

Comment

The Rev. Canon John Arnold writes:

I trust that your readers will not take too seriously the hostile account by Helene Posdeeff of the meeting of the Central Committee of the WCC in Geneva, August 1976 (*RCL* Vol. 4, No. 4, pp. 4-8). With any luck, many of them will also have read the short report and editorial comment in *Religion and Communism*, October 1976, which gives a much fairer assessment both of what actually happened and also of what can now reasonably be hoped for. I think that it would help us all if you would be kind enough to reprint an extract together with the text of the motions passed by the Central Committee, a copy of which I enclose.

Canon John Arnold attended the August meeting of the Central Committee as a representative of the Church of England in the place of the Bishop of Oxford.

The Editor is pleased to comply with Canon Arnold's request. The extracts from Religion and Communism, to which he refers, are printed below as well as the Central Committee's recommendations. (Religion and Communism has ceased publication. See p. 48 of this issue of RCL.)

EXTRACTS FROM "RELIGION AND COMMUNISM"

The recent decisions of the Central Committee of the World Council of Churches provide an example of one kind of progress that can be achieved. The question of religious liberty and other basic human rights is now openly on the table at the WCC and is to be the continuing responsibility of a WCC staff member and a co-ordinating committee on which churchmen from North America, Western and Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union will sit. The representatives from the Soviet Union will be obliged by Soviet law and practice to carry out, or at the very least not frus-

trate, Soviet foreign policy, in the sense that they will have to do everything they can to prevent the new mechanisms from attracting unfavourable publicity to the Soviet Union. All the same, we are heartily glad that this much progress has been made; if the Western churchmen who have pressed for it keep their objectives firmly in view, we are sure good will come of these ecumenical exchanges among Christians, no matter how circumscribed by diplomatic and political necessities.

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Four things happened at the Central Committee meeting of the World Council of Churches in August that mark major progress in the search for an East-West dialogue on religious liberty.

First, the idea that religious liberty in Eastern Europe should be discussed at all was finally accepted as a normal piece of business by the churches from those countries.

Second, the decision was taken to appoint a full-time staff member inside the WCC to look after human rights questions.

Third, the WCC's work is to be assisted by a special regional group covering churches from the signatory states of the Helsinki Declaration only. This means the real issues in America and

Europe, East and West, can at last be faced squarely, and will no longer be obscured by being muddled up with the totally different human rights issues that Third World churches are always raising for discussion.

Finally, the WCC General Secretary, Dr. Philip Potter, made a clear call for the WCC's long-mooted study of the biblical and theological implications of human rights to be begun without further delay.

Observers believe the success of the meeting was largely due to the thorough preparatory work that preceded it, an element in which was the report published by Keston College, *Religious Liberty in the Soviet Union*.

WCC CENTRAL COMMITTEE RECOMMENDATIONS ON HUMAN RIGHTS

Having heard the first report of the General Secretary on his intensive consultations regarding the role of the Churches in the signatory States in the application of the Final Act of the Helsinki Conference on Security and Cooperation;

having studied the memorandum presented to him by the colloquium he organized on this subject; and *keeping in mind the broad concerns for human rights expressed by the Fifth Assembly*

the Central Committee, meeting in Geneva, August 1976:

1. *Expresses its appreciation* to the General Secretary for his first report in fulfilment of the Assembly resolution regarding religious liberty in the signatory states of the Helsinki Final Act:
2. *Receives* his report and the memorandum of the colloquium to which it refers, and *instructs* the General Secretary to make them available to the member Churches in signatory States for their study and to provide the background documents referred to in them, which are not otherwise readily available, to those Churches which request them;
3. *Understands* that this represents only

the first stages of a longer process and *requests* the General Secretary to continue his consultations and efforts, in cooperation with the Churches in the signatory States, on human rights and religious liberty in the context of the Helsinki Final Act;

4. *Invites* the General Secretary to explore, in consultation with the Conference of European Churches how best to make known to the 1977 Belgrade Review Conference of CSCE the concerns of the Churches;
5. *Emphasizes* that the concerns of the WCC for human rights are global and that further work on them should be done within the framework provided by the St. Pölten consultation on "Human Rights and Christian Responsibility" and refined by Section V of the Nairobi Assembly.
6. *Recommends*, on the basis of the General Secretary's report:
 - a. *Advisory Group on Human Rights*
 - i. that there be set up within CCIA an Advisory Group on Human Rights to deal with the global concerns of the WCC in this field which would
 - act as a stimulus and means of sharing ideas and experience among the Churches and to "help

- strengthen church leaders and Christians to perform the difficult tasks which face them, and to execute conscientiously their prophetic role in the face of abuses of power and inhuman practices in their churches, communities and national societies" (rec. 21, Nairobi Section V report on human rights);
- bring groups together for intensive ecumenical work in this field;
 - study the provisions found in or the measures taken under state legislation where human rights are ignored or violated;
 - provide a means for examining and evaluating "problems and serious cases of violation of human rights which are brought to the attention of the WCC", make recommendations on how they should be handled, and where a member Church is involved, ensure that it be consulted (Montreux Colloquium memorandum):
- ii. that this Advisory Group be composed of 2-3 persons per region, selected by the CCIA in consultation with the General Secretary, the member Churches and the appropriate regional or national ecumenical bodies;
 - iii. that this Advisory Group meet at least once per year and that it report to the Commission of the CCIA;
- b. *Regional and national ecumenical activities in the field of human rights*
- i. that in order to allow this Advisory Group to work effectively and to encourage the implementation of the recommendations to the member Churches on human rights made by the V Assembly more effective work is necessary in the various regional contexts (Montreux Colloquium memorandum);
 - ii. that the CCIA, in consultation with the Churches and recognized ecumenical organizations in the various regions and areas, and seeking their participation, promote the creation and/or strengthening of the appropriate regional structures (Montreux Colloquium memorandum);
- c. *Ecumenical activities in the geographical area comprising the signatory States of the Final Act of the Helsinki Conference*
- i. that with specific regard to Europe and North America the CCIA, in consultation with the member Churches, and with the Conference of European Churches, the NCCC-USA, and the Canadian Council of Churches, promote the development of an appropriate mechanism and network connecting commissions or departments of member Churches, national councils and GEC which either exist presently or may be created to deal with matters of human rights;
 - ii. that through this means the Churches in the signatory States
 - promote further study and periodic encounters on issues related to human rights and religious liberty in the context of the Helsinki Final Act, of the report of the St. Pölten Consultation and of the report and recommendations on human rights of Nairobi Section V;
 - maintain regular contact with the CCIA and contribute to the work of the Advisory Group on Human Rights to be established under recommendation 6.a., above;
 - further develop guidelines for the application of the principles and recommendations contained in the report on human rights of Nairobi Section V on the basis of ecumenical solidarity and taking into account the "different confessional, historical, and social traditions of the various regions and countries as well as the ecclesiological background and the concrete circumstances in which these Churches live and witness" (Montreux Colloquium memorandum);
 - either directly and/or through the Advisory Group on Human Rights, advise the General Secretary on the implementation of the request contained in 3. above;
- d. *Strengthening the facilities of CCIA*
- i. as a prior condition for the implementation of the foregoing recommendations, that in accordance with the recommendations of St. Pölten, the recommendations submitted by Assembly Section V to the Programme Guide-lines Committee, and the recommendations of the

Montreux Colloquium, the facilities of CCIA be strengthened to enable it to serve as a more effective instrument in the field of human rights; this would imply

- the addition of one staff member to the Geneva office of the CCIA;
- the provision of a budget sufficient for regular meetings of the Advisory Group on Human Rights, collecting and evaluating information on human rights situations throughout the world, information and publication activities, and promotion and maintenance of more effective relations with member

Churches, national or regional councils and other groups on issues related to human rights.

- ii. that the CCIA should prepare a detailed budget for this and present it to the next meeting of the WCC Executive Committee;
- iii. that the member Churches give special attention to this request and provide promptly the necessary resources to allow this work to go forward.
- iv. that close collaboration be maintained with other sub-units in Unit II and other Units.

Bernard Smith

(Secretary of the Christian Affirmation Campaign) writes :

Your editorial (*RCL* Vol. 4, No. 4), commenting on the WCC's enforced discussion of human rights in Soviet Russia, declares that the WCC can no longer be accused of "selective indignation". How I wish that were so! Unhappily such a view is shown to be wildly premature by Helene Posdeeff's report, in the same issue, of the Central Committee's August meeting. One swallow never did make a summer and the WCC's present writhings and wriggings to avoid meeting Soviet tyranny with a firm Christian condemnation, hardly justify such optimism. For most of its 25 years the WCC has campaigned incessantly against racism in South Africa but has allowed the appalling suppression of human rights in Soviet Russia to go unrebuked. Something very much more substantial than Dr Potter's evasive August report will be needed to redress the balance.

On another page in the same issue Paul Oestreicher voices his fears that publicity given by Keston College to religious persecution in Russia may be used as fuel for anti-communist politics. But why on earth shouldn't it? The ideology of communism is intrinsically atheistic and, as a consequence, the modern communist State is anti-religious. For this reason it is right and proper for Christians to be anti-communist. I have no doubt that Mr. Oestreicher was anti-Nazi in the 1930s because Nazism was intrinsically anti-Jewish. And he was perfectly right to be so.

[The Editor welcomes comments from readers on material printed in *RCL*. The CSRC and *RCL*'s Editor do not necessarily agree with the views expressed in this journal.]