

WSCF Europe - Theology Conference
“Religion, Ethics, and Politics - God and the Use of Power”
Berlin, Germany
13-19 April 2010



43 participants gathered together for the WSCF-E Theological Conference, 13-19 April in Berlin. It was an educational and inspiring week of deep discussions, bible studies, lectures, worships, and workshops. Together everyone explored the themes of religion, ethics and politics in the perfect venue, Berlin. Though a volcano put a slight damper on the conference finale, the participants and organisers had a week filled with intercultural learning, searching and sharing together.

Religion's role in Politics

The conference strived to shed light on the difficulty many people have finding their way in the political world while remaining true to one's values and beliefs. Two participants led workshops that explored how the Church engages in the political world. Shannon Phillip (UK/India), presented his research on development aid of Churches and the future role churches have in providing aid; and Alexandru Socaciu (Romania) talked about the communist rule in Romania and its effect on the local Church. Students from Armenia, Belarus, Italy, Netherlands, USA and Zimbabwe participated in a panel discussion in which they briefly presented on the relationship between Church and State in their local contexts. Lecturer Alessia Passarelli (Italy), former Chair of WSCF-E, also engaged with this theme speaking on the relationship between migration, religion, church and the politics and leading a question answer session. Peter Lodberg (Denmark), head of the Department of Theological Studies at Aarhus University, lectured on the relationship between the Church and State in Europe throughout history.

Learning from one another:

There was great interest expressed to learn more about each other's local context and experience in their own churches and societies. Thus, enthusiastic participants presented to small groups about various topics: Dima Bartalevich (Belarus) led a discussion on the decline of spirituality in Europe; Alexander Moore (USA/Ireland) spoke on the idea of a liquid church and the role youth play in congregations; Philip Sides (Ireland), led two separate workshops on the changes in ecumenical hermeneutics and the relationship between Buddhism and Christianity; Armine Babajanyan (Armenia) spoke on the Apostolic Church in Armenia; Olha Sinkevych spoke about the relationship between religion and politics in Ukraine.

Everyone took part in a very long, yet entertaining, Intercultural Evening. Food and drink from almost every country represented were shared and some participants presented about their country or shared a song or dance.



Creative Learning and Dialogue:

In the artistic workshops participants were able to explore their more creative side. Katarina Babicova (Slovakia) led a drama workshop on Genesis 18:2 exploring the power dynamics of God; Martin Bonde Christensen and the Klezmorkester band (Denmark) led a workshop on how God is portrayed in music; finally Joanna Tkaczuk (Poland) gave a talk on the Images of God in Children's language.

The entire group also had the chance to play together. A large role-play game, led by Jill Piebiak (Canada), divided participants into eight groups representing "countries" from around the world with various trade policies and constitutional laws. Each group had to build a shelter with the materials they had been provided, traded for, or received from the "International Organisations" (the preparatory committee of the event). Everyone debriefed together reflecting on the global economic systems, and individual behaviour and faith when participating in such scenarios/systems.



Politics in Action:

One of the most exciting and inspiring parts of the conference was the opportunity to have two inter-regional participants representing their local SCMs in Zimbabwe and the Philippines. Lawrence Mashungu and Kristine Valerio led a panel discussion outlining the work and activism of the students. They focused, in particular, on the students' political action within the often dangerous political situations in which they live.

Unfortunately, Markus Ojakoski (Finland) was unable to travel to Berlin to present his lecture "Would Jesus Lead a Protest or Run for Parliament" due to the volcano, so Mr. Lodberg offered to present on the political action taken by the World Council of Churches throughout its history and answered participants' questions about the political involvement of the ecumenical movement.



Berlin – A City of History:

The conference could not have been held in a better city to explore the interactions between ethics, politics and religion. The students were honoured to meet Wolfgang Thierse, the vice-president of the German Parliament. Mr. Thierse gave a brief introduction to his political life as a minority, a Catholic and former Member of Parliament in the German Democratic Republic, but left the majority of the time for questions from participants about his thoughts on living a Christian life in public politics. The session was followed by a tour of the Reichstag; a window into country's political history. The group also toured the Martin Luther Memorial Church, famous for its architecture reflecting the Third Reich and Nazi regime; the Holocaust Memorial; the Memorial for Homosexuals persecuted during WWII; and the German Resistance Memorial (Gedenkstätte deutscher Widerstand) where they heard a lecture on resistance from Christians under the conditions of Nazi dictatorship given by Dr. Johannes Tuchel, the director of the Memorial.



Creating a Spiritual Community:

Every morning and evening the community joined together in worship services that rotated through ecumenical, Orthodox, Catholic and Protestant traditions. The conference also invited the students to work in ecumenical groups to discuss three Bible Studies led by Marco Fornerone (Italy), Jaso Pössi (Finland), and Mirka Bukovinska (Ukraine) on liberation theology, Empire and the Church, and Images of God. A Dominican Priest, Jan Branislav (Slovakia), also gave an intellectual lecture on the development of Liberation Theology challenging participants to think deeply about how it connects with political philosophy.

Waiting for the Cloud to Clear:

The group said their goodbyes by blessing each individual in their own language and then celebrating together with help from the Klezmeztzer Band. Though the Icelandic volcano threw confusion into many of the participant's flight plans from Berlin, eventually (though for some, a few days later with various detours) everyone finally made it home. Participants openly expressed their gratitude for the experience and the community; they were inspired by each other to work towards building intercultural, ecumenical and active communities in their own lives at home.



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