

# Editorial

Recent developments for believers in China are analysed on pp. 244-55, in the light of a Communist Party document on religious policy which reveals a more tolerant attitude to religion than that previously obtaining. In theory, believers in China are freer now than at any time since 1949. Whether they are so in practice continues to be hotly debated. This is interesting, because all sides in the debate rely on basically the same evidence, which, although increasing, is still fairly sparse (in comparison with that on Eastern Europe). The interpretation of the evidence is crucial, and to a large extent appears to rest upon the churchmanship of the interpreters. Observers interpret the situation of the churches in China in the light of their own view of what the church should be and do. No-one now seriously disputes that Protestants, Catholics and Muslims are far more numerous and display far more vitality than was supposed even a few years ago (though the extent of their growth is fiercely disputed). However, liberal churchmen tend to view the steady growth in the number of Protestant churches, the increased revision of training for pastors, and the increased foreign contacts — all under the watchful but impassive eye of the Chinese government — as satisfactory developments. Evangelicals, on the other hand, point to the restrictions the officially recognised churches face in reaching out to non-believers, the signs of increasing government intolerance towards the mushrooming unofficial house-churches and the slow rate of official printing of Bibles, and contend that the Chinese government is not really prepared to allow Christianity to compete on equal terms with communism. This summary risks over-simplification, but it helps to illuminate the basic question: what is the church for? Is it to hold services of worship for those who wish to attend them? Or is it to preach the Gospel, with or without government permission, to those who may never have recognised their need of it? Can the church's call to be the "salt" in society best be served by working within the government limits (thus demonstrating that Christians are patriotic and responsible citizens), or by challenging the assumptions of a godless society (and demonstrating that Christians have a prophetic role which frequently sets them at odds with the world around them, and has often led to suffering)? There are of course no easy answers to this question, and this is not the place to try to provide them. What is clear, though, is that at present Chinese Protestants (so far as one can tell) and Christian China-watchers are completely polarised in their views on this issue.

· For Chinese Catholics, the most divisive issue is the question of

loyalty to the Pope. The situation of the Chinese Catholic Church raises the question: can one be a Catholic independent of the Vatican? Most Catholics would tend to answer this question on the basis of their deepest instincts and personal experience, which will have coloured their own view of the spiritual leadership of their Church.

Controversy about Nicaragua, a country whose present situation is still in flux and whose future is quite unpredictable, polarises inevitably along political lines, and this tends to happen also among Christian commentators on the Nicaraguan church. In a volatile and unstable situation, both those who believe that the Marxist-inspired government must inevitably be as intolerant of religion as all others have been, and those who believe that the Sandinistas are leading a crusade against poverty and corruption which is essentially Christian, are still able to find plenty of evidence to fuel their assumptions. *RCL* hopes to provide its readers with differing viewpoints concerning the church in Nicaragua and its response to developments in the political situation. In a previous issue (Vol. 12 No. 1, pp. 42-54) we published an article by Humberto Belli which drew attention to ways in which the Sandinista government is limiting the freedom of the Catholic Church. In this issue (pp. 274-80), Fr Charles Antoine challenges Belli's assumptions (articulated in his writings published elsewhere, not in *RCL*), that the Church must necessarily limit itself to choosing between the stances of the Catholic Church in Poland and Czechoslovakia.

Three historical articles include detailed treatments of the Seventh-Day Adventists and the Mennonites in Russia and the Soviet Union and an incident in the history of the Bulgarian Orthodox Church. Professor Spas T. Raikin investigates the background to the unexpected and still unexplained resignation of Exarch Stefan in 1948. In doing so, he casts doubt upon the authenticity of a "Message to the Bulgarian People" allegedly written by Stefan in 1952, and subsequently published in *RCL* (Vol. 7, No. 2, pp. 111-13). Before publishing this document, every effort was made to check its authenticity, but in practice complete verification proved impossible, and a decision had to be taken on the basis of the best evidence available at that time. Five years later, although no new evidence either way has come to light, we see no reason to dispute the conclusion which Professor Raikin has reached after carefully researching the background to Exarch Stefan's story.

J.E.