

Religion & Democracy

A Newsletter of the Institute on Religion and Democracy

April 1982

The Debate Begins

IRD Leaders Meet the National Council of Churches

Two hundred church executives gathered on March 24th in the auditorium of the National Council of Churches at 475 Riverside Drive in New York to meet two spokesmen for the Institute on Religion and Democracy. The invitation to the IRD read, "We want to discuss directly the criticisms you may have concerning the approaches of the NCC and the mainline denominations." The words spoken were indeed "direct," although both sides affirmed that their arguments were founded on a spirit of love.

The event may prove to have been the opening of a debate which in time will reshape the local and international outlook of some of America's most important religious institutions.

The meeting was prompted by the IRD's challenge to the mainline churches set forth in its founding statement, "Christianity and Democracy." The IRD statement, drafted by Pastor Richard J. Neuhaus, charges church bureaucracies with neglecting the threats and abuses from totalitarian governments of the Soviet empire and the Third World while relentlessly criticizing the United States and its allies. But, like the IRD statement itself, the discussion at the NCC explored many deeper matters.

Neuhaus and Edmund W. Robb, Chairman of the Executive Committee of the IRD, made opening presentations. They were answered by Bishop James Armstrong, President of the NCC, and Dr. Arie Brouwer, General Secretary of the Reformed Church in America and Chairperson of the National Council's Committee on US-USSR Church Relations. This opening exchange was followed by spirited discussion from the floor, and from Rev. William



IRD Chairman Edmund Robb addresses an audience of church officials and denominational staff persons at the National Council of Churches headquarters in New York City. He spoke as a part of a dialogue between the NCC and the IRD.

Howard, a past President of the NCC who chaired the session.

Neuhaus began by charging that the pattern of leadership in the NCC and its dominant member churches revealed, "first, a betrayal of the liberal tradition, second, an abandonment of the ecumenical task, third, and most solemnly, a compromise of the gospel of Christ."

Neuhaus noted his own roots in the liberal tradition of social action, and asserted that liberalism has been often betrayed by a closed-minded elitism which often suffers from revolutionary fantasies. "The fascism we liberals fear has already arrived," he asserted. "Its name is Communism."

The ecumenical task of the NCC has been abandoned, he charged, because church leaders

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Pastor Richard Neuhaus makes a point during his presentation at the NCC-IRD discussion.

Briefs

So far the Catholic Church in Poland, with the protection of a Polish Pope, has been strong enough to deter the most brutal harassments of the totalitarian state. The Chronicle of The Catholic Church in Lithuania, a Lithuanian samizdat publication, tells a more painful story. According to a bulletin of the Lithuanian Information Center, the most recent issue of Chronicle details the murder of Father Bronius Laurinavicius, a member of the Lithuanian Helsinki Group, who had been attacked in the state press a few days before his death for "luring youth to church."

Chronicle charges that on November 24, 1981, at least three witnesses saw several men seize Father Laurinavicius and push him under a passing truck. The incident and its aftermath are described in considerable detail, including the testimony of doctors on the scene. Father Laurinavicius had twice before told close friends of attempts to run him over. He is, says Chronicle, the third priest to die in suspicious circumstances since October, 1980.

When Jose Esteban Gonzalez visited Washington at the end of March, the IRD staff helped him meet a number of church leaders. Gonzalez was the original organizer of the Nicaraguan Permanent Commission on Human Rights, and the late dictator Anastasio Somoza once described him as "one of my most effective opponents." Today Gonzalez is still speaking out - now against the Sandinista revolutionary junta. The Sadinistas don't want to hear it - they've driven him into exile in Costa Rica. A lot of American church leaders don't want to hear either. But his testimony is powerful - and it's getting through. In an editorial page article in The Washington Post (March 31), Gonzalez recounted his own visits to mass graves of political prisoners in Nicaragua in 1979 and 1980. He spoke of the 4,200 political prisoners now in Nica-

raguan jails: "higher than the highest figure ever registered under Somoza." He spoke of government press censorship, and attacks on political meetings and the Miskito Indians. And he urged American liberals to "... stop romanticizing a revolutionary leadership that has turned against the democratic promises of the revolution."

George Weigel, a syndicated columnist for a number of Catholic journals, has written a pamphlet which bears note by all in the debate about the church and disarmament. It's titled The Peace Bishops and the Arms Race, and it heartily commends church leaders for their concern about the possibilities of nuclear war. But it adds, with some urgency, these cautions:

A peace effort that merely repeats Kurtz in Conrad's Heart of Darkness and shouts "The horror, the horror!" may blind us to the seriousness and difficulty of the task we must undertake if peace is to be more than a chimera....

Our desperate need, as a Church and as a country, is for a third voice... a way out of the twin dead-ends of accomodation and Armageddon.

The Weigel pamphlet, published by a unique anti-war organization called the World Without War Council, is available from the IRD for \$2.00.

Query: What could the following superficially different descriptions of the Institute on Religion and Democracy actually have in common?

"The Institute presents itself as a fully independent organization, but is actually an autonomous 'special project' of the Coalition for a Democratic Majority..."

Eric Hochstein and Ronald O'Rourke, "A Report on the Institute on Religion and Democracy", October 13.

"Despite its several qualifications and superficially restrained tone, 'Christianity

and Democracy' (the IRD's statement of principles - ed.) is ultimately a careful crafted endorsement of the Reagan Administration's foreign policy."

Peter Steinfels, Christianity and Crisis, March 29

"Freedom House and the Institute on of Religion and Democracy, both of which are CIA fronts..."

Sergio Ramirez Mercado, member of the three-man Sandinista junta in Nicaragua, in a speech reprinted in The Nation, April 3rd.

Response: Is it an elitism that denies moral and intellectual standing, or good faith, to one's critics or opponents - and treats them as mere agents of some evil power or interest? (See also, "McCarthyism".)

Michael Novak's new book is out: The Spirit of Democratic Capitalism (Simon and Schuster, \$17.50). It promises to stir storm. This is no mere public affairs potboiler, but a serious and lucid work of theology, history, and what used to be called political economy. One of Novak's best insights is his grasp of the problem itself: while theologians have expounded on Christianity and monarchy, democracy, socialism, and a host of political and economic ideas, there is almost no serious theological work about the kind of economic order in which today most Christian churches actually live. Because of this the capitalist economy has been scorned as the incarnation of greed and materialism. Novak illuminates the spiritual and moral framework of the democratic capitalist system - and powerfully defends it against its socialist detractors. The implications are radical. The book can be ordered from the IRD.

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1000 16th Street N.W.
Suite LL 50
Washington, D.C. 20036
(202) 822-8627

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reach out only to those who share their social or political values - not to all their "alienated sisters and brothers in Christ."

Most importantly, Neuhaus argued, many church leaders have failed to hold the mission of the church higher than their political interests. What one thinks of Ronald Reagan or El Salvador, he contended, "often becomes more important than what one thinks of God."

Greater Polarization

Ed Robb spoke from his experience as a United Methodist evangelist. He noted that many authorities on church life see evangelicalism as the most vital force in American Protestantism today, and that there is a related trend among Catholics. The rise of evangelicalism is bringing with it a greater polarization between the "denominational agency bureaucrats and many of the people in the pews."

Robb argued that the NCC could help overcome this polarization if it tried to act like the genuinely open, ecumenical forum it was intended originally to be. Instead, it has turned to a rigid, undemocratic radicalism - especially in its work in international affairs. Robb cited specific NCC publications extolling Cuba, China, and the Sandinista government of Nicaragua to prove his point.

Robb noted that some NCC leaders may now realize that they have let things get out of hand. He pointed to excerpts that have been made public from a closely guarded NCC study undertaken by the Robert Johnston Company, which argues that many American church leaders perceive the NCC as "predictable" and "serving only the left side of the religious spectrum of America."

But Robb warned that the NCC cannot overcome its crisis merely by better public relations or the adoption of evangelical rhetoric. The NCC must begin to "see the world whole". This will

require a greater understanding of political differences among American Christians, and a greater stress on the importance of human rights and religious freedom in Communist countries.

Bishop Armstrong appealed to the IRD leaders to listen to "different truths", and not to think that "the United States represents the Sermon on the Mount, and the Soviet Union represents the Devil." He conceded that some NCC policy statements may have been mistaken or "selective", but he questioned whether the IRD's concern for freedom extended to such pro-U.S. countries as Chile or Argentina.

While appealing for understanding and dialogue, Bishop Armstrong also quoted the charge that "Christianity and Democracy is ultimately a carefully crafted endorsement of the Reagan Administration's foreign policy."

Political Ideology

Dr. Arie Brouwer, the fourth panelist, argued that the IRD was itself guilty of what it criticized the NCC for doing: letting "a favored political ideology take hostage the gospel of Christ." He accused the IRD of "argument by implication, innuendo and insinuations", and cautioned against an "obsession with the threat of totalitarianism." To the IRD's point that Christians should be anti-Communist, he said, "We Christians should not allow ourselves to be defined by our opponents in terms of what we are against."

In the floor discussion, Neuhaus further explained that his complaint was not that the NCC has become too radical, but rather that "it cannot speak a radical word because it is not distinctively Christian in its witness."

To those who argued that his statement appeared to glorify the U.S. and the capitalist system, he replied that while in the world today "the United States is the primary bearer of the vision of liberal democracy," to be

"historically elected" for such a task can be as much a burden as a blessing. He added that his statement is quite restrained in its assessment of capitalism, and merely notes the fact that "liberal democracy only exists in the world today where there is a largely free market economy."

Grass Roots

Ed Robb was challenged on his contention that many church bureaucracies are out of step with the "grass roots." He replied that while this might not be true in every denomination the decline in membership in most "mainline" denominations suggested that people were voting with their feet.

When Rev. Howard, the moderator, asked how many blacks were involved in the IRD, Robb surveyed the overwhelmingly white NCC audience and responded, "About the same percentage as you have here." He also reminded Howard of the IRD's statement against apartheid in South Africa.

To a final question -- Why has the NCC helped to promote the guerrilla cause in El Salvador while El Salvador's Catholic Church favors a settlement through the electoral process? -- Bishop Armstrong said he had not been involved in the NCC's past policy on this issue, but he blamed government troops for 90% of the violence in El Salvador. Ed Robb responded that the Marxist Left had little popular support in El Salvador, and that the Salvadoran Catholic Church favored continued U.S. aid.

While the next day's New York Times story on the debate described it as "heated", it also noted that "neither side was willing to write off the other as hopelessly lost." All participants spoke of the importance of continuing the discussion. Although at times it was sharp, it did arouse vigor among the speakers and attention in the audience that is not always evident today in mainline church forums.

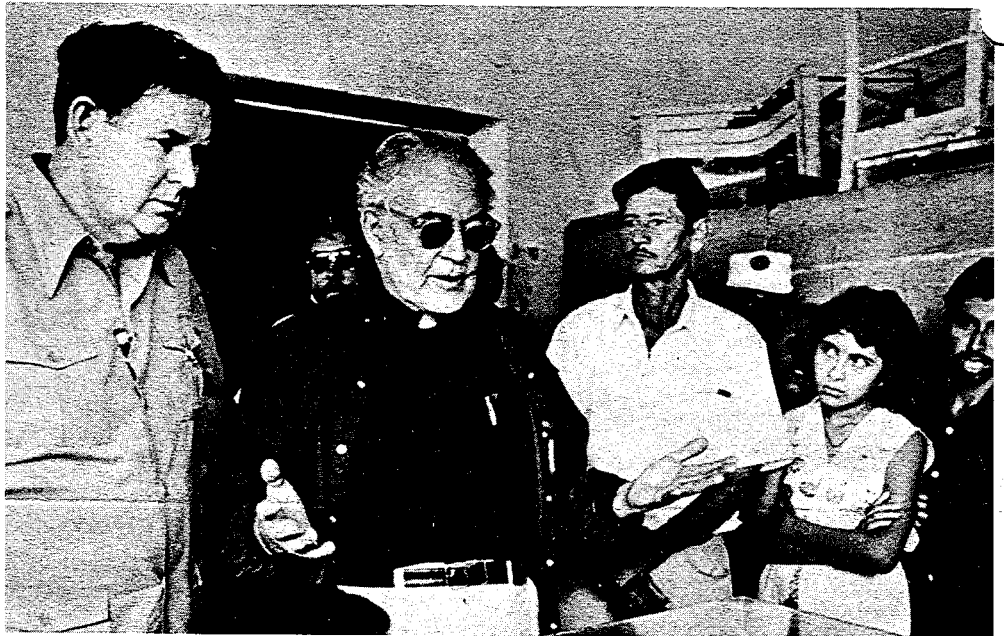
The Democratic Alternative Wins in El Salvador

"It's quite obvious that the people of El Salvador defied the guerrillas in going to the polls," explained Ira Gallaway, an IRD Executive Committee member who visited El Salvador shortly before the recent election. "The people of El Salvador are obviously saying something different from what many of the leaders of our national church bodies are saying."

Gallaway was referring to a background paper on El Salvador quoted at length in a National Council of Churches news release, and distributed widely last year by officials of several mainline denominations, which proclaimed that "The majority of the people of El Salvador have chosen to unite under the leadership of the FDR recognizing it as their legitimate representative...." The FDR is the political front group of the pro-Communist guerrillas.

"I can't understand," Gallaway stated, "how the churches up here or anyone who is really interested in democracy could any longer support the cause of the guerrillas, who threatened death to anyone who voted." Dr. Gallaway is pastor of the First United Methodist Church in Peoria, Illinois.

Among the many stirring press accounts of the election



Father Theodore Hesburgh, president of Notre Dame University, and Congressman John Murtha, visit a polling place in San Miguel, El Salvador on election day. The visit was part of their helicopter tour of the San Miguel and Morazan Provinces as members of the official U.S. team of observers.

was Warren Hoge's March 29 story in the New York Times - a paper which, with others in the major media, has at times portrayed the conflict in El Salvador as one where the only choice is between rightist death squads and their guerilla opponents. Hoge wrote:

"Many of the voters

expressed a kind of cheerful defiance today of foreign doubts that they would turn out in the middle of so much conflict. 'Tell the truth', they chanted in handclapping rhythm as journalists' cars and vans passed by voting lines."

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1000 16th Street, N.W. Suite LL 50
Washington, D.C. 20036

"Protestants' Protest" Available in Film and Cassette

An excellent half-hour program on the conflict in the churches over Marxism and revolution, broadcast last year over the PBS network as part of the Ben Wattenberg At Large series, is now available to local churches in both 16 mm film and 3/4" video cassette from the IRD. Among those interviewed are the IRD's Ed Robb, Dr. Claire Randall of the NCC, and President Philip Potter of the World Council of Churches. A showing will generate a lively discussion in your church. Film rental: \$30. Cassette: \$10.