

Society for Ecumenical Studies

The 14th Two-Yearly Consultation of *Societas Oecumenica*
Prague, August 17-22, 2006

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I was fortunate enough to be able to share, for the ninth time since its 5th meeting in Bossey, near Geneva, in 1988, in this as ever enjoyable and stimulating meeting of the community that defines itself as 'The European Society for Ecumenical Research'. It was founded in 1978 to provide a means by which the then rapidly growing number of theological institutes and departments in European universities concerned with the world-wide ecumenical movement could get together and enrich each other. This 14th meeting was in fact the largest we have ever had – 97 people on the list of participants !

For this success I think we can thank the city of Prague, which is of course nowadays the undeniable capital of tourism in Europe, alike in the sheer number of foreigners crowding its streets, and in the combinations of charm, history, personalities (from, say, Jan Huss to Mozart to Vaclav Havel !) etc. and etc. that it has nurtured and brought forth. Our meeting gave us opportunity not only to spend some time in the central parts of the city, as to enjoy an evening in at least one of the many theatres and concert halls, and also to visit both the Theological Faculty of the Charles University and a 'Hussite' church in a village on the edge of the city where we could meet, discuss with and enjoy the hospitality of local Christians.

We met in the International Baptist Theological Seminary, which has in recent years restored a charming chateau, originally the headquarters for the military forces of the Hapsburg Empire in the early 19th century (hence the name 'Jeneralka'), in a pleasantly isolated, forested valley on the NW edge of the city, yet which has remarkably convenient access by bus and underground to the city centre in 20 minutes or so. The British Baptist Union evidently carries a fair degree of responsibility for this college, which I can warmly recommend to any other group looking for a good conference site. Why, even the staffs of Churches Together in Britain and Ireland and their colleagues in the four national instruments in England, Scotland, Wales and Ireland had an encouraging meeting there this autumn thanks to cheap air fares !

The theme of the August Consultation was '***Ecumenism of Life as a Challenge for Academic Theology***'. This was a good choice, as the various addresses we had showed pretty clearly how difficult it is to bring together the often urgent and passionate discoveries of those who find

themselves living out a coming together of divided churches – for instance in the inter-church families of which the long experienced Fr René Beaupère from Lyon spoke so vividly – and the carefully considered analyses of the no less long experienced academic systematic theologians such as Christoph Schwöbel, now from Tübingen, formerly at King's College, London, and Geoffrey Wainwright, the long-standing co-chairman of the international dialogue between the Roman Catholic Church and the Methodist Churches, formerly of Queen's College, Birmingham and now for many years at Duke University, Durham, North Carolina in the USA. There was a very striking difference of culture and atmosphere between these two 'camps' (also to some extent 'generations' in a conference that once again brought together a good cross-section of both professors and post-graduate students), which I don't myself feel we really managed to bring together effectively, even if we surely did pretty well in terms of the undeniably enjoyable fellowship in the actual conference ! I will abstain from trying to enter into the contents of any of the addresses here, partly to keep this short, more because they will soon be published – see below.

As usual in these meetings – perhaps especially for those who have been to several before ! - it is the chance of meeting new people from new places that is particularly memorable and worthwhile. For years now I have felt disappointed that *Societas Oecumenica* remains a European reality. We don't in any way refuse entry to these meetings to people from other continents: in Prague we had a most useful Canadian woman theologian and a couple of African Catholic priests doing postgraduate work in Leuven and Tübingen. But for sheerly practical and financial reasons it remains a pan-European meeting place.

Yet there is always more to be discovered and learned from within a newly expanded Europe ! I was myself delighted to meet two new people, both bringing a great deal to this meeting from the Ukraine: Dr Antoine Arjakovsky, with excellent theological experience, much of it gained from fellow Orthodox in Paris while he was working there, now Director of the Institute of Ecumenical Studies at the Catholic University of the Ukraine in Lviv; and Dr Myroslav Marynovych, a layman in the Greek Catholic Church who had had a hard time in prison under Russian rule until 1989, now Vice-Rector of that University. They both spoke from first hand and highly thoughtful experience of the urgency of pioneering ways by which the so strongly divided churches in their and other lands could welcome, accept, learn from and in the end recognise each other in the Body of the one Christ.

I shall be happy to try and answer any questions about this year's meeting, or about the *Societas Oecumenica* more generally, that readers of this may wish to put to me, at martinconway@abelian.net .

All the addresses at the conference will be published in some months' time – watch this space for details of that book and its price ! The volumes from the previous conferences are as follows:

2002 in Salisbury, UK

Bekehrung und Identität: Ökumene als Spannung zwischen Fremdem und Vertrautem, ed. Dagmar Heller (Frankfurt a.M.: Lembeck, 2003 ISBN 3-87476-426-5)

Contributions in English (most) and German (some). Retail price €16 (Price for members of *Societas Oecumenica*: €10 plus postage)

2004 in Sibiu, Romania

Charting Churches in a Changing Europe: *Charta Oecumenica* and the Process of Ecumenical Encounter, edd. Tim & Ivana Noble, Martien Brinkman & Jochen Hilberath

(Amsterdam & New York: Rodopi, 2006, ISBN 90-420-2009-1) . Retail price €46 (Price for members of *Societas Oecumenica*: €20 plus postage)

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