

THE WORLD CONFERENCE*---A DUTCH IMPRESSION

H. C. LEIGNES BAKHOVEN

Zeerijp, Netherlands

About six months ago more than three hundred Mennonites came together for the General Congress at Amsterdam. What happened there was of great importance to our brotherhood. It is with great pleasure that I undertake to give a personal impression of the congress; with pleasure, because when I look back upon it, I am still filled with thankfulness. We who were there were able to receive and to learn much. To be sure, not everything tended to make us joyful, and certainly those days brought many problems before us, but that was a good thing too, for we learned to understand more clearly what questions are of importance to our Mennonite brotherhood in our time, and we learned to see better that these questions will be solved only by an earnest united sympathetic effort.

In addition to those present from the Netherlands, there were at this congress many representatives from Germany, the United States of America, Canada, Switzerland, France, and some emigrants from Russia as well as representatives of smaller groups. In some respects this congress was therefore a courageous act. An outsider might think that a congress of Mennonites, who have the reputation of always trying to be in harmony, should, as a matter of course, have a common foundation for fellowship. But he who is better acquainted with the circumstances knew beforehand that here people would come together who, although possessing a common historical tradition because they are all Menno's followers, today have become separated so far from each other that it certainly is a real question whether unity of any sort is possible. And many a one did indeed wonder if it would be possible to bridge over the differences in modes of thought and life.

So the wish which the chairman, Pastor van Drooge, expressed in the speech with which he opened the congress was right: the wish

* Reprinted (in translation) from the *Doopsgezind Jaarboekje* for 1937, by permission of the editor, S. H. N. Gorter. The translation from the Dutch is by the author, with some revision by the REVIEW staff at the author's request.

that we should emphasize so much the great things which bind us together that the trifles would not be able to separate us. Full of promise was that first evening in the Singel Church in Amsterdam, where Pastor A. K. Kuiper pointed out to us the One Foundation upon which every one must build in his own way. And then, when we Mennonites from so many different countries sang together the Ambrosian hymn of praise, there was no one who was not deeply touched. Yet I felt that the promise of that first meeting was not fulfilled at Amsterdam. Through the personalities of speakers such as Dr. Christian Neff and Professor Benjamin Unruh we were much impressed; and what was discussed and presented there, the lectures about the past and present of the Mennonites in different countries, was enlightening and good. But then, because of the official character of the Amsterdam part of the congress, those lectures were kept so brief and so purely historical, that at the end of it all we felt ourselves more or less as outsiders looking on, and did not really come nearer to each other. That was the reason why many a one left Amsterdam with a feeling of disappointment notwithstanding the many good things which were presented and which we shall keep as precious documents of our history in the extensive reports of the congress. We had not unitedly experienced anything fundamental. We felt very deeply that there were differences separating us, and we would have liked to talk about them in order to learn to know each other better, but that was not possible. Moreover, for reasons which are easy to understand, the German delegates did not express themselves very much. And so we felt a restraint upon us which interfered with that openness toward one another which is the first requirement for real fellowship.

It was Elspeet with its broad moors and beautiful landscapes which brought us to ourselves and to each other. There the lectures dealt more with principles, and everyone was compelled to express himself candidly. There too, in that sincere, brotherly, atmosphere each could reveal himself better and give expression to his real convictions. As a consequence of these frank discussions it became evident that our first fears were justified. The addresses and personal conversations revealed how far we Mennonites had drifted from each other. This was manifested first of all in the field of faith. Most of the foreign brethren were "orthodox," whereas we Hollanders for the greater part had altogether our own type of

faith which the foreigners could not understand. It was not possible to enter into a discussion of the differences in the short time which was available; had we done so, certainly the differences would have manifested themselves still more distinctly. These differences also played a part in the differing formulation of the purpose of our missionary activity. However, it appeared from the discussion that, in general, understanding and interest for mission work is increasing in our brotherhood and many of us were deeply touched by the inspired testimonies from men who are giving themselves to the work of medical missions and evangelization.*

The difference in convictions appeared greatest when we began to discuss the question of our attitude towards culture. Pastor Fritz Kuiper expressed sentiments on this subject which are probably shared by all of us. He said in essence: "The earlier Mennonites kept themselves out of worldly affairs, they wanted to form closed communities; we, however, think differently on this point; we believe that we are placed in this world to work here. As Christians we feel we have a calling in this world, a task in regard to culture. In principle we do not say 'nay' but 'aye' to the concept of a responsibility toward this world. We are aware, to be sure, that at times Mennonites have given themselves so much to this world that they have become worldly and lax and have consequently followed the spirit of this world too much. We know that it is therefore necessary that we should learn to understand our Christian calling better and to condemn everything which, according to our conviction, is contrary to the Gospel. We must be able to understand accordingly that according to their most sacred conviction some people can refuse to enter military service. We dare not let this world go, but neither dare we yield uncritically to this world. The Gospel calls us to be *in* this world and yet not to be *of* this world."

As a result of Kuiper's address and the one on the same topic by Professor Smith, the differences showed themselves in a somewhat alarming way. For the greater part the Americans and the Dutch agreed with Kuiper, only with this difference that generally the Americans seem to be less entangled in the things of this world than the Dutch. The Germans on the other hand took quite a different point of view; they saw in the cultural and political life of today

* Missionary Schmidt from Java, and Missionary Kuhlman from China, gave inspiring testimonies. H. S. B.

something to which Mennonites as Mennonites have nothing to say. In their congregations they would care for their personal religious life, but they had not a single word to say nor a single message on participation in national and cultural affairs. The Gospel was for them only a message for their own welfare, not for this struggling world. They stood altogether outside of the religious conflict in Germany. Sometimes it made us feel both strange and hurt that Mennonites living in a state where dictatorship and world-glorification is exalted, and where human and spiritual liberty is abrogated, should have nothing to say about all this from the point of view of their faith. Militarism, for example, was accepted as a necessity to hold back Bolshevism. Without wishing to judge on this point, I yet want to say that it seemed to us as if the life of the German Mennonite congregations had not escaped the danger of fossilization. On the opposite side of the question were the Americans whose representatives, Bender, Miller, and Schroeder, declared themselves for democracy as a high spiritual possession and who declared positively that ninety-five per cent of the Americans are non-resistant because of their faith. In them we met a type of faith which we Dutch do not know here, a positive faith which holds strongly to the ancient Mennonite principles and which desires to fulfill with them a special task in this world.

Thus a chasm was disclosed in the domain of religious conviction. That sometimes made it very difficult. Yet the differences were not able to estrange us completely from each other, because there was something underlying that I should like to call unity in the deepest sense. In the first place it was a unity in the earnest desire to understand the will of God. For when in the evening after much seeking and speaking and deliberation the sounds died away and we were silent together and every one bowed his head in prayer, then we all felt ourselves one in the sincere desire to listen to the voice of God for a message for our life and our time. That was sincere and in earnest. However great the differences were, we all understood that here things were involved which required honest discussion and in which each had found only a part of the truth. We knew that each sought the will of God with sincerity and intense desire. That will of God was understood in different ways, but the desire was the same. So we perceived again that where men speak there will be variety of opinion and that we must permit this variety if we wish to main-

tain liberty. But we perceived also that where there is sincerity and humble reverential seeking, there men may yet form a community if human insignificance is silent before God.

That there was unity in the deepest sense also was evident from the patience and conscious tolerance with which the strain due to our differences, which was sometimes very great, was endured. The desire grew to speak more fully and explicitly about the questions under discussion and in this way to learn from each other. Therefore this congress points to the future. After Basel and Danzig it was a new, although a hesitating beginning, but yet a beginning from which something good can emerge if we learn to speak still more sincerely with each other, to listen still more quietly.

There was also unity in the concern about the distress of many Mennonites, a unity which made us forget our differences in the common concern for the lives of those who for the sake of their faith have had to leave their native country, leaving everything behind, and who have lost many relatives and have still to undergo many hardships. We were deeply moved by the thought of those who still have a hard daily struggle for existence and whose letters and testimonies nevertheless speak to us of a religious strength and joy which make us feel ashamed.

A universal respect grew in us when Brother Toews and Brother Hiebert told us so simply and so touchingly about the fate of the colonists in Canada, Paraguay and Brazil, when we saw with our mind's eye how the refugees came to primeval forests and plains and were obliged to build their entire life again from a new beginning. Many of these refugees still have a very hard life, are still struggling to secure an existence for their families and to pay off their debts. And then there are the others who could not flee. Approximately fifty thousand Russian Mennonites who remained behind in Russia are slowly dying out in their own country. Everywhere they live dispersed and have to be silent under persecution.

As we thought of this, we felt very strongly that perhaps in the last analysis the differences between us were not the most important. And in all of us the desire was awakened to be able to do something for those Mennonites who lead such a hard life. Our life is still so easy; they have been faithful unto the very end; cannot we support them by giving something of ourselves? Then it was resolved unanimously that just as was the case after Danzig, a world

collection should be held in order to help pay off the debt of the colonists. It was also resolved to send to the brethren in Russia a message of sympathy and to pray that they might soon be able to occupy the place which they formerly held in our Brotherhood. It was but little that we could do; it may be of practical use when we show actually that the need of our brethren in Paraguay and Brazil is also our need and when we transform our pity into deeds of financial support.

And the best result of this last evening was that every one understood that for the support of the refugees and those still in Russia international co-operation was necessary. The Dutch Mennonite Committee for Emigrants, which met frequently in private sessions with the other relief committees, brought us the information that a fixed center for international contact had at last been established. The information which Pastor Gorter communicated to us was greeted with joy, particularly because Professor Unruh is to be the central figure in the international contact. Thus it will be possible for international contact to continue and to grow in the years between congresses. In this way the congress had a double practical result: a clarification of insight about the problems which concern Mennonites at this time, and the formation of a central point for international contact in relief work.

We learned much at this congress—much that caused us pain, but our horizon has been widened. We as Hollanders especially realized again and again: how comparatively safe and peaceful we are in our country, how little is at stake for us personally. Those outside stand in the midst of the conflicts of our time. The struggle with the powers of this world has compelled them to make decisions. Many have been dragged along with the world, others have held their own. We do not judge them. As a matter of fact we dare not do so because our lives are still so comfortable. But we must be roused from our complacency; may this congress have awakened us and may it have made us feel how great is the responsibility laid upon us. Many times we were ashamed when we heard others confess a faith, so full of courage and joy notwithstanding the most terrible circumstances, for we were thinking of ourselves and our congregations. Many times we trembled when we perceived how some Mennonites in other countries are no longer faithful to their vocation, for again we were thinking of ourselves and our congregations.

I believe that the contact with the others has delivered us from our complacency. Now we know again what important things are at stake in the struggle of our days. Now we know that when our faith retires to a narrow circle it becomes lifeless. It can be kept alive only through contact with and response to reality. We here, in Holland have still the opportunity to ask ourselves what our faith requires of us. We are still able to seek in the Gospel not only our refuge, but also our strength and guidance. That was the charge which the congress laid upon us. We must seek more earnestly than before and try to be faithful. That is why the last meeting at Witmarsum meant so much for us all.

It was Professor Unruh who spoke to us about our Menno Simons who was a fugitive on the face of the earth, but who never fled before the face of his God, and Pastor van Drooge added thereto in his closing prayer the petition that God might renew us as of old. Not that everything must become just as it formerly was, not that we have to go back to the old days in every respect, but that we may learn the obedience of Menno, that again we might give our lives to the service of God.

Probably many went home from the congress with an uneasy feeling that the questions which were placed before us there are very difficult and yet must be faced. And the possibility also faced us that we might be asked personally the decisive question. That may make us fearful, yet it was good that we were there. In a certain sense the life of others which was revealed to us in the sessions of the congress brought us to face ourselves. So the congress can mean a promise for the future of our congregations, if in our own circle we hold fast the word of the song which the young people from Friesland sang so strongly and encouragingly at Witmarsum: "Our strength lies in union, hold out your hands to each other, you all who are young and Mennonites," and if also we hold fast to sincerity and come together with the ardent desire to help each other to understand the will of God and to be faithful to His call.



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