The Russian Church, Religious Liberty and the World Council of Churches*

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Introduction

> The foes of peace seek to achieve their ends by a third world war, by destroying millions of peaceful, innocent people with nuclear warheads, by annihilating their cities and the treasures of their centuries-old cultural achievements . . . Thus the primary factor is the insatiable craving of the USA for new military gains and the economic and political domination of the world . . . Yet no matter how important for the Americans are their plans of global economic and political domination, no matter how strong the dollar, these are not the basis of their decision to employ their bombs. The overriding factor is their fear of socialism, which marches forward inexorably.

These words were written not earlier this year in the worsening East-West conflict; they are those of a spokesman for the Russian Orthodox Church printed in January 1948 in the *Journal of the Moscow Patriarchate.*

I propose in this lecture to examine changing — or in some cases unchanging — Soviet attitudes to the world outside, particularly as seen through the relations of the Orthodox Church with one organisation, the World Council of Churches. I shall look at the complementary policy from the side of the WCC, narrowing the focus in the later part of the paper to the debate of the last decade and a half on religious liberty.

With commendable breadth of vision, typical of its early days, leaders of the WCC had tried to be in contact with the Russian Church even before the founding assembly in 1948.

Inevitably, during Stalin's lifetime the Russian Orthodox Church denounced the infant WCC as a mere tool of American policy. Five years later the death of Stalin made it possible for the Moscow Patriarchate, that church's central body, to delelop relations more broadly, not just

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within the Soviet sphere of influence.

The years of the "thaw" made it possible for the Russian Orthodox Church to feel its way towards a more normal relationship with the churches of the West and in 1955 there was renewed contact with the WCC. At Utrecht in August 1958 there was a meeting which led directly to the Russian application for membership. The architect of these new relations on the Russian side was the intriguing and formidable figure of Metropolitan Nikolai (Yarushevich) of Krutitsy and Kolomna.

The same thaw opened up limited possibilities for foreign students to study in the Soviet Union and it was my privilege to be a member of the first British Council exchange for the academic year 1959-60, so it was from this time that I began to be a personal observer of some of the events described. I met members of the WCC delegation which visited Moscow in December 1959 under the leadership of the General Secretary, Dr W. A. Visser't Hooft, a meeting which further developed relations.

When asked my impressions of Russian church life by the WCC delegation I was pessimistic about the viability of religion under the communist system; wrongly, as it turned out. I was also unaware of a new factor: the virulent persecution just beginning under Khrushchev. By a strange coincidence, this broke the surface in the very same month as the WCC delegation's visit, being signalled most notably in *Pravda* on 6 December by an article in which a priest and lecturer at the Leningrad Theological Academy, Alexander Osipov, announced a dramatic break with religion.

The details of this persecution, so little comprehended at the time, have been extensively documented in subsequent years, not least through the efforts of such Russian churchmen as Father Gleb Yakunin (a central figure in this lecture) and the most precise details of it have long since been available to the world.

The Russian Orthodox Church joined the WCC at the Third Assembly in New Delhi, November-December 1961. This same year stands also as the blackest for religious liberty in the Soviet Union since before the Second World War. Twenty thousand functioning Orthodox churches were being reduced by two thirds by the employment of brutal physical measures; after only fifteen years of renewed activity, theological seminaries were being closed again and any believers who resisted were being imprisoned after only a crude pretence of justice.

The atmosphere at home in which the Russian Orthodox Church was taking this decisive new step was one of acute crisis. Nothing could have embodied this more symbolically than the events surrounding the very man whose efforts had brought the Russian Church to this point: Metropolitan Nikolai. Seemingly at the height of his powers, he was removed from office in 1960, almost certainly on orders from the highest level in the Kremlin. As it happened, I may have been the last foreigner to be re-

ceived by him (April 1960) before his fall, and knowledge that he must have had of the impending crisis probably accounted for the tense atmosphere which prevailed. It was, therefore, Archbishop (later Metropolitan) Nikodim, then aged only 32, not Nikolai, who led the delegation to New Delhi. By the most gruesome coincidence, Nikolai died a week after the end of the Assembly. And there are those in the Soviet Union who believe that his death was not natural. Certainly at his funeral some *babushki* (old women) screamed out, "Murderers".

At the New Delhi Assembly there were cautious hopes for the future. Still more, those who knew of the persecution were afraid of endangering the Soviet churchmen, all of which inhibited any desire there was on the part of some delegates to raise difficult questions. Both sides were cautiously feeling their way in uncharted territory. It was an era of lively hope, immense good will and a profound desire for reconciliation across political frontiers.

1962-68

A few experienced people in the ecumenical movement certainly knew the truth. They were in a very considerable dilemma: speak out or keep silent? In today's terms one would advocate the former. But at that time not a single one of the later avalanche of Christian documents had reached the west which besought us to "speak out: it is our only hope".

After twenty-five years it is possible to reveal without indiscretion that, when the first World Council delegation went to Moscow, one of the people they met was Fr Vsevolod Shpiller, one of the most respected Moscow priests. His subsequent comment to a friend of mine was: "It is amazing how much the leaders of this delegation know about us, but it is equally amazing how little they understand. But there is a young man with them, Pat Rodger [now Bishop of Oxford] who understands everything."

There is as yet no inside account of the policy discussions which took place during these difficult years of the early 1960s. A WCC publication of some value — and the only one of its kind there has ever been in Geneva — *Current Developments in the Eastern European Churches*, came out under the editorship of the late Alexandre de Weymarn from 1959, seemingly in preparation for Russian membership. It was circumspect but not completely silent about the emergent persecution, drawing on the Soviet press, which did reveal the general drift of events. It is possible that the new Russian presence in Geneva was instrumental in securing its discontinuation in 1962, though there is at present no evidence for this.

Even an ecumenist as experienced in the ways of Russian church life as Sir John Lawrence, in a notable and perceptive article published in 1962 in *Ecumenical Review*, the main organ of the WCC, failed to forecast the

drift of events:

> So far experience does not suggest that Russian church-people come to ecumenical meetings in order to play politics and, if they did so, it would be seen through at once . . . No doubt there will be a certain number of occasions when public declarations will have to be modified in order to avoid embarrassing delegates from the East when they get home but, provided we choose our words carefully, I think we shall be able to say very nearly everything that we want.

Sir John, now the Honorary President of Keston College, would be the first to admit that this forecast has not been fulfilled, but his phrase "so far" justifies the remark at the time.

Some officials at the WCC did realise that the Soviets had to make "passport speeches", but they were perhaps not prepared for the way politics would come to dominate Russian participation under the tutelage of Metropolitan Nikodim. The leaders of the WCC were people of outstanding ability and complete integrity. They had the will to understand the Soviet Union, but in my view they sometimes listened to the wrong advice. They were of course in a difficult position. The official representatives of the Soviet churches advised secrecy and caution, which seems to have led to a move away from open discussion of sensitive issues of which member-churches of the WCC had some right to be informed. Discretion was certainly required, but it may be thought that in this case discretion was carried too far. The representatives of the Soviet churches needed to show their own government that they had done their best to prevent discussion of delicate issues but, if they had been overruled by the majority, the Soviet government might have accepted this.

In 1965 Patrick Rodger only just failed to be elected General Secretary of the WCC. If his candidature had been successful, he might well have put the East-West relations of the ecumenical movement on a different course. Instead Dr Visser't Hooft was succeeded by the American Presbyterian, Dr Eugene Carson Blake. Under him the WCC continued its internal staff work, integrating the Russian Orthodox Church, now joined by the Russian Baptists and four other churches from the Soviet Union, into the life at headquarters and the various committees of the World Council. Metropolitan Nikodim became a member of the Central Committee in 1962 and one of the seven Presidents in 1975.

It was during this period (1965) that two Russian priests, Frs Gleb Yakunin and Nikolai Eshliman, made the most forceful plea for religious liberty ever to emanate from the Soviet Union up to this date. One of their hopes was to open up ecumenical debate over the issues of discrimination and persecution. Some Russian appeals were already being addressed directly to the WCC.

At the Fourth General Assembly of the WCC at Uppsala, Sweden, in

July 1968 the debates and adopted policies were overwhelmingly in favour of third-world causes: Vietnam, Angola, the racial issue of Southern Africa. Even though Soviet threats to crush the Prague Spring were rumbling on the horizon (the tanks moved in a month later) the delegates took no public stand on this, although WCC officials were in close touch with Professor Josef Hromádka from Czechoslovakia.

Canon Bernard Pawley, writing in the *Church Times*, summarised the question thus:

> The most controversial and, to my mind, the most disastrous decision of the Assembly was a unilateral request to the USA to stop the bombing of military targets in Vietnam. An attempt to link this with the condemnation of the infiltration of the South by armed guerrillas was defeated. So the old dark shadow of appeasement fell over the Assembly — there will have been joy in the Kremlin that night.

This same Assembly passed the basic resolutions which led to the establishment of the Programme to Combat Racism, one of the most distinctive and controversial arms of WCC policy. My personal view of this programme was always that it needed strengthening by a positive declaration that it was opposed to racism and discrimination of all kinds and in all places, not just to racism between black and white. Oppression of Soviet minorities, such as the Islamic Crimean Tatars and even the Jews, has always been excluded. This was also the very time during which the ancient religious and cultural traditions of the Tibetan people were being systematically eradicated by the Chinese.

According to someone who was on the sub-committee of the Uppsala Assembly which considered the establishment of the PCR, it was the North American representatives who insisted that the WCC should focus exclusively on black-white relationships. Third-world representatives fought hard to keep other human-rights conflicts on the agenda, but the Americans were "fanatically determined" (my informant's words) to concentrate only on the exploitation of the blacks. No Russian voices, it is said, were heard on the issue. My own impression, from being present on the margins of this great occasion, is that Soviet delegates were able to sit back and simply watch the Assembly's work engage upon a whole series of measures which were in line with Soviet foreign policy. It is clearly from 1968 that one notes a new direction in WCC activities and condemnation of American policy in Vietnam came to play an ever larger role.

Nevertheless, when confronted with such a flagrant violation of a nation's rights as when Soviet troops invaded Czechoslovakia the month after the Assembly, the WCC spoke out unambiguously from its headquarters:

> We appeal to the government of the USSR to reconsider the

> policy which dictated the military intervention, to remove all its troops from Czechoslovakia at the earliest possible moment, and to renounce the use of force or its threat upon its allies.

No words could have been more forthright. Yet the Soviet representatives in Geneva sat tight, proving that it is possible for the WCC to speak out on human-rights issues affecting the communist countries, despite the risk of seeing its Russian Orthodox membership walking out. Again, in 1974 the WCC offered public support for Pastor Georgi Vins, the outstanding leader of the Reform Baptist movement in the Soviet Union, when he was imprisoned for a second term for his efforts to achieve independence from state control. The WCC also issued a statement in support of Solzhenitsyn shortly before his expulsion from the Soviet Union.

Nairobi: A Door Opened

During the early seventies Soviet pressure on the churches continued, though in less severe form than earlier. One outcome of this was a spate of letters from the ordinary faithful, especially of the Orthodox Church, addressed to the WCC charting violations of religious liberty in their own areas. Some of these gave new insights, such as a series from the Pochayev Monastery in western Ukraine. The Geneva representatives of the Russian Orthodox Church advised a policy of keeping the texts of these appeals to as restricted a circulation as possible and not informing the member-churches or even the Central Committee of their contents, even though they were clearly designated as "open letters". When questioned about them publicly, officials of the Moscow Patriarchate tended variously to state that the authors were representing only local difficulties which Soviet legislation protecting religion would be able to sort out or that any publicity would only make the situation worse. Thus the ecumenical movement was deprived of a valuable insight. In more recent years information about the imprisonment of Soviet citizens for religious reasons has always elicited the response that "every country has its laws and these people have been imprisoned for breaking them, not for their faith". The administration in Geneva, in consultation with the Soviet representation there, evolved the policy of taking up selected human rights issues mainly in private, either with Soviet officials direct or, in keeping with generally-prevalent policies, of doing this in the first instance through the member-churches in that country, whose representatives were in any case permanently in Geneva. This is a central issue of policy and deserves to have been more fully discussed among member-churches and by the Central Committee. There are lively and divergent views on this question, which should have been aired before the decision that this was the correct, indeed the only, policy to be adopted. Furthermore, for

more than twenty years there has never been a single person in the Geneva headquarters who was both politically independent of Moscow and an expert on the Soviet situation. Francis House was asked to consider staying on in this capacity after 1962, but no alternative emerged when he did not. The Soviet representatives could now *de facto* exercise a veto over any WCC activities in defence of human rights in the Eastern bloc, to be circumvented only when some event of special magnitude made it impossible for the WCC staff to do any other than react—such as over Czechoslovakia and Solzhenitsyn.

The period between the Fourth and Fifth General Assemblies of the WCC saw a growing frustration within some member-churches at what they construed as inactivity in Geneva on human rights and religious liberty in the Soviet bloc. Therefore pressure built up towards the Nairobi Assembly, which opened on 23 November 1975, that something should be done. How this should happen was not so clear and no preparation whatsoever was made for this issue on the agenda. When they met together, those delegates who felt concerned and morally obliged in some way to raise the question were still not clear whether this would be possible or not.

On the third day of the Assembly an event occurred which jerked open the eyes of every single delegate, whether he or she was previously interested in this issue or not. The Assembly had a daily newspaper *Target*, an existing Kenyan Christian publication adapted to this new purpose for the duration of the conference. Its local editors, advised by one member of the Communications Department of the WCC, rose to the challenge in an exciting way which the Assembly's organisers had not foreseen. They received an "Appeal to the Delegates of the Fifth Assembly of the World Council of Churches" from the Soviet Union. Perusal of the text showed the editors that this letter from individuals within the largest member-church raised issues which were of enormous interest to the whole of world Christianity. Indeed, upon publication it became the main talking-point of the Assembly.

In brief, the long letter makes a passionate appeal for help and goes on to present western churches with a precise, practical plan for offering it. One signatory of the letter was Fr Gleb Yakunin, resuming his activity of ten years earlier. The other was Lev Regelson, a lay physicist.

The authors expressed the hope that the exercise of Christian love in response to the lengthy suffering of the Russian Orthodox Church would offer a sphere in which the world churches could work together and find ways of healing their divisions. They gave concrete examples of steps taken in this direction in pre-war years. These efforts, initiated by both Anglicans and Roman Catholics in the 1920s and 1930s, did something to stem the flood-tide of persecution during the most difficult period of all. Therefore there had been the widespread hope that:

> the WCC would provide powerful support to its new member, initiate an international movement for the defence of persecuted Christianity and invite all Christians to united prayers for the suffering Church . . . However, the issue of religious persecution has failed to occupy the place it deserves — although it ought to become a central theme of Christian ecumenism.

As regarding the USSR, Christians generally are not informed about what could be done, the authors continued, perhaps they would welcome some practical suggestions from those best placed to make them. Each of the eight points was backed up by detailed documentation.

1. Be informed — this means founding a new mass-circulation and multilingual bulletin.
2. Church leaders should call for worldwide prayer for the persecuted.
3. More meaningful personal contacts should come out of this.
4. Publicity about the persecution, it has proved, is the only way of directly helping to alleviate it, for the Soviets are "extraordinarily concerned about their international reputation".
5. All Christian denominations should involve themselves in this and it will be an effective witness to Christ in the modern world.
6. The Assembly should especially defend those in prison or in penal mental institutions for practising their faith.
7. The right to emigrate should be basic for all humanity.
8. There is a desperate shortage of Christian literature and for this help should be organised from outside.

The response of the Russian delegation in Nairobi was swift and of course appeared in *Target*. Metropolitan Yuvenali, leader of the Soviet delegation and Chairman of the External Church Relations Department of the Moscow Patriarchate, launched into an attack against the character of the authors, rather than attempting to answer their points:

> We note that the first of the signatories, the priest Gleb Yakunin, has been in conflict with his own church authorities for some time, while the other, a layman, Lev Regelson, is known for his anti-ecumenism, having addressed a statement to the Local Council of the Russian Orthodox Church in 1971 in which he severely criticised the ecumenical attitudes and activities in the theological field of the Moscow Patriarchate's representatives. It was a statement in which he argued that ecumenism and all connected with it is a danger for Orthodoxy and must be seen as a heresy in our day.

The ensuing statement set up the "establishment of a socialist order in our country" as a yardstick against which all Christian activities must be measured and claimed that Soviet government activity, as typified by the Council for Religious Affairs, was "highly beneficial" for church life in

the Soviet Union, though admittedly there had been some infringements by local representatives of the state authorities. The "ever-increasing development of democratic principles" gave great hope for the future, he continued. There was no attempt to answer the allegations of systematic persecution made by the writers of the Open Letter.

All the talk for the next few days was behind the scenes, with those concerned to raise the issue looking for some opening within the agenda where they might do so. The opportunity did not occur until 8 December, two days before the end of the Assembly, when there was to be a debate on disarmament and on the Helsinki Agreements which had been signed earlier that year. A report had been prepared for the Assembly and a Swiss delegate, Dr Jacques Rossel, proposed an addition to it:

> The WCC is concerned about restrictions to religious liberty, particularly in the USSR. The Assembly respectfully requests the government of the USSR to implement effectively principle No 7 of the Helsinki Agreement (which proclaims religious liberty as a fundamental freedom).

The Rev Richard Holloway of the Episcopal Church of Scotland seconded the motion and, in an atmosphere of great tension, the Soviet delegation opposed it. The proposal was put to the vote and carried by a show of hands — the only time in the history of the WCC that there has ever been such a resolution.

Nevertheless, the question of procedure immediately arose. Some delegates, it was claimed, thought they were voting on a motion of closure. The chairman of the session, the late Dr Ernest Payne, the British Baptist leader, adjourned the Assembly for a tea interval. Upon his return, giving the impression that there had been an agonised discussion during the break, Dr Payne stated that the motion had been out of order, because the committee which had prepared this particular report had not considered the specific issue of Soviet religious persecution. He proposed that the whole matter should be referred back to the resolutions committee and this was accepted.

This committee, which included a member of the official Soviet delegation, decided to hold an open hearing on religious liberty in the Soviet Union that same evening after the close of the official proceedings, outside the formal agenda of the Assembly, but still part of it. For this, of course, there was no prepared documentation, which turned the hearing into a makeshift event.

Late that night and working into the early hours of 9 December the committee, including the Soviet member, worked out a substitute amendment which now referred to "alleged infringements of religious liberty", but all mention of the Soviet Union by name was dropped. The next morning Dr Rossel and Fr Holloway offered to withdraw their

original amendment, provided that the following statement was added to the new draft:

> The Assembly requests the General Secretary to see to it that the question of religious liberty be the subject of intense consultations with the member churches of the signatory states of the Helsinki Agreement and the first report be presented at the next Central Committee meeting of August 1976.

After some considerable discussion the Assembly passed the committee's amendment and this addition. The deletion of the condemnation of the Soviet Union weakened the force of this motion, though the final text of the resolution on the Helsinki Agreements stated that there had been a discussion of the "alleged denials of religious liberty in the USSR". At the same time Dr Philip Potter, new General Secretary of the WCC, was put under a clear obligation to report back to the Central Committee on the subject of religious liberty in the Soviet Union.

The next day Fr Vitali Borovoi, a senior member of the Soviet delegation, explained why he had felt obliged to abstain from voting on this resolution. His moderation and willingness to see both sides won him considerable sympathy from the Assembly:

> We are prepared for frankness, for dialogue, and for cooperation, but we are unpleasantly disappointed by the prevailing atmosphere which surrounded the discussion of the questions at the Assembly, an atmosphere compounded of haste, nerves, emotion, and divisiveness . . . However, as concerns the substance of this matter we are prepared for both cooperation and dialogue, though in an equitable and fraternal atmosphere. We ask for your prayers, and we pray for you.

Fr Yakunin's Reaction

The stir caused at the Nairobi Assembly by the initiative of Lev Regelson and Fr Gleb Yakunin became its most controversial talking-point and the echo of this immensely encouraged the Moscow authors. The belief that at last they had aligned world Christian public opinion behind them gave them impetus to make a dramatic new attempt to achieve religious liberty in 1976.

On 6 March 1976 Regelson and Fr Gleb addressed a letter to the General Secretary of the WCC. The main section of this was a careful and detailed exposé of four major areas in which discrimination against believers is built into the Soviet system. The beginning and the end reflect the stage which they believed the WCC had now reached in its support of Soviet believers:

> Dear Mr Potter,
>
> Like many Christians in our country, we are sincerely grateful to you for your personal efforts to which were due in no small

> part to the outstanding spiritual achievements of the Assembly in Nairobi . . . We want to express our profound appreciation to all participants in the Assembly who showed a sincere and effective concern for the fate of the confessors and martyrs who are victims of such inhumanity . . .

The authors did not reply in detail to the accusations and "disinformation" contained in the *Target* letter of Metropolitan Yuvenali. They merely clarified what precisely lay behind the unexpected accusation of anti-ecumenism. Fr Gleb said that he, too, had been associated with the incident mentioned, having helped to draft a document which he had been unable to sign because the Patriarch had banned him from such activities after his open letter of 1965. This letter was an appeal to the *Sobor* (Council) of the Russian Orthodox Church in 1971, stating not that "ecumenism represents a danger for Orthodoxy on the theological level", as Metropolitan Yuvenali had claimed, but that Metropolitan Nikodim's "modernist theology, which he represented as traditionally Orthodox" was a danger. This was an internal question which did not touch the WCC at all, and they also criticised some aspects of the work of the Prague Christian Peace Conference.

Regelson and Fr Gleb issued a warning to the WCC: the Soviet government agency, the Council for Religious Affairs, had already sent out a directive, the aim of which was to neutralise the Nairobi events and "to undermine any possible attempt by the WCC to adopt a resolution of protest against the limitation on believers' rights in the USSR".

The authors concluded by looking forward with confidence to the future work of the WCC in defence of freedom of religion and particularly to the meeting of the Central Committee later that year:

> We are confident that the WCC, guided by the spirit of Nairobi, will prove worthy of its assignment and will study the problem of religious discrimination today with the necessary seriousness and objectivity.

At the same time as writing this document, the authors were also preparing a most significant step in their campaign: the founding of the Christian Committee for the Defence of Believers' Rights. Confident that a significant sector of world Christian opinion was behind them, they prepared themselves to take on the Soviet authorities on a fundamental issue of party policy. They stepped out on a plank over the abyss, not knowing whether it would cross to the other side or not, but sure at least, as they thought, of the support of worldwide prayer in what they undertook.

The work of the Christian Committee (the CCDBR), founded in December 1976, was of the highest calibre. To his previous grasp of the situation in his own Church, Fr Gleb and his associates added the most vigorous defence of Baptists, Pentecostals, Adventists, Catholics and even of non-Christian believers. Had he been given longer to do it, he would un-

doubtedly have extended his work on behalf of Soviet Jews to other religions as well. In the first three years of its existence, the Christian Committee poured out an astonishing total of 417 documents, amounting to 1,302 pages — and these are only those which reached the West. By any criterion, but most especially in Soviet conditions, this must rank as one of the outstanding ecumenical initiatives of this century. The network of contacts necessary to do this under the eyes of the secret police can only be guessed at; Soviet church history of the twentieth century was suddenly being brought to the attention of the world. Not one single fact in any of these 417 documents has so far been shown to be false and their tone is objective.

Fulfilment of the "Spirit of Nairobi"

The first meeting of the new Central Committee of the WCC, immediately following the Nairobi Assembly, decided that "no new programme or structures would be required" for this special study of religious liberty and that the question could be encompassed within the normal processes of the WCC. So Dr Philip Potter wrote on 19 March 1976 to all member-churches based within the states which had signed the Helsinki Agreements (Europe East and West and North America) asking them to supply their own information for a small exploratory consultation on this question. We do not know whether Dr Potter acknowledged the two communications from Mr Regelson and Fr Gleb.

Dr Potter asked the Moscow Patriarchate (but not Fr Gleb) how the Helsinki Agreement was being studied in the Russian Orthodox Church; what infractions of it could be observed; how the Patriarchate could aid the study and the implementation of the agreement; what action it was taking; and what role should be played in the future by the WCC and other bodies.

It is obvious — and not only with hindsight — that it was at this point, by following a rigid procedural policy, that the World Council of Churches made its first mistake in the fulfilment of its mandate from Nairobi. The very act of addressing such a letter to the Moscow Patriarchate put the latter in an impossible position. There was not a single precedent which could have led anyone to think that the response could have been in the "spirit of Nairobi": it was inevitable that there would be an elaboration of the kind of point already put in Metropolitan Yuvenali's *Target* letter. Further, by this time the Council for Religious Affairs would have had the chance, as Fr Gleb was already warning in precisely the same month, to consider its position and devise neutralising tactics. Protocol made it necessary for the same enquiries to be made of the Moscow Patriarchate as of other church leaders, but common sense indicated that other enquiries were also necessary. If these were made, I have seen no

record of them.

There were some senior figures in the WCC administration who saw precisely the dangers which were threatening. In conditions of great secrecy, I was called to Geneva in the same month of March 1976 for a consultation meeting. It was not possible, we were told, to hold this consultation which was with three research institutes — Keston College (Kent), Glaube in der 2 Welt (Zürich) and the Inter-Academical Institute for Missiological and Ecumenical Research (Utrecht) — on the premises of the WCC for fear the Russians should find out about it. Instead, the meeting took place in a hotel by Geneva railway station. Even now the identities of those who convened the meeting must remain secret.

Nevertheless, the substance of the consultation is on the record. It was a matter of the greatest urgency to provide, under one cover, essential documentation, the lack of which had been so keenly felt during the Nairobi debate. For years the problem had not been that information was unavailable, but that the WCC had not distributed any of it and there was no way that member-churches, especially in the Third World, could know where to obtain it. It seemed obvious to the secret meeting that there must be one brief but comprehensive compilation to cover the basics of the situation under review.

There was very little time, as the WCC had by now fixed the date and place of its key consultation: Montreux, 24-28 July. In less than four months something substantial had to be written, translated, printed and distributed. The result was *Religious Liberty in the Soviet Union: WCC & USSR — a Post-Nairobi Documentation* published in English and German jointly by the three research institutes. It did indeed reach the participants and the Central Committee in time. Its hundred pages could hardly be considered comprehensive, especially in view of the massive amount of information from the Soviet Union which had become available over the last decade. Nevertheless, it did set out the groundwork in relatively basic terms: it described all the Soviet member-churches and gave evidence of the struggle for religious liberty within them, as well as in several which were not members of the WCC (such as the Catholics and the Seventh-Day Adventists). There was a detailed study of basic Soviet legislation on religion, including a valuable letter from Mr Regelson and Fr Gleb to Dr Philip Potter on this and a sympathetic account by Hans Hebly of the existing record of the WCC on religious liberty, which showed that in earlier days this subject had been important to the WCC leadership.

A further and more extended piece of documentation (though with less on the Soviet Union) available to the Montreux consultation was a study of religion in the whole of Eastern Europe which had not long before been produced by the British Council of Churches, *Discretion and Valour*. The one British delegate to the conference, consisting of only thirty

participants, was the Rev. (now Canon) Paul Oestreicher, who had been closely associated with *Discretion and Valour.*

The delegates to Montreux received officially from the WCC as their conference papers a compilation of the replies to Philip Potter's letter of 19 March, a summary of all the appeals and the comments on religious freedom in the Soviet bloc received by the WCC between October 1975 and the date of the consultation (including the two documents from Mr Regelson and Fr Gleb Yakunin, as well as the official views of church leaders) and — which was irrelevant to the sense of the original Nairobi debate — a summary of West European and North American legislation which might be considered in violation of the Helsinki Agreements.

In addition, the delegates received an account of WCC statements and activity in defence of religious liberty from its foundation to the present. The volume produced by the three institutes was available on the table.

There were five days of private discussions, no minutes of which have become available. The main deficiency of the discussion, according to informal reports, was that, while the viewpoint of the Moscow Patriarchate was vociferously presented in the person of Alexei Buyevsky, its senior administrator, no-one at all unambiguously represented the opinions of the Moscow group whose initiative had occasioned the colloquium in the first place. It was all too easy for the delegates to lay aside long and rather complicated documents written by them, the background to which was still obscure to many of those present.

One outcome of this was that Mr Buyevsky called upon the ecumenical movement not to co-operate with the three institutes or any similar groups of experts in the future. There were objections to this statement from Mr Oestreicher and others, but there was no conclusion and Mr Buyevsky's position appears to have become policy from then on (though in fact this did little more than confirm the policy which had existed up to the time of the consultation in Geneva which I attended). It is strange, though, that the WCC did not permanently build on the expertise of the British Council of Churches, which had done such sterling work on this identical subject in the years immediately preceding — and even more strange that the British constituency of the WCC did not insist that its voice on these matters should be decisively heard.

When Philip Potter reported on this consultation to the Central Committee the next month, he stated that it had merely confirmed the direction of the work that was already being done within the WCC and the United Nations.

He then changed the subject by turning his speech into a further criticism of the rich nations of the world for their conduct towards the poor:

> It is essential for the churches in Europe and North America to be aware of the problems created and maintained by European and North American domination of other regions of the world.

> The importance of the Montreux meeting is that the churches in Europe and North America have begun to grapple together, as do those in other regions, with the problems they face.

Instead of questioning the relevance of such a statement to the discussion in hand, the Central Committee appears to have accepted it as a satisfactory assessment of current WCC policy. It is strange that not even the British delegates questioned the General Secretary as to how far he considered the intention of the Nairobi debate and resolutions to have been fulfilled.

However, the Central Committee did recommend the creation of a Human Rights Advisory Group, and the strengthening of regional ecumenical structures for human rights and the Churches Commission on International Affairs (CCIA). This latter is an older organisation than the WCC, but by this time had become subsumed into its structure.

In 1977 the CCIA drew up terms of reference for the Human Rights Advisory Group, which was approved in the same year by the Central Committee. This was to consist of 25 people nominated by member-church and regional bodies, whose brief was to look at human rights over the whole "Helsinki" area: Europe and North America. While this may have appeared to be a logical and even-handed step and could even have been adroit if handled skilfully, it carried with it the danger of crowding out or obscuring the clear sense of the Nairobi debate: pressing for religious liberty in the Soviet Union. To make matters worse, the churches did not supply money for this Advisory Group to meet, so it was reported to the Central Committee at Kingston, Jamaica, in January 1979. No alternative plans were announced for informing member-churches such as could easily have been arranged if there had been cooperation with the three institutes, an exercise which would have cost very little money.

However, in the meanwhile the CCIA increased its staff from four to five to cope with its increased programme, though it still did not call up an expert on the key subject. The Advisory Group did eventually meet in Copenhagen in October 1979 and produced four papers, one of which advocated full cooperation with existing human rights groups. This initiative soon appeared to be less important than a parallel one initiated in March 1977 by Dr Leopoldo Niilus, Director of the CCIA, who suggested there should be Helsinki monitoring within the Conference of European Churches (CEC), a quite separate body from the WCC, but with its headquarters in the same building. This led to a consultation in Montreux in July 1977 which recommended establishing "the Churches' Human Rights Programme for the Implementation of the Helsinki Final Act" and this was adopted immediately by the Central Committee, though not without the reservations of some who felt, in the light of the Nairobi mandate, that the WCC itself should be responsible for such monitoring. In

the event, there were two separate offices in the same building which were concerned with human rights in the communist bloc. The CCIA was responsible directly to the WCC, but it is not clear to whom the other group answers, as its sponsors were the National Council of the Churches of Christ in New York and the Canadian Council of Churches, as well as the CEC.

For the key position of director of the "Churches' Human Rights Programme" a Swiss pastor, Dr Theo Tschuy, whose main working experience had been in South America, was selected. He began his programme in 1980, with a mandate to formulate a five-year plan of work, conditional on funds being forthcoming.

Also in 1980 the CCIA published a *Study Paper on Religious Liberty* for the Central Committee of the WCC. It contains an insight into the ecumenical thinking on the subject at that time and reflects the work done by the Executive Committee of the WCC and the Human Rights Advisory Group up to that point. The appendix contains all the main WCC statements on religious liberty from the beginning and one may read there a series of unambiguous statements, the like of which have not been heard now for two decades. The CCIA, in the same pamphlet, states that these documents reflect cold-war tensions and a western Christian understanding of individual liberties. The *Study Paper* seems to imply that such considerations are now considerably modified. This paragraph is apparently to be taken (though the whole document is shot through with ambiguity) as a reference to the communist bloc:

> Churches and religious associations which in cooperation with the political, social and economic structures of their respective countries take an active part in the creation of what from the Christian point of view is a society of justice for all citizens, are able in this process to resolve problems of church-state relationships in a positive and constructive manner, and thereby clarify matters of religious liberty in practice.

Already the "spirit of Nairobi" seems to have evaporated and the churches, for their guidance, are presented with a set of guidelines so vague as to be barely comprehensible. Nowhere is there an attempt to set out any of the problems facing the churches under the group of governments which systematically deny their full rights.

Meanwhile on the Soviet front the prospects for religious liberty had seriously deteriorated. After three years of intense activity by the Christian Committee for the Defence of Believers' Rights, during which time he saw Soviet policy beginning to crack down in a new way on all kinds of human-rights activities, Fr Gleb was arrested on 1 November 1979 and Lev Regelson on 25 December 1979. The first reaction of the World Council of Churches to this news came in the form of a telex to Keston College which read:

1. Presently no immediate action contemplated.
2. Contacts maintained with concerned member churches.
3. Strengthening of longstanding ecumenical human rights endeavours mandated by WCC Fifth Assembly an outcome of 1971 Central Committee and 1974 St Pölten Consultation reflecting alarming developments worldwide and not generated by individual cases or single countries.

Regards

Leopoldo J. Niilus, Director International Affairs WCC.

Subsequently the WCC did raise this case both in private with the Moscow Patriarchate and in public almost a year later, in a forthright letter from Konrad Raiser, then Acting General Secretary of the WCC, to Metropolitan Yuvenali, but it did not give member churches any details of who Fr Gleb was, nor did it call on its members to support him in prayer. Lev Regelson was so pressurised by the Soviet investigative organs that he renounced his activities. On 28 August 1980 Fr Gleb was sentenced to ten years, the first half in prison, the second in exile. In November 1984 he completed this first half (counting from the day of his arrest).

Towards the Sixth Assembly

The Helsinki Working Group, with Dr Tschuy as secretary, formulated a plan of consultation which divided Europe into a northern and southern band, thus changing the conventional East-West focus.

The group comprises eleven people, four each from Eastern and Western Europe and three from North America. The chairman is Christa Lewek from East Germany, and Dr David Russell, former General Secretary of the British Baptist Union, is an active participant. Instead of producing reports the group planned in the later stages of its work, after informing itself of human-rights violations in the Helsinki area, to take up individual cases with the relevant governments, acting in the main through the local member-churches of CEC. By mid-1983 this case-work had begun and some instances were being raised: for example, those of Valeri Barinov, the Leningrad Christian rock musician, and Fr Gleb Yakunin himself. The group made the attempt, reportedly with some success, to involve the Russian Orthodox Church itself in this advocacy with its own government.

As Dr Tschuy was not responsible to the WCC, he did not present a report in person on the work of the group at the Sixth General Assembly of the World Council of Churches in Vancouver in July 1983, but he did submit a brief printed document which listed the meetings so far, some of the main subjects covered and the personnel involved.

A much longer and more detailed document prepared for the Vancouver Assembly was a Background Information pamphlet: *Human Rights on the Ecumenical Agenda* by Erich Weingärtner, a staff member of CCIA, which naturally had to report on the fulfilment of the Nairobi mandate. It bears the imprint of the World Council of Churches, though carrying on the back cover the disclaimer that "the views expressed do not necessarily reflect positions taken by the WCC or the CCIA". However, this publication is clearly intended as the WCC overview of its human-rights activities, with especial emphasis on the last seven and a half years since Nairobi. Some passages of the text are factual, giving basic information, such as dates of meetings and an outline of various programmes. There are several valuable pages, particularly those in section 12 on "Modes of Action in Human Rights". At the same time, it is deeply flawed and needs careful analysis.

1) The author implies six times that there is something intrinsically dishonourable in the motivation of those in the West who defend religious liberty and human rights in Eastern Europe. After the Second World War many Christians in the West "propitiated for their sins of omission during fascist rule by turning to a fervent commitment to the religious liberty of their sister churches in Eastern Europe" which contributed to the Cold War. They indulge in "pious denunciations from a safe distance" which "are not only ineffective", "but mask a certain hypocrisy", a claim which is repeated in different words later. In the wake of Watergate and Vietnam the need arose again to divert attention to the "misdeeds of others". Alluding to a variety of human-rights organisations, which presumably includes Keston College, Weingärtner claims:

> In fact, "complainants" to the WCC are rarely the victims themselves, but very often special interest groups whose human rights motivations stem from political programmes in opposition to particular ideologies or governments. These groups may wish to trap the WCC into actions in support of their political programmes, using human rights violations as the bait.

The author does not mention the possibility that such groups may have a genuine Christian motivation or that they may be consciously fulfilling the precept of St Paul, who taught that the church is the Body of Christ and that if one member suffers the whole body suffers (1 Cor. 12.26).

2) The author often uses phraseology which lacks the moderation which one might expect in a publication of this nature. When the WCC's policy is questioned, it is "viciously attacked from outside by . . . interest groups". When the WCC presses a case, this is "advocacy", when someone else does, it is "denunciation".

3) Weingärtner appears to hold a conspiracy theory in which all human rights organisations are somehow "diverting attention from

Southern Africa to Eastern Europe" and this misinformation is being directly funded by the South African regime.

4) Weingärtner reflects a questionable theological tenet which has become prevalent in WCC circles. Some ecumenical activists have been claiming the supremacy of "group rights" over "individual rights", a view propagated by some Eastern European church leaders. This Stalinist concept needs fuller analysis than it is possible to give it here, but one should not pass over it without mentioning that it is an idea which, however well meaning it appears to be, has often been used to justify oppression. As soon as the Christian assertion is blurred that the individual is sacrosanct, one is walking off into a haze which somewhere conceals the *Gulag*. The late Max Hayward said: "For Solzhenitsyn and Sakharov, Utopia smells of corpses". Weingärtner writes:

> There can therefore be no priority of the individual over the community, since the separation of the individual from the community is equal to separation from the Holy Spirit, which is equal to sin and death. This position insists that collective rights take priority over those of the individual, that social, economic and cultural rights are the foundation of real freedom of the person, that human dignity derives from the wellbeing of the entire family of humanity.

The essential message of Christ is very nearly the opposite of this Marxist view and the Soviet prison camps are populated with people whose conscience has forced them to go against the collective. But even this concept, if honestly applied, would indict the Kremlin for its anti-religious discrimination and persecution, which turns nearly half the nation into second-class citizens. The Orthodox conception of *sobornost* is a theological view of the collective far superior to the Marxist one.

5) Weingärtner expounds another policy frequently stated in WCC circles, which is highly questionable on theological grounds. This is that the member-churches must show "that their primary responsibility for human rights is within their own countries". Again, it is hard to reconcile this with what St Paul said about the Body of Christ. If member-churches are obliged to be responsible for the agenda and fulfilment of human-rights programmes within their own area, this puts a tremendous responsibility on their leadership and the whole proposition stands entirely on their integrity and ability to act independently of political pressure. In another WCC publication, *Bread and Freedom*, Ron O'Grady gently argues the opposite point of view in the context of India. It cannot be that responsible outside intervention is correct for India, but not for the Soviet Union. Weingärtner does not even argue the basic question as to whether the Moscow Patriarchate has the independence to act on human rights. He simply assumes that it has, and questions the motives of any who would presume to argue the case, which he wins very easily by the way in

which he represents the argument of those who disagree:

> After more than twenty years, there can still be found a considerable level of mistrust, which has been fed by forces hostile to the ecumenical movement. Especially the Russian Orthodox Church has been the object of such hostility, its leaders having been portrayed as agents of the Soviet government, through whose activities the WCC itself becomes a tool of Soviet policies.

Weingärtner does not allow the possibility that there may be some — or even many — who are positively disposed to the ecumenical movement, who yet question the ability — given the present internal political climate in the Soviet Union — of the Russian Orthodox Church to formulate a human-rights programme for its own country.

6) Weingärtner lays the blame for the limitless suffering which the Russian Church has undergone at its own door, though the leadership has now atoned for this by "repentance for the past failures of the church". Even now, according to him, Russian Church leaders say that some individuals are themselves to blame for being persecuted, because they continue to break the law.

7) Weingärtner does not admit that western pressure on behalf of the persecuted can be effective in some instances. Indeed, he has "evidence" that the opposite is true, but he does not produce it, nor does he ask himself the question of what led the Soviet regime in 1971 to reverse its earlier stance on Jewish emigration.

8) The author has a very idealistic view of the present state of Soviet society:

> Communism has guaranteed employment, food, shelter, education, medical care and social security . . . Soviet society is evolving in the direction of an extension of democratic principles.

The context shows the second sentence to be an argument of the Russian church leadership, but the author reproduces it without comment.

9) Weingärtner claims that a consultation on human rights at St Pölten, Austria, in 1974, equipped the churches "to deal concretely with human rights violations, aiding the victims, disseminating information". If this is true, one is bound to ask why participants in the Nairobi Assembly felt it necessary to raise the issue of religious liberty in the Soviet Union in such an acute way a year later. There would have been no need for the emergency nocturnal debate if the question was in hand anyway, and the participants in that felt themselves deprived of precisely the kind of documentation and guidance which Weingärtner claims they were already receiving. Instead of checking the documentation, Weingärtner repeats the expressed views of the Russian church leadership. For

example, in dealing with the Regelson-Yakunin letter he states:

> Rumours of these (Soviet) infringements have reached western Christians in an exaggerated and sometimes distorted form, provoking inappropriate reactions which complicate the resolution of internal church problems.

In fact, Fr Gleb's own writings and the documents collected by him have been accurate almost to the point of pedantry. When such men are brought to trial the Soviet authorities are always looking, but in vain, for falsifications, in order to make the charge of anti-Soviet activity stick. Weingärtner's vague statement already quoted is precisely the kind which helps the Soviet courts to do their work.

Weingärtner twice states that the Third World claimed that the Nairobi debate on religious liberty in the USSR pushed aside "far more urgent human rights problems", but he does not find space to mention any substance of the debate itself, nor does he mention the passing of the resolution criticising the Soviet regime for its anti-religious policies, which was later set aside.

I apologise for devoting so much time to one pamphlet, but it bears the imprint of the WCC. If there were a more weighty statement of its views, I would have been glad to examine it. As it is, *Human Rights on the Ecumenical Agenda* reflects the official Soviet position on many controversial issues. Therefore it is not only inconsistent, but it deviates from the clear Gospel teaching on some points, notably as regards respect for the truth and the duty to seek it.

Vancouver: A Door Closed

Clearly worried about the Vancouver Assembly, the Soviet regime sent a priest to visit Fr Gleb just before it opened. He gave the prisoner communion and a Bible and the world press gave this publicity. This was the news for Vancouver on religious liberty in the Soviet bloc. The "Spirit of Nairobi", in Fr Gleb's phrase, had been reduced to this.

One must sympathise with the officials of the WCC who were faced with determined and resourceful obstruction from the accredited representatives of one of its major member-churches. But more could have been done. Here it is pertinent to observe that sometimes at international gatherings, when Soviet churchmen are publicly opposed, they will privately thank their opponents for having said what they know to be true, but could not have said in the open themselves. Not a document on religious repression in the Soviet Union was circulated, and in any case most of those who would have written them were in prison or penal psychiatric hospital.

Dr David Russell did raise the issue in one short and telling speech. He

was supported by others but this did not lead to any extensive debate on the basic issues. The Archbishop of Canterbury received a communication during the Assembly from Deacon Rusak of the Russian Orthodox Church, in which he stated that he was being persecuted for his determination to write a history of his church since the Revolution. The Archbishop supported Deacon Rusak's right at a press conference and in a BBC radio broadcast, but a spokesman for the Russian Orthodox Church said that no notice should be taken of Rusak because he had been kicked in the head by a horse when a child! He did not explain how, if Rusak was mentally defective, he had been accepted for seminary training, and indeed had served on the editorial staff of the *Journal of the Moscow Patriarchate* for many years.

A resolution before the Assembly called for an end to aid for Afghan "rebels" and for a withdrawal of Soviet troops only after a comprehensive settlement of the Afghan question guaranteed by East and West. An amendment which would have struck out the first clause and would have called for immediate Soviet withdrawal was narrowly defeated after Soviet delegates had hinted that its acceptance might mean their own withdrawal from the WCC. The tone of the resolution was in marked contrast to that of resolutions condemning apartheid and US policy in Central America. General Secretary Dr Philip Potter said afterwards that tough resolutions against the USSR might cause problems for Soviet churches.

Christian Solidarity International staged a "Yakunin Hearing" which presented a great deal of basic information, but this did not have a great deal of influence, as it took place far from the campus of the university where the General Assembly met. (The hearing was originally to have been on the campus itself, but the university cancelled the booking of the hall at very short notice.)

Apart from the work being done by the working group of the Conference of European Churches, which is on a very small scale, it would seem that the WCC is less well placed to guide its member-churches to an understanding of the needs of the persecuted church in the Soviet Union now than it was two decades ago, when Alexandre de Weymarn's publication was still in existence. Nor does it advise its members to seek information from those groups which can provide it.

In 1979 the WCC published a guideline that "the churches within the ecumenical community should support each other morally, materially and politically". The WCC would do well to heed its own directive and to encourage member-churches to follow suit. But to speak openly to the churches of Eastern Europe they will need courage to go against some public statements of the accredited representation of some important member-churches, by no means an easy step to take. But in doing so they would in fact strengthen the hands of those representatives — even of

those who complain the loudest in public — in standing up to their own government and, more important, there is abundant evidence to show that they will be meeting the ardent wishes of the vast bulk of the believers in Eastern European countries.

But the objection will be immediately raised that this action might lead to the withdrawal from the WCC of Soviet churches. Admittedly, with growing isolationism of the Kremlin since 1979, this could happen, as it did recently when the Soviets withdrew from the World Psychiatric Association. But they might well hesitate to do so without warning, given the immense investment the Soviet government has made in the peace campaign through the churches. Even such a withdrawal presents, in my view, some positive possibilities. The resulting publicity would put very heavy pressure on the Soviet government to liberalise in a genuine way.

It is only realistic to suggest that the WCC policy towards the Soviet Union has failed. Its overwhelming aim has been to preserve the link with Russian Christians by avoiding public controversy with the East European church leadership. Not even the Nairobi debate was planned, while for seven years before and nine years since the keynote has been appeasement. It is not too much to say that Geneva policy has misled the worldwide membership of the WCC on the real situation of Soviet believers. If the aim of this was to alleviate the lot of the persecuted, it has failed. Far from easing, Soviet policy on religious liberty and human rights has significantly hardened since 1979. It is not the fault of the leaderships of the Soviet churches that they have not been free to conduct a genuine dialogue in the open Christian spirit they would have wished to bring to their developing contacts.

Beneath the superstructure of collaboration with the regime there is a "confessing church", as there was in Nazi Germany. Surely history teaches that one must seek it out and take every opportunity to set up relations with it. Here lies the path towards genuine peace-making.

Such a re-evaluation of policy would engage the WCC in deeper study of the true situation and acting accordingly. There would be aid for the persecuted "morally, materially and politically", in the WCC's own phrase. Such action would also correspond to the precise requests of Lev Regelson and Fr Gleb Yakunin to the Nairobi Assembly. Not only would such an approach be morally sound, but it would be likely to strengthen the situation of Soviet believers.

The World Psychiatric Association in the late 1970s, in response to strong persuasion, put great pressure on the Soviets. They withdrew from the Association, but there was immediately less psychiatric abuse in the Soviet Union. The World Council is at the moment prepared to do less than the psychiatrists. It is less than the worldwide Jewish community, which achieved a dramatic result on the question of emigration in the 1970s. Christians are asking, as the wife of the dissenter Avvakum did in

17th century Russia, "Will there be an end to this suffering?"

When the suffering ends, world peace will come a few steps closer, for a Russia of the future, where the Christian faith is allowed to play a genuine and positive role, will be an ally in building a better world where resources go into third-world development and not into the arms race. If ever there was an issue to unite the world churches, this should be it.