

THIRD WORLD THEOLOGY DIALOGUE HELD IN GENEVA

by Louis Ha

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GENEVA, Switzerland (UCAN) — "For the first time, first world theologians were ready to dialogue with third world theologians," asserted Ian Fraser, Scottish theologian and author of "The Fire Runs," after attending a eight-day theological conference here.

The conference, "Dialogue between First and Third World Theologians: Doing Theology in a Divided World," was sponsored by Ecumenical Association of Third World Theologians (EATWOT) here Jan. 6-13. Both Catholic and Protestant theologians took part.

Guilt feelings by many theologians seemed to pervade the event. Such feelings began to emerge from the opening presentations by a Dutch feminist theologian and a Chilean liberation theologian. The debate following these talks pointed accusing fingers at first world people, especially males.

Some felt guilty about inadvertently causing oppression and for being powerless to participate in making a new theology that would emerge from struggle and oppression.

One third world theologian, so annoyed at the feelings and attitudes expressed by other participants, began to doubt the sincerity of the dialogue. "They are so reluctant to express their real feelings because they feel guilty for our suffering. They think they have lost all credibility and simply agree to what the third world says," she said.

The sense of guilt reached its peak when German Catholic theologian J.B. Metz was invited to sketch the historical development of western theology. He described himself as "doing theology in the face of Auschwitz, in the face the holocaust."

Metz held fellow past theologians responsible for a lack of sensitivity to historical catastrophies, and asked: "Was it not a faith that does not follow Christ, but believes in following, that goes its own way? Was it not a faith without compassion, but with a belief in compassion, that cultivates the apathy that allowed us Christians to go on believing and praying with our backs to Auschwitz?"

All seemed to appreciate his open confession, but as one African said privately: "This is another example of European hypocrisy. I do not see much change since then."

First and third world women theologians joined forces on the third day and succeeded in having a plenary session that night to discuss the problem of sexual discrimination. Later, they were again able to have another morning session dedicated to the same issue.

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The overdose of feminist theology occasioned some opposition. "You are hurting the solidarity between third world men and women," said one participant. "You are avoiding the true problems of oppression in their more serious form of capitalism, racism, classism and imperialism," said another.

The dialogue developed more smoothly in the last two days. Oppression and alienation were discussed as were the method and style of communication. Emphasis was put on spirituality and personal conversion as well as respecting one's own culture and avoiding the danger of a new elitism among liberation theologians. They said theology should be done by keeping in touch with the people on the bottom who have nothing to lose.

When a 20-page draft final statement was presented to the assembly, a majority asked that it be redrafted. Bishop Patrick Kalilombe, Catholic Bishop of Lilongue, Malawi, East Africa, opposed the statement's sophistication. "I would like the statement to be made within two pages," he said, stressing that the oppressed, largely simple and uneducated people should be able to understand a document that was being written on their behalf.

Continuing, Bishop Kalilombe said: "After the statement is rewritten, ask some people without any theological training if it is understandable. I feel it is contradictory to issue a statement on the theology of the oppressed, while the statement itself oppresses the non-theologically trained."

The conference closed before the final statement was completed, but the EATWOT vice-president, Father Sergio Torres hoped "it will be the best statement of the century."

Indian theologian K.C. Abraham, Steering Committee Chairman, admitted the conference succeeded only to a certain degree. "It was not yet up to my expectation. The first world theologians are not yet ready to dialogue on a theological level. It is not a question of ability. They confined themselves to analysis of problems only," he said.

EATWOT's president, Methodist Bishop Emilio de Carvalho of Angola, said little during the whole conference. When asked if EATWOT would meet in 1986 as proclaimed, he was not quite sure. Still, his feelings are not vague. "I hate people saying we are fighting against the same oppression together. The fact is that we are living in a divided world."