

GENEVA (UCAN) -- The Third World has given theology a new home and is fast becoming the place to make theological sense out of contemporary human issues.

"We are here to begin a new era of doing theology that consists in becoming immersed in solidarity with the struggles for justice, social change and liberation, and involving ourselves in grassroot movements to change mentalities and institutions," declared the head of the Ecumenical Association of Third World Theologians (EATWOT) recently.

Addressing the start of the fifth EATWOT conference that opened here on Jan. 10, the association's president, Methodist Bishop Emilio de Carvalho of Angola, launched what is being called a week-long "Dialogue between First and Third World Theologians."

The conference participants, including 41 theologians from 15 developed countries and 30 theologians from 20 developing countries, began by "telling stories" - sharing personal narratives of oppression and struggle against racism, sexism and classism.

This input was then put to social and theological analysis to induce new theological conclusions. A five-page theological reformulation is expected to be produced when the meeting ends on Jan. 13, and EATWOT hopes this reformulation will further stimulate dialogue with oppressed peoples, other theologians and heads of churches.

Organized at the Centre Internationale Reforme John Knox, the conference caught fire after two German theologians, J.B. Metz and D. Soelle, spoke. The ensuing heated debate confirmed for many participants that the European-centered era of Christianity has ended and that the Third World is now the place and source of a relevant and vivid new theology.

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Women theologians, one-third of the participants, lashed out at what they said is a male-dominated social system which worships power. In reaction against sexist oppression, they blamed masculine theology for supporting such a system.

The EATWOT Secretary, Maryknoll Sister Virginia Fabella of the Philippines, said she does not like the term "feminist theology" which was discussed at length. Instead, she said: "I prefer to say I am a woman doing theology from a woman's perspective."

The conference has been organized on the theme: "Doing Theology in a Divided World." Besides the theologians, Christians with theological background who are involved in issues of justice and social change, were also invited. They work in feminist movements, anti-nuclear organizations, migrant worker groups and solidarity groups for Third World causes.

Among the Asian theologians, India's K.C. Abraham was appointed Chairman of the Steering Committee, while fellow Indian Father D.C. Amalorpavadass and M.J. Manazan from the Philippines were made members of the Drafting Committee.

EATWOT was founded at Dar-es-Salaam, Tanzania, in 1976, and it aims to bring Third World theologians together for dialogue. It explores the diverse meanings of "liberation" as a theological, cultural, economic and political theme.

The association also aims to foster the growth of theologians, relevant to the lives, religions and cultures of Third World people and to their struggle for full humanity. "EATWOT serves to confirm the change in the geographical location of theology," said its Vice-President, Father Sergio Torres of Chile.

Till now, four "dialogues" have taken place, the last at New Delhi in August 1981. A European ecumenical symposium on "the future of Europe: a challenge to theology" was held in Woudshoten in the Netherlands in December 1981 to prepare for the present conference.

EATWOT's Asian Coordinator, Oblate of Mary Immaculate Father Tissa Balasuriya of Sri Lanka, hopes to gather Asian theologians next year to reflect on results of the dialogue.

The conference, being held here because of Geneva's importance and accessibility to all participants, will have far-reaching effects. As one participant from Belgium stated: "The theology of the West will not remain the same after this historical dialogue."

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