

*Reveiw*s

Religion in China Today: Policy and Practice

by Donald E. MacInnis. Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 1989.

Paperback, 458 pp.

Since the so-called liberation of China in 1949, the communist party's handling of religion has gone through three distinct phases. In the first, during the fifties, the party aimed to bring all religions under their control, forcing them to sever their links with the outside world, and restricting religious activities to official centres of worship, while promoting atheist propaganda among the people at large. In the second phase, during the Cultural Revolution in the late sixties and early seventies, all religion was totally banned, many religious leaders were imprisoned or sent off to the countryside to undertake manual work, and places of worship were either totally destroyed or confiscated and turned into factories or warehouses. The third phase began, after the death of Mao Zedong, when Deng Xiaoping came to power in 1978 determined to liberalise and expand China's failing economy. In order to achieve this, he needed to rally support from as wide a cross-section of the population as possible — including religious believers. So he restored the right of believers to participate in religious activities, handing back religious properties to their rightful owners and, in many instances, making public funds available to restore and rebuild religious buildings damaged during the Cultural Revolution. Ultimate control over religion was still exercised by the authorities, but for many people the situation was now considerably easier than it had been since the communist party came to power.

In an earlier book, Donald MacInnis had gathered together a large body of documentary material illustrating religious policy and practice in communist China up to the early sixties. The present work brings the story up to date, providing translations of various official documents, articles and press reports detailing official policy on religion and describing the actual religious situation in China since the

Cultural Revolution. Each chapter in the book is preceded by a helpful and informative introductory section, written by the author, setting the documentary material in a wider context.

The change in the party's official policy on religion after the Cultural Revolution was laid down by the Third Plenum of the 11th Central Committee of the party in December 1978, and a translation of the directive explaining the new policy, known as 'Document 19', which was published in March 1982, appears as the first item in the book. The document reaffirms the party's traditional belief that religion is a social phenomenon which will wither away with the coming of communism. For the time being, however, the document acknowledges that any attempt to suppress religion by force is likely to be counter-productive. According to the document, the party's basic task at present is to unite the whole people, including religious believers, in order that all may collaborate in the building of a powerful, modern socialist state. The document warns all party members that the new religious policy is not a temporary expedient but 'a decisive strategy based on the scientific theoretical foundation of Marxism-Leninism and Mao Zedong Thought'.

There are exceptions to the new religious tolerance as promulgated in 'Document 19'. As the document makes clear, a distinction is made between the five major religions (Buddhism, Daoism, Islam, Protestant Christianity and Catholicism), all of which are recognised by the state and enjoy its protection, and 'superstitious' beliefs and practices — very widespread in China — which are not. It is a distinction which, to judge from various statements quoted elsewhere in the book, have caused much confusion among the government cadres who have to implement the new policy. Nor does the policy of religious toleration extend to what are referred to as 'hostile religious forces from abroad who set up underground churches and other illegal organisations', a coded reference to the Vatican and certain Protestant missionary societies which, Document 19 says, continue their efforts to return to mainland China surreptitiously.

Because of its allegiance to an external authority in Rome, and also, no doubt, because of its strongly anti-communist stance during the civil war, the Catholic church in China was indeed always regarded with particular suspicion by the communist authorities, and of all the Christian bodies which were active in China before the revolution, it has suffered the most from communist rule. Forced to sever its links with Rome in the 1950s and — in common with all religions — totally banned during the Cultural Revolution, it emerged in the eighties as a church divided within itself between those who were prepared to support the pro-communist Catholic Patriotic Association and those others — probably the great majority — who remained loyal to Rome,

preferring to have nothing to do with the large numbers of churches which were being reopened throughout China under the Association's auspices. There are plenty of items in the present volume illustrating the havoc wrought within the church under communist rule. One such refers to the case of the diocese of Dali in south west China which, in 1957, had a population of over 5,000 Catholics with over sixty churches. In 1988, when the author visited the area, only one church was open; the 86-year-old priest in charge (who was also the diocesan bishop) was the only remaining priest in the diocese, and the combined attendance at the two Sunday Masses, which the author attended, was just thirteen people. So far as the church as a whole is concerned, the government's new religious policy has brought no nearer a lifting of the ban on a renewal of the church's links with Rome, and the evidence in this book makes it clear that the divisions within the church remain unresolved.

If the Catholic church has been thrown into disarray as a result of communist rule, however, its sufferings hardly begin to compare with the treatment meted out to the Buddhist religion in Tibet. It is true that in Tibet religion and nationalism are closely intertwined and it is difficult to be sure which of these two elements has been the prime target of Chinese repression. In either case, the impact upon religion in the country in the fifties and sixties was devastating, one authority quoted in the present volume claiming in 1987 that, of over 6,000 monasteries in Tibet in 1951, all but a handful were by then in ruins. So far as the effects of the government's new religious policy in Tibet are concerned, a spokesman in Lhasa told the author two years ago that about half the important temples in Lhasa itself had by then been restored. Even if this statement is taken at face value, however, this would still clearly leave a long way to go. And — although this is not referred to in the present book — the savage repression of Tibetan nationalist demonstrations in the Tibetan capital as recently as March last year (1989) would give little ground for optimism that the more liberal official policy towards religion in China proper will ever be fully implemented in the country's Tibetan dependency.

Of all the different religious bodies in China, it is probably the Protestant Christians who have benefitted most from the government's new policies. From the earliest days of the regime, the Protestants were in general prepared to seek as much common ground as possible with the authorities, finding much in the party's political programme which seemed worthy of their support. In their case, the pressure from the government to sever their organisational links with parent bodies in the West did not have the doctrinal implications which it had for the Catholics, and indeed it was very much in line

with their own thinking that the Christian churches would never establish themselves permanently in China until they were seen to be fully self-supporting. Moreover, the official abolition of denominational differences had done much to eliminate the scandal of sectarian rivalries. In many ways, therefore, when many of the former restrictions on religion were lifted from the late seventies onwards, Protestant Christianity was well placed to take advantage of the situation, and they soon began to make rapid headway in a number of places. Several graphic examples of the success they achieved are related in the present work. A Chinese account describes, for example, the situation in a certain county in Anhui province in central China where, just prior to liberation, there were said to be only 11 Christians; in 1976, there were still only 77 but by 1987, according to the Chinese account, the numbers of Christians in the country had jumped to nearly a thousand. By 1987, the total number of Protestant Christians in China as a whole was estimated by their ruling body, the China Christian Council, to be in the region of five million, compared with less than a million in 1949. The indications are that in many places the numbers are still increasing rapidly, which is not surprising in a country in which, in the author's words, young people especially have become disillusioned with Marxism-Leninism after the traumatic experiences of the Cultural Revolution, and are seeking other answers to the meaning of life.

There is unfortunately insufficient space in this review to consider those sections of Donald MacInnis's book dealing with the other religions in China. Suffice it to say that all the main religions are covered, as are the popular religious beliefs and practices which still exert considerable influence throughout the country. There are also interesting sections dealing with such matters as atheism and religion and with the efforts currently being made to promote the concept of a so-called socialist spiritual civilisation to fill the ideological vacuum which is now so widespread. The one reservation one would have is that the book relies exclusively on official documents and on live statements of individuals working within the system: no attempt is made to represent the views of people like growing numbers of underground Catholics, who boycott the official structures. All in all, however, the book does make an important contribution to our understanding of the contemporary religious situation in China, and the many original documents which it brings together will be read with considerable interest by specialist and layman alike.

No Longer Strangers, Selected Writings of Bishop K. H. Ting
 edited with an introduction by Raymond L. Whitehead.
 Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 1989. 199 pp.

Few who meet Bishop K. H. Ting for the first time can fail to be impressed by his charm, courtesy, good humour, quiet dignity under criticism, and his almost saintly demeanour. As one observer put it:

One of the outstanding church leaders of the twentieth century. Despite his first-hand knowledge of Western culture and Western theology, he welcomed 'New China' with open arms. He has never denied his admiration for the benefits brought by communism, but his religious faith has never wavered. His example and advice helped the Protestant churches of China to become truly Chinese during the years after the liberation; he encouraged believers in times of adversity, and was himself silenced during the years of the Cultural Revolution. When religious tolerance emerged after 1976 he was tireless in helping to re-establish congregations and in making their needs known to the government. He has been a faithful pastor for more than four decades.

Others disagree. Indeed, one Hong Kong citizen put it like this:

The party was delighted to sponsor a church leader who returned in 1951 from the West, filled with a naive enthusiasm for Chinese communism. He proved to be an ideal spokesman for the church in China. Meanwhile, he presided over the extinction of organised church life. During the Cultural Revolution he was shielded by party members; he lay low and suffered little. He lauded the so-called 'freedom of religion' established during the 1980s, once again being sent to spread his views abroad. Whether or not he is a secret party member is not certain; what is absolutely clear is that he is instrumental in carrying out party policy — a Marxist wolf in bishop's clothing.

These are extreme views, though many China-watchers are strongly inclined one way or the other. How, then, is the enquirer with little or no experience of Chinese affairs to make a judgement? A commentary is needed, yet numerous pitfalls confront anyone who tries to write one. Raymond Whitehead's introduction is highly favourable — both in what it says and what it omits — to the communist regime. Its whole tone breathes the spirit of 'Liberation'. To take but two specific examples: (1) The impression is given that the 'Christian Manifesto' (a brainchild of Zhou Enlai) was a free initiative put forward by Chinese Protestants. The reader is told nothing of the pressure used to

'encourage' hundreds of thousands of believers to sign; (2) It is not made clear that all organised church activity had been suppressed years before the advent of the 'Gang of Four', who intensified an anti-religious policy that was already in force. In short, the introduction gives only one interpretation of the career of Bishop Ting — a highly favourable one.

The selection of Bishop Ting's writings is quite a fair one. The extracts fall into two periods: 1947-61, and 1979-87, with nothing at all — no diaries, no letters, no jottings — to fill the empty eighteen years.

There are, of course, countless examples of the Bishop's use of party language: 'Feudalism, imperialism, and bureaucratic capitalism long weighted like three mountains on the backs of the Chinese people' (p. 172), or

Like all other citizens, those who believe in Jesus Christ ardently desire a strong and prosperous motherland and look forward to an early realisation of the Four Modernisations . . . it is only natural that Christians are part of the United Front (p. 173).

The editor has justly included Ting's bitter attack on Wang Mingdao, (pp. 141-46). The language certainly supports oft-repeated accusations that Ting was appointed by the Communist Party to spearhead the campaign against Wang. Wang may or may not be an oddity, but the notion of this distinctly Chinese preacher being 'in league with the West' is totally ludicrous, and Ting must have known it. On page 148 he professes to be unaware of any believers 'jailed not for subversive political manouevers but for religious belief.'

On the other hand, the reader must be alert for positive elements in Ting's thought. He will look carefully for any hints that Ting has done his best to protect Christian congregations from undue government pressure. He will assess Ting's contributions to the doctrines of the Fall and divine grace: 'The incarnation has surely made more of an impact on humanity than the fall of Adam. Human solidarity with Christ is more universal, more powerful than solidarity with Adam through sin' (p. 72).

Likewise, Ting's statements on such themes as ecumenism, the church, the Cosmic Christ and the validity of non-Christian religions must be assessed with care. There is no doubt that Ting can write in an original way. The reader must make up his own mind whether such essays as 'Realising the Gospel' (pp. 39-42) or 'Challenges to Faith' (pp. 42-49) contain anything of permanent value.

It is unfortunate that this collection of writings ends with part of an address given only a few days before Ting's finest hour. It was in May 1989 that he gave public support to the Peking demonstrators,

insisting that Protestants were with them. Naturally, he was shortly afterwards compelled to join other Protestant leaders in making a statement of 'repentance'. For one who has nailed his colours to the communist mast it is not easy to leave the ship. What will his future be? Perhaps a later edition of 'No Longer Strangers' will include further extracts from the late eighties — and from the nineties.

ARVAN GORDON

Pol Pot Plans the Future. Confidential Leadership Documents from Democratic Kampuchea, 1976-1977. Translated and Edited by David P. Chandler, Ben Kiernan and Chanthou Boua. Monograph Series 33/Yale University South East Asia Studies Yale Center for International and Area Studies. 1988. Paperback, 346 pp.

These documents might become horribly relevant if the Khmer Rouge were once again to succeed in overrunning the whole of Cambodia. Both before and during their years in power the Khmer Rouge had a great aversion to putting things on paper. Few documents survive to explain and elucidate the inner workings of the party and government during their barbaric rule. The editors have included in this unique collection seven surviving inner-party documents, plus one of the many confessions extracted under torture at the Tuol Sleng prison in Phnom Penh.

The documents are in many ways unrevealing, written ambiguously and in arcane language. In other ways they are invaluable as the only recorded internal texts of the Khmer Rouge leadership. These documents contain no discussion of political theory. Building socialism is portrayed merely as building up a sound, independent economy, not as the fulfilment of socialist ideals. For example, a section on 'Building Political Consciousness in the Party' in a document on 'general political tasks for 1976' speaks of 'nurturing a Marxist-Leninist viewpoint' which should be allowed 'to seep in according to our chosen methods'. This is one of the few references to Marxism-Leninism, a set of doctrines which was never outlined in detail to the people. The Khmer Rouge were over eager to stress that they owed no debt to foreign communists. Indeed the foundation of the Communist Party of Kampuchea was redated from 1951 to 1960 to try to downplay the debt to the Vietnamese Communist Party in

setting up the CPK. China's 'Great Leap Forward' is mocked and belittled by the CPK's 'Super Great Leap Forward'. The Khmer Rouge's failed plans often seem based on science-defying logic: 'in military matters, people who pilot our helicopters can't read a great deal. But by cultivating good political consciousness, we all can learn swiftly and we can exceed the plan's requirements.' Even more drastic was the decision to increase rice targets to three tons of paddy per hectare, an immediate doubling of average yields. Their naivety is echoed in many phrases: 'Compared to other countries we have very many more qualities. First, they have no hay. Second, they have no grass.'

These documents are almost silent on the Khmer Rouge decision to wipe out all institutional religion. In the new constitution for Democratic Kampuchea (not quoted in this book), adopted on 5 January 1976, the new regime made an ambiguous promise: 'every citizen of Cambodia has the right to worship according to any religion and the right not to worship according to any religion. All reactionary religions which are detrimental to Democratic Cambodia and the Cambodian people are strictly forbidden.' However, the regime that was the quickest in history at wiping out all religion recorded almost nothing on the subject in this selection of its documents — perhaps because by the time these texts were written in 1976-77 institutional religion had already been destroyed. The only decision recorded is from the Central Committee meeting of 30 March 1976 that the Catholic cathedral in Phnom Penh be destroyed. 'Decree that the Armed Forces demolish it. The method must be such that this does not affect other buildings,' run the minutes. There is no further explanation. The decision — taken when the Khmer Rouge had many other pressing problems to cope with, only a year after gaining full power — was indeed carried out and the cathedral was demolished brick by brick. As the editors note, the cathedral was known as the Vietnamese church and might have been destroyed partly because of its Vietnamese associations. There are no further references to religion and the closure of all places of worship, the deportation or murder of most monks and priests is not recorded here.

The editors have usefully related the documents closely to the history of the CPK, internal political developments in Kampuchea and to the policies of neighbouring countries, especially China and Vietnam, that had a bearing on CPK policy. They have also pointed out curiosities in the documents. This unique collection will provide students of the Khmer Rouge's brutal period in power with unique insights and complement both published CPK propaganda and survivors' accounts.

The Church and Socialism in Cuba by Raul Gomez Treto.

Translated from the Spanish by Phillip Berryman.

Maryknoll, Orbis Books, 1988.

Cuba's future has become a matter for considerable speculation. With the disappearance of its erstwhile communist allies in Eastern Europe and with the pending re-negotiation of agreements with a dramatically changed Soviet Union, its isolation on the global stage has become a grave issue. Equally, changes in Nicaragua and the American invasion of Panama have resulted in the departure of the Cuban regime's closest allies within the western hemisphere. A deteriorating economic situation within the island and continuing external pressure from the USA are placing question marks against the capacity of Castro's regime to survive in its present form.

On the other hand that regime has characteristics and assets that mark it off from all of its one time East European counterparts. Its undoubted achievements, particularly in the promotion of social justice and human welfare, have created a still significant popular base and, in Castro, it has a charismatic leader who continues to attract much sympathy. Nationalism, of an anti-American kind, still remains a potent reserve of ideological support. By no means least it can now count on a measure of support from religious activists within the society, as well as from radical Catholics elsewhere in Latin America, whose opposition to the socio-economic and political structures prevailing within their own countries renders them sympathetic to Cuba's revolutionary experiment. Indeed, one of the interesting features of Castro's struggle for survival is the degree of importance he now appears to attach to a 'strategic alliance' with radical Christians. This is partly a question of seeking domestic support but, still more, it is a matter of promoting a 'Marxist-Christian' dialogue that might do something to save Cuba from total regional isolation.

Raul Gomez Treto's book is a useful contribution to our understanding of this distinctive situation. It is all the more welcome for being the contribution of an active yet scholarly participant in the events and processes that he chronicles. As a lawyer with a senior post in Cuba's Ministry of Justice he is a well informed observer sympathetic to the revolutionary cause. As one of the island's most prominent Catholic laymen he brings to bear a relatively independent perspective upon political affairs and detailed inside knowledge of ecclesiastical matters. The result cannot be a substitute for John Kirk's *Between God and the Party* (University of Florida Press, 1989), which remains the best English language work on the modern Cuban

Church but it is a valuable supplement in a field that has attracted too few authoritative commentators.

As Gomez Treto makes plain, the present relatively co-operative relationship between the church and the revolutionary Cuban regime is a fairly new development. Indeed, the author structures his argument by reference to six phases beginning with a brief review of pre-revolutionary church history, and continuing with moves towards a church-state confrontation that only significantly abated in the 1970s. It was not until after 1979 that a serious dialogue commenced. At the outset the church was closely identified with the counter-revolutionary cause, and with exiled Cubans. It was not until after the expulsion of the largely Spanish pre-revolutionary clergy and their gradual replacement by indigenous priests that the possibility of an accommodation emerged. The changes associated with the 1968 Medellin Latin American bishops conference also had gradually to be absorbed before the country's Catholic leadership could envisage participation in the revolutionary process. It is perhaps ironic that the church's consequent, if still sometimes hesitant willingness to identify with Cuba's socialist experiment has become most pronounced at the moment that the experiment is being most severely called into question.

This book was in fact published before the present crisis and ends on an optimistic note about which the author might now be more guarded. The author might also have welcomed the chance to look more closely at the church's possible contribution to any future attempt to break out of the current impasse. (Some have envisaged a possible and significant role for the church in a putatively pluralistic political situation.) On the other hand the author's standing as a participant observer might well have inhibited him had he become involved in any such speculation. Certainly there are points in his review of the last thirty years when the discretion of the ecclesiastical politician takes over from the openness of the scholar with no obvious axes to grind. For example, controversies within the church are sometimes hinted at but, out of deference to those concerned with the divisions in question, they are not fully explained or subjected to thorough analysis.

Lack of analysis is sometimes due to the largely chronological approach which the author has adopted. A series of well observed and sharply etched vignettes is strung together in a skilled way which generally enables the reader to discern the underlying pattern or thrust of events but there are issues which could have benefited from a more rigorously analytical treatment. The nature of decision making in the Cuban church, and of the factors impinging on decision makers, is a case in point. The backgrounds and careers of clerical and lay leaders

is another. A final significant example might be relationships with Cuba's Protestant community and, in particular, the island's 'mainstream' Protestant churches. There is a perception amongst leaders of the ruling party that, despite recent changes in the Roman Catholic communion, it is the local Protestant groups, represented in the Cuban Council of Churches, which have most enthusiastically adapted to the realities of life in a socialist society. A systematic comparative analysis of the two major traditions in question, and of the factors underlying their respective responses, would have been very rewarding.

In justice to the author it has to be indicated that such lacunae can largely be explained by the circumstances in which the book was written. As he himself reveals it was produced on the basis of intermittent bursts of activity and in the midst of professional pressures that did not always leave room for leisurely reflection. It does no disservice to Dr Gomez Treto to say that, from time to time, his text makes this evident. On the contrary he has produced a valuable first hand account of little known yet important processes, of interest not only to students of modern Cuba but also to all concerned with relationships between religious communities and Marxist regimes. He has also produced a lastingly useful source book for future historians.

KENNETH MEDHURST

The Puzzle of the Soviet Church. An Inside Look at Christianity and Glasnost by Kent R. Hill. Portland: Multnomah Press, in co-operation with the Institute on Religion and Democracy, 1989. 417 pp.

Now that the churches in the West can communicate and work with their brethren in Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union, it is vital that western churchmen are well informed about the history and present position of the churches in those parts of the new Europe which lie to the East. Kent Hill's new book on the churches in the Soviet Union is published at a time when reliable information is badly needed. Furthermore his judgement of the religious situation in the USSR is well-balanced: he is able to acknowledge and appreciate the positive changes which are taking place at present, at the same time

recognising that all is not perfect. His book is intended to be a guidebook for prudent and effective action so that Christians in the West can respond responsibly to their co-believers in the USSR.

The partly autobiographical nature of the first section makes gripping reading. Kent Hill describes how, apparently by chance, he was drawn into a drama at the American Embassy in Moscow when seven Pentecostals from Siberia took refuge there from 1978-1983, to escape persecution. The spiritual force which drew him into helping these people is conveyed as he describes reading their records of persecution (225,000 words in all) in a secure room at the embassy. His passionate commitment to his fellow Christians in the USSR stems from this profound experience, when for the first time he was confronted with the stark and awful truth about the lives of many Soviet Christians.

The four remaining parts of *The Puzzle of the Soviet Church* cover first, Marxism in relation to Christianity and to Russia in particular; second, church-state relations in the USSR; third, western responses to the Soviet churches' experience; and fourth, the Gorbachev era.

The presentation of Lenin's views on religion and of his changeable policy towards the churches is useful for understanding the fluctuations of church-state relations in the USSR. In his account of Marxism's influence in Russia and on Lenin, it would have been useful to have mentioned the influence of Jacobinism and of Tkachev in particular on Lenin's intellectual formation. Here is a strand of Russian nineteenth century political thought which bears no relation to Marxist ideas but which explains Lenin's obsession with central party control and the imposing of ideas from above. Many of Kent Hill's quotations from Lenin and others are taken from a secondary source when it would have been preferable to quote the original source in the footnotes.

Kent Hill's main thesis that Marxism-Leninism is inherently anti-religious and tries to either destroy, co-opt or restrict the churches is amply borne out in his extensive section on Soviet church-state relations. He covers three main periods: from the Revolution to the Second World War, followed by the post-war period until Khrushchev, and finally the period covering Brezhnev to Gorbachev. Before we can understand the present situation we must have a knowledge of the past, and Kent Hill provides an excellent and detailed account. He is determined to dispel the distorted western view that either there was no persecution at all in the USSR, or that, on the contrary, *all* Christians were under terrible pressure. He explains well what 'registration' means for a congregation and points to the

complexity of a situation where both 'registered' and 'unregistered' churches needed western support. His analysis of the 1927 *Memorandum* of the bishops imprisoned on the Solovki islands (p. 111) is invaluable: this document gives an alternative *modus vivendi* for the Russian Orthodox Church under Stalin as opposed to the capitulation of Metropolitan Sergi. But perhaps Kent Hill is too quick to condemn Sergi:

Sergi was obsessed with maintaining the skeleton of the Church, the administrative structure. But what is that worth if the living flesh of the body — priests and the people — lose respect for the structure? (p. 118)

Let us hope that this policy of preserving the skeleton at all costs through many years of oppression will now enable a new miracle to take place as in Ezekiel's valley of dry bones: now, under Gorbachev, the church has the opportunity to put the flesh back on the bones and to win back the respect which it lost through compromise.

An important lesson from the past is Kent Hill's account of western responses to the religious situation in the USSR. The WCC and the National Council of Churches as well as many Christian denominations failed to speak out in defence of Christians even when the facts of oppression were documented. They preferred the language of 'selective indignation', the woolly thinking of 'equivalency analysis' and behind-the-scenes diplomacy. Now that the full tale is told, a bolder approach would have been preferable. The work of Keston College in publicising the true situation of Soviet believers is fully justified by Kent Hill.

The final part of *The Puzzle of the Soviet Church* is of special interest for it deals with the situation under President Gorbachev. The position of the churches is greatly improved, there is much greater scope for them to express their beliefs in word and deed, but there are, as yet, no structural, institutional guarantees of religious freedom. A new law on religion is at present being debated, it is true, but technically the 1929 Law on Religious Associations is still in force (though mostly ignored in practice).^{*} Until the rule of law is upheld in the USSR and a new law on religion is passed by parliament, religious believers are still vulnerable. As Kent Hill points out, some unregistered groups are still being harassed:

^{*}On 1 October 1990 the Supreme Soviet of the USSR adopted the new Law on Freedom of Conscience and Religion. The Law came into effect when it was published on 9 October.

Significant evidence exists that in many parts of the USSR the rhetoric of legal guarantees has not been matched by the reality of religious freedom (p. 304).

In Kent Hill's view religious freedom will only come with the development of democracy in the Soviet Union: and this means renouncing Marxism-Leninism and one-party rule.

XENIA HOWARD-JOHNSTON

The World Council of Churches and Politics 1975-1986
by J. A. Emerson Vermaat. New York: Freedom Press, 1989.
Paperback, 128 pp.

The author, a noted Dutch journalist and a seasoned observer of the World Council of Churches, has written a well documented account of the Council's engagement in international politics over most of the last two decades. He describes succinctly its major debates and statements covering different regions of the world, along with general issues of peace and human rights. Mr Vermaat is clearly unhappy with the Council's record, especially the contrast between the cautious stance which it has normally taken on actions of the Soviet government or of other governments supported by it, and its readiness to condemn those who have been opposed to liberation movements in other parts of the world, especially the US government. He sees in this a double standard, reflecting an uncritical acceptance of Soviet policies which many people in the pews would reject as an indication of the 'biased political attitudes of a church elite that has stopped taking its critics seriously.'

This is a serious charge and in making it, Mr Vermaat scores a number of palpable hits. He writes:

The WCC defends its so-called silent diplomacy towards Eastern bloc and many Third World countries by suggesting that public pronouncements would jeopardise both the Council's effectiveness and member churches in the countries involved . . . But the WCC does not practise silent diplomacy towards Western governments, nor does it acknowledge the propriety of silent diplomacy when practised by Western governments.

He concludes that the WCC lacks a 'balanced, biblical approach' to international issues and needs to restore objectivity and integrity to its analysis of them.

Mr Vermaat sees illustrations of the double standard in the Council's frequent pleas for an appreciative understanding of the context in which denials of human rights have arisen in the Soviet Union or other countries sympathetic to it, insisting that they have to be linked with a wide range of 'peace and justice' issues on which these countries may appear in a more favourable light. The consequent readiness to suspend judgement has sometimes been carried to startling lengths. For example, the then General Secretary was recorded as saying in August 1976, when the Pol Pot regime's campaign of mass killing in Cambodia was already well advanced: 'There is too much self-righteousness on such issues. We should first of all take our own situation into account. We are all sinners.'

Mr Vermaat is right to point to confusions and inconsistencies in the WCC's stance. However, I think his book is lacking, both in a sufficiently deep analysis of how the situation has arisen and in convincing indications of how it could be remedied. The argument is vigorously deployed up to the last chapter, but seems to flag at the end with a very summary list of suggestions for improvement. The list covers the WCC's staffing, political relationships, the style and content of its statements and their theological grounds. These all need a much more extended examination, which would reveal the inherent difficulties in the WCC's situation and perhaps lead to a more sympathetic view of the limited but real efforts which it has made to deal with them.

Much of the problem stems from uncertainty in the minds of both the churches and the (somewhat fitfully) interested public as to the WCC's role. A worldwide gathering of church leaders and representatives is inevitably an impressive occasion, offering a rich contrast of liturgies, music, ecclesiastical dress and cultures, and creates expectations that great statements will be made commanding prophetic authority. Sometimes the WCC has indeed risen to this level, as at its great inaugural meeting at Amsterdam, and it is clearly right that it should be open to the wind of the Spirit at all times. But the expectation that it should speak with a clear prophetic voice, continuously and on all subjects that come to its attention, is profoundly misplaced. The WCC is essentially a worldwide fellowship of churches, prone to all the tensions, misunderstandings and other marks of human fallibility found in any international organisation. In my own contacts with the WCC, I have been struck by its close similarity to one of the United Nations agencies in the conduct of business and relationships between staff and delegations — a

comparison which I do not regard as to the discredit of either organisation.

Against this background, it is not surprising that churches in sensitive situations should seek to mute any statements of protest aimed at conditions in their countries or to opt for the ways of quiet diplomacy. The WCC has recognised this dilemma very candidly on a number of occasions. For example, when the Soviet Union occupied Afghanistan in 1980, it was made clear that a protest on this specific matter would place the Russian Orthodox Church in a very difficult position. A resolution at the World Conference on 'Missions and Evangelism in Melbourne, meeting soon after the event, included a remarkably frank acknowledgement of the constraints on public statements:

We . . . confess our inability to be as prophetic as we ought to be, as that may, in some instances, entail imposing martyrdom on our fellow believers in those countries — something we dare not do from a safe distance. . .

However, this candour is put in question by the very unquiet manner in which other acts — where the danger of provoking martyrdom may have been less — have been condemned.

How did this situation arise? The book leaves an impression of wilful one-sidedness on the part of some of the WCC's leaders, but this is hardly satisfactory as a main explanation. To a very large extent, the WCC's difficulties reflect the real complexity of problem situations across the world, in which oppressive conditions are found (albeit in significantly varying degrees) in most societies, and the inevitably diverse reactions of church leaders to them. Mr Vermaat recognises the evils of the apartheid system and the existence of serious abuses of human rights in many of the countries where the WCC has condemned them. Its protests in such cases are not invalidated either by the fact that the Soviet government (for reasons of its own) has shared in them or by its failure to condemn abuses in other situations. Mr Vermaat also seems to present at some points a mirror image of the biased attitudes which he is criticising, for example, in taking a very uncritical view of the motivations for the US government's actions in Central America.

Nevertheless, I would agree that more needs to be done to ensure objectivity in the WCC's analysis of international issues. It could with advantage recover something of the tone and temper of its work thirty years ago, when (as shown in the writings of such leading personalities as Sir Kenneth Grubb or Alan Booth) it placed a strong emphasis on careful investigation of the facts, reference to lay experts and responsible political leaders and a marked reluctance to rush to

judgement. However, the prevailing climate of thinking in the WCC has been radically changed since then by developments, particularly in the period from 1968 to 1975, which are likely to leave permanent traces.

The main line of development has been closely related to liberation theology and the challenging associated concept of 'bias to the poor' which is now given an almost universal emphasis in ecumenical statements on political issues. In this context, 'the poor' are apt to be extended to cover all disadvantaged or 'marginalised' groups — notably women, ethnic minorities and indigenous peoples — as well as the nations of the Third World. Many would accept this as a legitimate attempt to express an essential implication of the Gospel, which in the past was largely ignored by the churches. However, its application can produce perverse results, when the claims of the poor are treated as absolute imperatives ruling out serious questioning or discussion. Where a statement is made with passion on behalf of the poor (in the extended sense) in a WCC gathering — or indeed some national ecumenical gatherings — it becomes very difficult to present an alternative viewpoint without appearing mean spirited, or worse. Delegates from smaller churches or countries, without the means of forming first hand judgements on other parts of the world, often adopted a low profile, voting like the 'country gentlemen' in the 18th century British Parliament with the main current of strongly expressed opinion. Discussion is not helped by the frequent confessions of guilt from delegates from Western countries, expressing contrition for the sins, past and present, of their societies towards the rest of the world. These confessions can cast a blight on serious discussion in two ways: by withholding from the champions of the poor the critical examination which their arguments need (and thus in effect perpetuating their 'marginalised' position); and by weakening the affirmation of responsibility in positive and practical terms on the part of the West. Argument can be further confused by the use of terms such as 'structural violence', a somewhat elusive concept which tends to obscure the horrors of actual violence. It is largely for this reason that the WCC has found it difficult to make any significant statement on terrorism. Indeed, I would say that those in the Western world who harp on their guilt have a lot to answer for!

The WCC's examination of political issues has also become unbalanced as a result of its insistence on the extensive representation of minorities and disadvantaged groups in its counsels. This is in itself a proper and laudable aim, but taken together with the inevitable preponderance of clerical (and mainly male) representatives in almost any church gathering, the effect has often been to crowd out the lay experts who formerly made an essential contribution to its work. The

WCC often seems happier and more at ease with representatives of peace movements than with soldiers or sailors; with spokespersons of the poor and disadvantaged than with trade union leaders (not necessarily the same thing!), employers or people holding political responsibility. This has produced a skew in the Justice, Peace and Integrity of Creation process which has taken up much of the WCC's attention since its Vancouver meeting in 1983. Its pronouncements on this group of themes have included many statements of aspiration which would command general support. But they have not so far dealt at all adequately with such pressing issues of practical application as wealth creation, and the incentives necessary to sustain it; or the creation of a framework of international order without which peace cannot be secured.

In spite of these pressures, there are signs of hope in that vigorous debate does in fact take place within the WCC and a healthy plurality of views is expressed. I agree with Mr Vermaat that its conclusions are sometimes remote from the viewpoint of many people in the pews. However, the remedy is not to withdraw from political engagement but to broaden its base, ensuring that it takes account of the views actually held by most church people and that it is not left to the pressure groups to make all the running.

One further sign of hope is that the main cause of the double standard — the extreme pressures on churches in communist lands from their governments — was already changing radically when Mr. Vermaat's book was being printed. In most of these countries, there is now a refreshing readiness to admit past mistakes and abuses, together with a strong desire to create freer forms of political and economic life. Indeed, the sharpest issues in the WCC's debates in the immediate future are likely to come less from this side than from those in the West who saw certain marks of the kingdom in the failed communist societies and regret their passing. It has also perplexed many people and churches in the Third World to see the collapse of an order which seemed to offer a model for their own development.

The surprisingly rapid liberation of the former communist societies is undoubtedly to be welcomed, and one must hope that the liberation theologians will find proper affirmative words for it. But it is only the beginning of a long and arduous search for a social order which will be more free, just and also efficient, and it should not be assumed that the West has the last word to say on the subject. The WCC's discussions on international issues are likely to look very different in five years' time, in response to the rapidly changing pattern of world politics. Although the need for the hard disciplines of objective analysis will remain as great as ever, the

context will be very different in many respects from that described in the book.

Mr Vermaat has done the WCC a service by pointing out some of the imperfections and contradictions to which its work on international issues has been subject. Those who wish the WCC well will hope that his criticisms are taken seriously and will eagerly await a considered response to them.

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