Guilty or Not Guilty?

27 March—2 April 2012

Bratislava, Slovakia

When students think about theological questions of guilt and sin how do they respond? How does faith play into everyday ethics as well as large scale tragedies? What were individuals’ roles in climate change or the financial crisis? Do they feel guilty and how do they cope?

Over 30 students came from across Europe to Bratislava, Slovakia for a five day conference to discuss these very questions. It was a week full of lectures, bible studies, role-plays and many, many deep and reflective theological conversations. Though perhaps there were not clear answers to any of the above questions there was a lot was learned from one-another about different cultural and theological approaches to these topics.

An Ethical Basis

A discussion from Peter Šajda (Slovakia) started off the week by introducing the group to the basics of applied, normative and meta ethics. The group discussions that followed allowed individuals to apply the theories they heard through a reflection on their understanding of each approach. Later in the week, David Weberman (USA/Hungary) furthered the discussion on meta-ethics and the group used a thought experiment to better understand the theory.

A Theological Overview

Nagypál Szablocs (Hungary) introduced the group to different religious understandings of guilt. By giving an overview of Buddhism, Confucianism, Judaism and Hinduism. Groups were asked to look at sin and guilt in their own lives as well as three quotations about forgiveness and justice. Using a bible study Gabriela Bradovkova (Slovakia) led the group in through the passages from Genesis 3 (6-13, 23) and Luke 17 (36-39, 44-50). Small groups looked at the stories and the examples given of guilt, shame and forgiveness.

Moving from theoretical to the practical Ignatios Stavropoulos (Greece) spoke candidly about the Financial Crisis in Greece and the impart for the Greek Orthodox Church. He spoke both about positive and negative effects of the crisis.

How can psychology have influence on pastoral care? How do students view pastoral care? What is the psychological approach to feelings of guilt and sin? Vivian Boland (Italy/Ireland) introduced the group to another aspect of religion and guilt to the group by explaining a more personal relationship between clergy and parishioners.

Contemporary Examples

Through participant led workshops the lectures and ethical understandings were put into modern day examples. Annika Rotter led a group discussion on drug legalisation; Shannon Phillip led a workshop on prostitution; Alexander Arktos discussed ethics and legality of natural resources; Olha Sinkevych led a group discussion on ecological responsibility; Madga Slawinska had a talk on abortion; and Alastair McIntosh spoke about non-violence and the military.
Nenad Dimitrijevic (Serbia/Hungary) spoke from a more controversial point of view on collective responsibility for mass crime—going into a personal understanding of the crimes committed in his native Serbia. The group was called to think about what it means to apologise for mass crime as well as what it means to be an innocent bystander when such atrocities are committed.

A passionate cry for a culture driven less by consumerism came from Alastair McIntosh’s (UK) who introduced the topic of Climate Justice. Using examples of advertising he explained how society has changed its view on consumption and therefore its relationship to the earth.

During a more creative time, the group engaged in a large role-play scenario recreating the financial crisis of 2008. Each person took on a persona, whether it be financial institutions, local banks, property owners, economists, or the government, and went through the stages of the crisis and respond accordingly. The financial institutions enjoyed their wealth and bonuses with a luxury party while the property owners had act out their struggle of finding a home, extra work and time to manage their new debt. Each stage the group discussed the decisions they made and the impact it had on one another.

Prayer and Poetry

Each morning the participants worshiped ecumenically starting the day in prayer and song. True to the tradition of WSCF Europe, during the each evening an Orthodox, Protestant and Catholic worship was held giving each participant a better understanding of the diversity found within their Church.

Poetry didn’t just come through prayer during the conference, Anna Abram (UK), from a background in philosophy, led the group through the poetry of Czesław Miłosz. His poems helped the group understand the concept of “heart sight”; how to reflect on the world not only through their heads but through their hearts.

Exploring the Local Context

An excursion in Bratislava gave everyone a better understanding of Slovakia’s time in the Soviet block. A visit to the Nation’s Memory Institute and Archives gave insight into the books banned during the time as well as the oppressive government at that time.

Participants were also able to visit Chatam Sofer, a beautiful memorial and underground Jewish cemetery. A guide spoke about the historical place as well as the life of many prominent Jewish leaders buried there.

Learning from One Another

There was a lot of time scheduled throughout the week for small group discussions so that each participant had time to talk with one another about the lectures and workshops they had attended. A workshop on Blogging led by Pawel Pustelnik and Jill Piebiak taught students how to continue the conversations Online, at home after the conference. During the inter-cultural evening, the country presentations also gave participants a more informal and fun aspect of one another’s culture. Food and drinks from around Europe were shared.

A special thanks to our donors, the Council of Europe, Youth in Action for making this event a success!