

# Editorial

The World Council of Churches is now facing the question of religious liberty in Eastern Europe. In November-December 1975 the WCC's General Assembly in Nairobi asked its General Secretary, Dr. Philip Potter, to produce a report on religious freedom in the signatory countries of the Helsinki Declaration. In August this year the WCC's Central Committee met to consider this report.

The WCC has in the past been accused of "selective indignation". It has seemed to some Western churchmen that the WCC has been concerned with such subjects as colonialism, racialism and national liberation movements but has ignored the discrimination against religious believers in communist countries. Now, however, this can no longer be said. Last August the Central Committee decided in the face of strong opposition from the Soviet Union, to set up an advisory group on human rights within the Commission of the Churches on International Affairs (CCIA). It was also agreed that the Churches of those countries which signed the Helsinki Declaration should be closely connected with establishing the facts with regard to violations of human rights and religious liberty in Europe and North America. The indications are that enough of the Churches in question will take these duties seriously to produce effective results. But the machinery of Geneva, like that of the Vatican, does grind slowly, though it can sometimes "grind exceeding sure".

Helene Posdeeff in her article (see pp. 4-8) on the August meeting of the WCC's Central Committee, looks at the background to this meeting. No two people will assess the intangibles in such a situation in the same way. And some will think that Mrs. Posdeeff has been over critical. We leave it to our readers to decide, but we feel bound to point out that, though the General Secretary does represent the member Churches, he represents them only as their servant.

The legal position of believers in Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union has been obscure but must be understood before Western Churches can have any true idea of the problems which face their Christian brethren in the East. Because this subject is so important – and so little known

— *RCL* is devoting considerable space this year to articles and documents on religious legislation in the USSR (see for example “The New Soviet Law on Religion” in *RCL* Vol. 4, No. 2, pp. 4-10). Now a hitherto unknown lawbook containing the secret legislation on religion has reached the West. Some of the material from this book is the subject of an article by Walter Sawatsky (pp. 24-31). Part of a long document by Lev Regelson and Gleb Yakunin, which was sent to Dr. Potter, also examines the legal position of religious believers (see pp. 9-15). Registration of religious groups is understood by the Soviet authorities, not as an act of recognition, but as an act of *sanction*. This, the writers claim, negates the Soviet Constitution which guarantees Soviet citizens “freedom of assembly” (Art. 125) and stipulates (Art 124) that “in order to ensure to citizens freedom of conscience, the Church in the USSR is separated from the State”. In fact “registration” is used by the authorities to control parish life. The body which grants or refuses registration is the Council for Religious Affairs. Hitherto no information about the Council’s structure, functions or powers was available. But thanks to the discovery of this secret Soviet lawbook we are now able to publish for the first time an English translation of the Council’s Statute (see pp. 31-4).

Paul Oestreicher in his review (pp. 39-41) points to the danger of giving a one-sided picture of religion in communist countries. Soviet policy has not made it easy to get positive material about religion, but we are glad to print it when we get it. In this issue we are pleased to print the testimony of Fr. Zachariah, a bearer of that blinding light which in spite of all transfigures so much of the Church’s life in communist countries.

It is not possible to show all sides of the truth in every issue of *RCL*, but we do our best. We rely on readers and their friends to help us to fill in the picture by their comments either in letters to the editor, short factual notes or articles.

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X.H.J.