

# Editorial

'Are the churches in society part of the public order or are they absolutely private organisations?' This question posed by Hungarian Justice Minister Kálmán Kulcsár (pp. 140-47) is being asked in many countries at present, and not just in those ruled by communist parties. In the Middle East Iran has clearly opted for the former solution, whilst Turkey seems to be moving ever further, at least in practice, from Atatürk's secularist ideal. Recent debates in Britain have focused on this same question in relation to the established church, with government ministers and backbenchers inclining to the first response at a time when a growing number of churchmen are coming to favour the latter. Yet, as Kulcsár suggests, the answer the churches give to this question may have unforeseen consequences. In Hungary the so-called 'historic' churches wish for less state interference in their internal affairs but, according to the Justice Minister, appeal to the state to protect their own denominational privileges or to continue to guarantee some degree of financial support.

For some religious groups Kulcsár's question raises no difficulties. Many of the smaller evangelical and charismatic communities in Eastern Europe are quite happy to be private organisations within socialist society and they adopt a politically passive stance. Others, existing on the verge of legality or even 'underground', have no choice about their formal exclusion from the public domain, though in various ways they make their presence felt in the wider society. In East Germany the *Kirche von Unten* basis groups make no secret of their desire to push the Protestant churches into taking a more prominent public stand on the issues of the day (pp. 127-39); in Ukraine the close links between nationalism and the banned Greek-Catholic Church in the western regions of the republic inevitably force the religious question onto the political agenda (pp. 152-56).

Another question touched on by Kulcsár concerns relations between churches, and even within them. In a number of those Soviet-bloc countries which are loosening their controls over religious groups there are signs that inter-religious conflicts may, all too sadly but in a very familiar way, become as important as those between church and

state. When this happens no-one benefits, with the possible exception of the ruling communist party. Thus, Jane Ellis can suggest that in the Soviet Union there are signs that the authorities are shifting responsibility for resolving the Greek-Catholic 'problem' to the churches themselves (pp. 100-111).

Throughout the communist world a common problem facing citizens is the fact that they are all too often subject to a changing party line or the whims of officials. In recent years, however, there have been some hints of change, and these have been rendered more substantial by Gorbachev's proclaimed aim of turning the USSR into a 'law-governed state'. The summer of 1986 witnessed the launch of a five-year legislative plan and it now seems that a new Law on Freedom of Conscience will be part of that programme. The objective of this legislative programme seems to be to strengthen the legitimacy of the system by providing citizens with adequate legal protection against official abuses and to ensure that laws are implemented with a measure of predictability. For the churches, such an approach consistently applied holds out great hopes, though they remain aware that, to return to Kulcsár, 'It is one thing to make a declaration, it is another thing to realise it.'

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