

Let Us Survive!

Last November WSCF's Ecology Conference took place in Strasbourg, with the theme: "The Ecological Consequences of the Single European Act". Two delegates give their impressions

The WSCF Ecology Conference was held in the European Youth Centre in Strasbourg, from the 10th to 17th of November last year. Considering that my first experience of SCM had come less than a fortnight beforehand (I had not been a student for a term, then!) my attending was quite something ... perhaps "character-building" is the phrase that most immediately springs to mind!

However, having made it to Strasbourg, after an incredible two days notice (but that's another story ...), I soon overcame my initial nervousness as the actual conference began.

Monday

Our first lecture was by James Robertson from the London-based New Economics Movement, and was entitled "Europe - growth and a sustainable future". He highlighted the failings of our present system of economics and showed how these discourage people in positions of power from caring about social or environmental issues, and merely compound the view that "ethics and economics don't mix". He talked about the New Economic Movement, which aims to change attitudes towards the economic system by making people less depen-

dent on banks and big business. It also tries to propagate the idea that wealth means more than material possessions and consumption, encouraging people to give less importance to actual standard of living and focus more on the quality of life, by putting importance on the community and family. Clearly this sort of change in attitude is of great importance to the Green movement.

Tuesday

Tuesday's main topic was "Environmental consequences of the Single European Act", and here we discussed the implications of "1992" for the state of the environment in Europe: the effectiveness of the current system of directives and "norms"; and the possible problems of reaching agreement on environmental policies, especially given the prospect of new members from Eastern Europe.

A great deal of time over the first few days and throughout the conference was dedicated to sharing problems and solutions, and this was done in a variety of ways. On Monday we met in Regional Groups under the basic division on the four points of the compass. Each group discussed common problems and looked at the differences in solutions, which was a particular eye-opener for me in the Western group, where Britain see-

med to have by far the worst track record on environmental action. Each of the groups then gave a short presentation, which provided a chance to pin-point the key issues concerning us all in Europe.

Another chance to learn more about the specific situation in the countries present was at the Ecomarket on the Tuesday evening where each country set up a display on its own environmental concerns. This was an excellent way of putting across the information because it saved a long, drawn-out plenary session which no-one would have appreciated.

Wednesday

Wednesday was excursion day, so after breakfast instead of heading for the conference room we were all loaded onto a bus, complete with our translators and guide. We first visited the disposal plant for the Strasbourg conurbation, where the region's domestic and (to some extent) industrial waste is incinerated. We were shown around the plant and we then harangued the representative with questions regarding environmental provisions. Initially he denied any problems, but by the end of our visit did admit to some of their shortcomings, which included the fact that their chimney filter only removed smoke particles and actually allowed any potentially dangerous gases to escape unhindered.

The excursions were important in that they took us out of the centre and into the reality of actual problems, after two days of mostly theory.

Thursday

Thursday brought us onto the more specific topic of Eastern Europe, and we had a very interesting lecture by Karol, the delegate from Poland. He clearly described the problems faced in his own country and in Eastern Europe in general, namely heavy industry using old technology with little effort to reduce pollution levels (and the resulting problems of air and water pollution). The presentation and ensuing discussion brought up some other more general questions, such as the rights of Western European nations to interfere and impose restrictions on the Eastern industries in the name of environmental protection, versus the responsibility of the West to ensure that the levels of destruction are reduced. Of course, although we agonised, we had to face the fact that the main consideration for both East and West (especially with regard to

"1992") was economics; and it was hardly realistic to expect the East to invest in ecologically sound industry and energy production at a time when they were struggling to find their feet economically in Europe.

Friday

On Friday I chose the workshop on "Images of Nature": various different religious views of the natural world, including the Taoist philosophy and a look at the American Indians, using quotes from Chief Seattle; ecofeminism; and in more general terms the view of the earth as God's body. This led into a debate on pantheism and panentheism and of the relative worth of regarding the world as sacred.

The Friday afternoon lecture was on the broad subject of theology and Ecology, which led directly from our morning's discussion. M. Rimbaud based his views on a few well-known biblical texts, looking mainly at Genesis 1 where over the centuries its description of man's responsibility for nature has been twisted to justify man's exploitation of the world and its resources. He also talked more positively about what is now being done through the church; for example the declarations made by the European Ecumenical Assembly in Basle regarding the environment.

On Friday evening I was one of a small group who had volunteered to plan the final worship, a fairly daunting task given the problems which had by this stage emerged regarding tolerance of different styles of worship. The two services which had already taken place during the conference had been basically liturgical, with set prayers and Bible readings interspersed with Taizé chants and other international songs. The services had been led in English, but readings and prayers had been encouraged in a variety of languages. The workshops had also contained a large visual element, in particular the second worship during which we had burned elements of nature to symbolise the sacrifice of the natural world. Predictably, this sort of worship was not to everyone's taste and we realised that we would be faced with a difficult job trying to create a worship with which everyone could feel comfortable. The Saturday worship was in the end less liturgical than the others had been, and had more of an emphasis on reflection on the week and our hopes and visions for the future.

Saturday

Saturday morning was a very open-

ended Bible study where we were given two texts: the feeding of the five thousand, and the vision of a new heaven and earth. We looked at the passages in general and talked about what they meant for us as Christians. The Matthew text we saw as an example for us to follow; that we should see the possibilities of achieving those tasks which at times seems so impossible. The Revelation text was an inspiring vision for the future, but we stressed in our group the fact that it was an ideal that we should be working towards, and not just an excuse to sit back and wait for things to get better.

Saturday afternoon was a time for evaluation, giving us all a chance to reflect on what we could take away from the conference and to discuss our general reactions (both positive and negative) to the week. The discussion covered a whole range of practical applications.

Then we held our final worship and had a final party, complete with silly games and a cabaret. All week the free time had been really enjoyable and for me a rare chance to meet people from so many different countries and learn a bit more about how they live. This was especially true for the Eastern European delegates, as their problems previously seemed distant to me, but have now taken on a much more real perspective. Also we had shared the centre for most of the week with a Gay and Lesbian Youth Organisation and in socialising with them we managed to convince each other that we were normal people, even if we at WSCF did dance around the centre singing *Siyahamba*, and they wandered about having had their faces and - in some cases - bodies painted. In fact, by the end of the evening, helped along by a few beers, half of the WSCF contingent also had painted faces...

Sunday

Sunday morning came around all too soon and we all dispersed across Europe once again. But, as the best game-show hosts would say, I didn't go home empty-handed. The conference has given me a more accurate picture of the environmental problems to be faced in Europe, but also a greater vision of how to work for change. The conference was not just about Ecology, Europe and Christianity, but about the present reality and our hopes for a better future, working as individuals and as a community. Whether we do this as Christians, Europeans or Environmentalists, we are working for the same world, and this is the uniting force beyond any other. The conference highlighted this

above anything else for me and I left feeling enthusiastic both to share what I'd learned and to act on it, following James Robertson's slogan of "Pessimism of the intellect, optimism of the will."

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The most inspiring speaker of the Conference, James Robertson, is one of the inspirations behind such important ventures as "The Other Economic Summit" (an alternative agenda and set of values to question those of the G7) and "Turning Point 2000" (seeking to enable people, conserve the planet and choose between a Hyper-Expansion (HE) Society and a Sane, Human Ecological (SHE) Society). Progress must be redefined to include more than short-term financial gains. Economic activity should be determined by the needs and situation of each community. He also set us straight on the real importance of 1992 - not the dawn of the new Europe but of the First Earth Summit (UNCED), at which the issues of environment and development will be tackled in world-wide conference. (1992 is also the 500th Anniversary of "Columbus" and hence European exploitation.)

As the week progressed I became both depressed and inspired by tales of the problems and solutions of other parts of Europe despite varying degrees of intensity given to environmental protection. The bottom line was always the same: Governments and industries are talking, not acting. Any action which is taken is in the realm of cosmetic surgery and not holistic medicine.

I am sorry to say that the conference, too, did not get much further than feeling intellectually and theologically regretful. That is not to say that individual conversations and the international experience were not valuable, but I think that for a number of participants it was a bit like taking time off from the "Green Revolution" to read a Church of England booklet on "Care for Creation". The most important initiative - a proposal from Theo of the Dutch SCM delegation to join the international input to the Earth Summit in June - went largely unnoticed.

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