

Editorial

Should Christians "meddle with politics"? Or should they concern themselves first of all with "spiritual" matters? Over the last few years there has been lively debate on these questions in the British media. The problem for all governments is that if Christians choose to comment on political topics they are often critical of current government policies.

In the Soviet Union the churches are allowed to speak out on political questions in a strictly controlled way: at international gatherings; and in full support of the "peace-making" policies of the Soviet government. When priests preach to their flock in their parishes, however, their sermons "must contain no political or social issues or examples". Nevertheless, there are obviously many areas of contemporary life in the countries of Eastern Europe, as there are in Western countries, about which Christian citizens naturally feel concerned and on which they consider it their duty to offer critical comment, unwelcome though this may be to the secular authorities. As one East German Protestant bishop has remarked, "Christians should be the salt of the earth rather than the marmalade of the state."

One subject which is of particular concern today throughout Eastern Europe is conscientious objection. The Polish Freedom and Peace movement, which Gareth Davies writes about on pp. 4-20, began in spring 1985 after the trial of a young draftee who had been sent to prison for refusing to take the military oath. The movement soon broadened its frame of reference, however, and now concerns itself with a wide range of issues in the realm of peace and human rights. Freedom and Peace is not primarily a Christian or even a religious movement, but the story of its development illustrates the role which Christian teaching and the churches as institutions tend to play in Eastern European social and political movements — a role with several characteristics specific to the communist context.

Firstly, Christian teachings. A Freedom and Peace declaration

argues that "there can be no peace . . . where the individual has been deprived of his right to independence and initiative." This perception is echoed by similar groups throughout Eastern Europe. Freedom and Peace bases itself explicitly on what Pope John Paul II has said about the intimate interdependence of these two concepts, and thus proclaims a Christian basis for its activity.

Secondly, the churches as institutions. Freedom and Peace held its most ambitious project yet, an international peace seminar, in the vault of a Warsaw church. Catholic clergy have provided a forum for the movement's activities and a refuge for its members. The Protestant Church in East Germany has played a similar role in relation to unofficial peace, human rights and environmental groups in that country. Behind this pattern lies the fact that in all Eastern European countries the churches and other religious organisations are the only legally existing institutions which are not directly organised and controlled by the Communist Party, and as such they provide an environment in which alternative ideas can grow and towards which those with ideas of political or social reform naturally gravitate.

Under these circumstances, it is not surprising that the churches in Eastern Europe which are most congenial to the authorities are those which explicitly "keep out of politics". The New Apostolic Church (see Arvan Gordon's article, pp. 26-35) provides a good illustration: throughout its history it has expressed its loyalty to the current secular power — most recently the Nazis and the Communists. What concerns members of this church is salvation: meanwhile they are hardworking citizens of the GDR. For the New Apostolic Church, the "religious" and the "political" are quite separate realms.

For the 19th century Slavophiles, by contrast, membership of the Russian Orthodox Church meant that one was intimately involved in a process of social transformation which could culminate in the realisation of a special religious destiny for Russia, the "God-bearing nation". In his article on pp. 36-53, Peter Duncan reminds us that the ideas of the Slavophiles have been a continuing inspiration to Russian Orthodox thinkers in the Soviet Union, and he analyses the content of the *samizdat* journal *Veche* of the early 1970s in which these ideas were expressed at length. In the late 1980s, when a certain relaxation of political controls within the Soviet Union has led *inter alia* to the appearance of extremist nationalist groups such as *Pamyat'*, Duncan's article is most useful to those who would seek to set this nationalist revival in its historical context, and serves to remind us all that Russian nationalism in its most creative manifestation is a social and political idealism based firmly in the Christian faith.