more painful remark: "We, in Central and Eastern Europe, often feel like colonies of Western Europe." This awareness also colours at least partially the public discussion around the possible entry of several countries of Central Europe to the Western European Union. There is for these countries a clearly humiliating aspect in the way in which "Brussels" shifts repeatedly the times and the conditions for their possible entry to the European Union. "Brussels" may see

it as a matter of responsible care and caution; Central Europe sees it primarily as a matter of arrogance.

The existing gap came even more to the fore when the issue of poverty was addressed. Of course the struggle against poverty was seen as a necessity by all participants. But sometimes an unconscious element of stigmatization creeps in when rich Christians speak on this problem to poor Christians. It is as if they are suggesting, with the best possible intentions, that being poor carries an intrinsic element of inhumanity with it, and therefore creates in some way a loss of personal dignity also. During the conference it happened too often to be accidental that several non-Western delegates stressed the deep dignity of simple poor people, and wanted to identify fully with them as people who must fight every day for their existence or sheer survival, but who nevertheless uphold deep communitarian values like sharing and giving, and find a real joy in life.

The supposed correlation between happiness and the possession of more material goods, which for Western people seems to be natural, was sometimes openly denied during the conference. Several stories were told to illustrate the "richness of sufficiency" -- the expression which plays such an important role in the message of Bangkok to the churches of the North. It was as if by these and other remarks about poverty, consumerism and materialism, the discussion sometimes took a full turn: Do rich Christians in the West really have an adequate understanding of their own position? They speak easily about poverty elsewhere, but in their richness and consumerism there is a also a kind of hidden poverty: a poverty related to loneliness, sometimes to enslavement.

This last lesson from Budapest will hopefully stay with us when other ecumenical conferences and meetings are organized in the future -- especially in the West, and that for pragmatic reasons also. For in this conference there was an underlying current that, if the people and societies of the West do not learn to be content with what they have, and go on with their unchecked -- and highly organized -- search for higher standards of consumption, then the sustainability of planet earth and all its inhabitants will become increasingly unattainable, a mere fiction. Budapest taught us clearly that if in the future we seek for a

true correlation on this globe between sustainability and maintaining human dignity, the heart of this search will not lie in endless globalized economic growth, but in a mutually shared positive sense of material contentment -- surely an attainable goal for all humanity.

Bob Goudzwaard is emeritus professor of economics at the Free University of Amsterdam, Netherlands, and an adviser to the WCC's justice, peace and creation programme.

COPYRIGHT 2001 World Council of Churches

Found at **http://findarticles.com/p/articles/mi_m2065/is_4_53/ai_81223347** . The site contains articles from The Ecumenical Review.