

Religion in Eastern Europe

(REPORT ON A LECTURE)

On 31 May, 1973, Professor Bohdan Bociurkiw of Carleton University in Ottawa, Canada, delivered a London University lecture, entitled "Church-State relations in Communist Eastern Europe", at the London School of Economics and Political Science.

In his introduction he observed that the position of organized religion in Eastern Europe had been fundamentally affected when communist political systems emerged in Poland, Czechoslovakia, Hungary, East Germany, Romania, Bulgaria, Yugoslavia and Albania. For the first time the churches were faced by regimes which aimed at eradicating religion from society. The churches, claiming that their internal autonomy was an essential part of religious freedom and that the dissemination of the faith was an intrinsic function of the church, could not but clash with the totalitarian aspirations of the East European regimes. Unlike the latter, which could refer to Marxist-Leninist doctrine and the Soviet model of church-state relations, the churches had little in their past experience to help mould their relationship with the atheist regimes.

Professor Bociurkiw went on to consider the Soviet model of church-state relations. In theory, the 1936 Soviet Constitution and various enactments on religion have guaranteed Soviet citizens "freedom of conscience", which includes "freedom of religious worship and of anti-religious propaganda"; and to ensure such freedom, church and state were separated and the church was excluded from the educational system by a decree of 1918. But this decree also deprived the church of the right of a juridical person, including the right to own property: in fact the church became dependent on the state for the use of the buildings and articles necessary for worship. The state in practice became closely involved in the church's internal affairs. In addition organized religious education of those under 18 was forbidden.

Although the countries of Eastern Europe adhered to a common ideology, the new regimes were faced with different religious and political situations. In Czechoslovakia and Hungary (predominantly Roman Catholic) the relationship between church and state developed along the same lines; Poland, too, (almost completely Catholic) developed similar features. Bulgaria and Romania (mainly Orthodox) produced a distinct type of relationship between church and state as did the GDR, with its Protestant majority and peculiar international status. Albania, with its

Moslem majority, and Yugoslavia, with its many denominations and nationalities, have also evolved their own types of church-state relations.

Professor Boiciurkiw noted three main stages in the development of East European church-state relations : those of transition, confrontation and accommodation.

The transitional stage, he claimed, coincided largely with the coalition regimes before the local communist parties took power. Where church and state interests did not overlap, the governments' treatment of the churches was relatively benevolent. In East Germany, this policy continued into the 1950's, but in Albania and Yugoslavia – where communist governments were established during the war – there was no such transitional stage. The second stage, that of confrontation, Professor Boiciurkiw stated, coincided with the most intensive phase of the "cold war". Radical political and socio-economic changes, attempted by the new communist regimes, caused a clash between church and state. Conflict arose over the legal status of religious organizations; over whether they should receive material support; over their educational, charitable, and publishing activities; over the religious education of the young; over the participation of the clergy in political activities supporting the regime. The central issue behind this confrontation was the extent to which the government controlled strictly ecclesiastical activities : e.g. the appointment, transfer and dismissal of bishops and clergy; internal church discipline and – in the case of the Catholics – their relations with the Vatican.

The third stage, that of accommodation between church and state, largely coincided with the "de-Stalinization" policy of individual countries. The upheavals in the Kremlin after the death of Stalin affected the satellite countries at different times. The 1953 June riots in Germany produced a temporary respite from government pressures for the churches, although not a stable *modus vivendi*, whilst in Hungary, the 1956 revolt caused a temporary collapse of state controls over the churches. The "agreement" made between Hungary and the Vatican in 1964 reflected the relaxation in East-West relations and the more independent attitude of East European communist governments towards Moscow. In Poland after the events of October 1956, a relatively satisfactory though fragile *modus vivendi* developed between the Catholic Church and the state. In Romania the initial accommodation with the Orthodox Church was undermined when the government forced a reduction in the number of monasteries and imposed reforms of monastic rules, but since the early 1960's, the "national-communist" line of the regime has upgraded the Church to a quasi-established status. Even the Roman Catholic Church re-emerged as a legal institution under Ceausescu: its two surviving bishops

took up their posts after years of confinement. But the suppression of the Uniate Church has prevented a settlement being reached between the Vatican and the Romanian government. In Czechoslovakia, it was only really during the "Prague Spring" of 1968 that full accommodation between church and state became possible : for example, monastic orders were legalized and the Greek Catholic Church re-established. The Husak regime, however, has been trying to reassert the state's supremacy over the church and withdraw some of the gains of the 1968 "liberalization".

The final part of Professor Bociurkiw's lecture compared the legislation on religion in the different East European countries and showed how the Soviet model of church-state relations was adapted to the situation in each East European country.

Unlike the Soviet model, the principle of church-state separation is not included in the present constitutions of Czechoslovakia (1960) East Germany (1968) and Romania (1965), while the Romanian fundamental law provides only for the separation of schools from the church. All the communist constitutions (except Albania's) provide for freedom of "conscience", "religion", "religious rites" or "the free exercise of religion", but qualify this freedom by banning the use of religion "for political ends" (Bulgaria and Yugoslavia), for "purposes contrary to the Constitution or for political-party ends" (GDR), or "for purposes prejudicial to the interests of the state" (Poland). Only the East German constitution recognized the right of the churches "to express their opinion on vital issues affecting the nation". Apart from Albania, none of the constitutions has adopted the Soviet formula which allows only anti-religious but not religious propaganda. Religious groups in Eastern Europe possess the rights of a juridical person, including property rights – unlike the USSR – but in general (excluding Yugoslavia) such groups have to be "recognized" by the state, after their statutes have been approved, before they can exercise these rights. The East German Constitution and Polish law limit such a requirement to denominations which were not officially recognized under the pre-war law.

All communist legal systems restrict the guarantee of "freedom of conscience" in some way, both for ideological reasons and because the governments fear that religion may be used for hostile political ends. For the churches, landed and other real property is limited; some East European governments insist on receiving inventories of all church property and ban the alienation or mortgaging of such property unless their permission is obtained. No denominational schools exist, apart from the eight Catholic gymnasia and one Protestant gymnasium in Hungary (all maintained by the state) and the private Catholic University of Lublin in

Poland. However – unlike the USSR where organized religious education of children is a criminal offence – some East European countries (Czechoslovakia and Hungary) permit such teaching on school premises after hours. Other countries – Poland (since 1961) and Yugoslavia – allow the churches to organize catechetical centres.

Theological schools exist in Eastern Europe, but the number of schools and students per denomination is limited : in Hungary and Czechoslovakia, the government maintains them; in Romania and Bulgaria the same is true, though done indirectly through state subsidies. In East Germany several universities still have theological faculties. Only in Yugoslavia is theological education left entirely to the churches. In Poland, the two theological academies are state financed (though the network of Catholic seminaries is maintained by the Church).

An important area of state interference, mentioned by Professor Bo ciurkiw, concerned church appointments, transfers and dismissals. Only Yugoslav and East German legislation did not permit such “participation” as he termed it. All clergy must be citizens of the given country and take an oath of allegiance to the state. The Bulgarian code makes the leadership of every denomination “responsible to the state” and stipulates that the government may veto any ecclesiastical appointment, while Romanian law requires government approval for all church appointments down to the diocesan or equivalent level. The Hungarian decrees of 1957 and 1959, require preliminary state approval for any “appointment, election, assignment, transfer and dismissal” of the clergy down to the city and district centre parish level. The Czechoslovak 1949 laws severely restrict the church’s freedom to select its own ministers and leaders and require government consent for *every* church appointment. In addition the Czech authorities can demand the removal of any clergyman. In Poland since 1956, the church must check whether the government approves of their candidates for senior ecclesiastical posts; the government can veto such appointments within three months and in the case of parish priests, the provincial authorities can veto them within 30 days. However, negotiations between church and state on such matters, when there is disagreement, still take place.

One way of controlling the churches, discussed by Professor Bo ciurkiw, was that of subsidizing their activities. In Romania and Czechoslovakia the law allows state salaries for “recognized” and “loyal” clergy and provides state subsidies for the churches; in addition Czech law mentions the financing of theological education and of the churches’ everyday expenditure. Bulgarian law provides for a state subsidy to cover the church’s annual “deficit”. Two theological academies in Poland are maintained

by the state, which also subsidizes "registered" religious instruction centres, and pays salaries to chaplains in the army. Hungarian law also allows for large annual subsidies to the churches, maintains the church gymnasia and finances religious education after school hours. In East Germany, the churches receive state subsidies and even in Yugoslavia – where the principle of church-state separation is observed to a greater degree – some material aid may be offered by the state to religious communities.

All communist regimes have placed religious publications under censorship laws. In addition, the Romanian, Bulgarian and Czechoslovak codes prescribe that all general communications and orders of the churches must be submitted to the government agencies in charge of religious affairs. The Romanian and Bulgarian laws empower these agencies to ban any pastoral letter or circular and suspend any church order or instruction if they are found to be "contrary to the law, order or public morals".

All East European countries, in one form or another, restrict the foreign contacts of their churches. The Romanian and Bulgarian codes require explicit government approval for such contacts and provide that they must be organized only through the Ministry of Foreign Affairs.

Special administrative agencies have been erected in all communist states to administer religious legislation, to channel state funds to the religious groups, to supervise their activities, and act as links between the churches and the government. State "Offices", "Secretariats" or "Commissions" for "Confessional" or "Cult" Affairs have been set up following Soviet practice and are mostly responsible to the Cabinet. The Romanian Department of Cults is helped by an Advisory Council consisting of representatives from all "recognized" denominations. The Council advises the Department on inter-church relations and foreign ecclesiastical activities.

In Poland and Hungary occasional meetings between senior religious, government and Party leaders have provided a more direct channel for the articulation of ecclesiastical interests and the settlement of some issues dividing church and state. In Poland a Joint Commission of the Episcopate and Government has become a quasi-permanent institution which safeguards the delicate equilibrium between the spiritual and secular powers in this most Catholic of European countries.

In his concluding remarks Professor Bociurkiw observed that while religion is perhaps taken more seriously in the communist political systems than in the pluralist polities, it is also true that ruling communist parties consider all religious organizations as their rivals in ideology and political socialization. He noted how the "separation" principle was con-

tradicted by the ideological commitment of these states to eradicate religion from society, the practical need to control the churches and the political expediency of exploiting their influence in society. The East European regimes' failure to implement the "separation" principle demonstrated that such a principle — requiring an "agnostic", "limited" state — could not be reconciled with the political culture and behavioural patterns of the ideologically "committed" communist systems. Both state and church in these countries had adapted to the new circumstances over the years : the churches — even eventually the Roman Catholic Church — realizing that they could not transform the political order, preferred to accept their regime's terms in order to preserve themselves as institutions ; and the East European regimes, unable to eliminate institutional religion as a major social force, re-discovered its importance and moved towards a *modus vivendi* or at least agreed to coexist with the churches.

Religion is far from dying in Eastern Europe, were the lecturer's closing words. Paradoxically, the communist regimes' treatment of religion may have contributed to its continuing vitality. The problem of church-state relations, never fully soluble, would remain for many years to come one of the central concerns of East European governments, and would become a greater problem with the secularization of the communist faith.

(reported by the Editor)

Constitution of the USSR

Article 124: In order to ensure to citizens freedom of conscience, the church in the USSR is separated from the state, and the school from the church. Freedom of religious worship and freedom of anti-religious propaganda is recognized for all citizens.

Article 125: In conformity with the interests of the working people, and in order to strengthen the socialist system, the citizens of the USSR are guaranteed by law: (a) freedom of speech; (b) freedom of the press; (c) freedom of assembly, including the holding of mass meetings; (d) freedom of street processions and demonstrations.