

II. Reflections on the Conference & Declaration

Let me first review the process that resulted in the Oxford Declaration. An initial, smaller conference (held in Oxford in January of 1987) produced several papers (reprinted in *Transformation* 4:3-4, J/S and O/D 1987) and initiated two follow-up processes. First, a study of credit-based income-generating development projects in poorer nations was commissioned. Second, the entire world was divided into seventeen geographic regions, each of which was to produce four papers on the four topics highlighted in the Declaration. These sixty-eight papers were to be refined in regional conferences, then submitted to a single editor who would collate them into a "long" (72 pages) interpretive paper. A shorter "statement," which was to be discussed and revised by the conference and issued to the public as the conference "Declaration," was not available to conferees until after the conference began, and then only appeared one section at a time. These sections were discussed primarily in small (about 7-person) groups, with group comments passed back to a drafting committee that often worked late into the night to produce a revision for the next morning's session. After about a half dozen such revision cycles, the final draft of the Declaration emerged.

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Luther's comment that God's rule in social relationships is a left-handed one applies to the Conference process as well; there were some flaws, some of which may have been unavoidable. Only twenty-two of the expected sixty-eight regional papers were actually produced and cited in the interpretive paper. Since the interpretive paper and first Declaration draft were produced by a single editor, they inevitably reflected that editor's viewpoint, in spite of attempts to make the process an international and inclusive one; several sections of papers that I considered to be crucial were left out of the process from the start. Since much of the drafting was done on-the-spot, it was fairly difficult to be reflective or to review the relevant literature on the topics at hand, and it was inevitable that much of the statement would be written by a few individuals interpreting interpretations of their own drafts. This further limits the "representativeness" of the document, and leads toward suspicion that many who signed did so only because the signing indicated one's "substantial agreement," a clause open to wide interpretation. These weaknesses may be "inevitable" in that such a process is usually initiated by persons with "visionary" personalities (a common psychological profile calls them "intuitives," as opposed to "sensors"), visionaries who are weak at managing details but reluctant to turn them over to others. We can be grateful that "intuitives" are rarely given responsibility for the enforcement of law or collection of garbage.

It is also difficult to write a communique when the intended audience remains unnamed. It was never clear if our statement was to be a mere affirmation of our own solidarity with each other, or a didactic statement aimed at the evangelical laity, or an exercise to earn for evangelicals the Social Justice Merit Badge from the World Council of Churches, or a discussion with the scholarly community (and, if so, scholars in which field(s)), or a docu-

ment for consideration by evangelical leaders. I expect that future gatherings would do well to limit the number of attendees, limit the topic of discussion to some particular policy problem (since the number of conclusions that may be drawn from first principles is about exhausted), meet around a common scholarly syllabus that every attendee has read, and either produce no common document or write a manuscript to some particular audience (e.g., a thirty-page leaflet for evangelical church-attenders about how to think Christianly about the cultural side-effects of Capitalism, or about the appropriate role of the state in the economy, or about the relationship between the "public" and the "private" for Christians and the church).

The Oxford Conference did provide a forum and thought-framework in which a large group of evangelicals could spend time talking together about issues on which they had disagreed in print, all in the context of tremendous world-wide economic changes. The resulting Declaration has been widely heralded as an instance where "liberals acknowledged the benefits of markets as a means of organizing resources, while conservatives affirmed the norms of social justice and concern for the poor," a breakthrough in fusion technology in which the Left and Right averaged their positions and arrived at subscribable truth.

I think that this is a misreading of the events, though there are obviously some of the Left who are now groping for a way to "come in from" their old positions. History has forced nearly everyone to acknowledge that markets are superior to central planning as a coordinating mechanism. But the evangelical Left has rarely tied its fortune to central planning. Their concern has more often been the alleged harmful cultural side-effects of free-market economies, the value of the welfare state in mitigating these side-effects, the special hermeneutic office of the poor, and the

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salvific significance of state-sponsored leveling projects. So even if central planning is dead, I don't see that much has necessarily changed for the evangelical Left. The Declaration's language is certainly inclusive enough to force few changes in their positions. I could imagine the Left both affirming some value in markets and continuing their earlier agenda; they could even be *fueled* in it by the changes in the East, encouraging the East to reject the ideas of the Right and seek, yet again, a Third Way.

As to the Right, concern for social justice and the needs of the poor is not new to their agenda. The debate has focused on metaphysics, means, and measurement, not on good will. While conservatives must be pleased to see kind references in the Declaration to the creation of wealth and the economic disclosure of the creation/environment, it would be unwise for them to submit to the triumphal impulse and claim that all the world has tipped its hat to conservatism.

Conservatives may be most tempted to this impulse by the Declaration's references to credit-based income-generating projects among the poor. These are heralded and endorsed as the means of preference for alleviating poverty, and Christian agencies are strongly encouraged to "get with the program." This will be a welcomed change from the tired dilettantesque diatribes emphasizing redistribution, but as one who has been professionally involved in the evaluation of such income-generating projects, I think that such a strong, universal endorsement of credit-based programs is a mistake.

This development strategy was promoted in the "secular" literature ten years ago, and has since fallen out of favor in many quarters. That it should be tardily over-endorsed by evangelicals tends to mark us as excitable, sophomoric types (as if folks needed more fuel for this), and sets the conservatives up for a backlash.

In any event, the "Oxford Declaration" has not ended the conservative-liberal

conversation within evangelicalism. However, I think that discussion of the manuscript during the next several years will be very helpful in clarifying the remaining points of agreement and disagreement. ■