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## Editorial: On Avoiding the Pitfalls of an either/or Mentality

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## EDITORIAL

### ON AVOIDING THE PITFALLS OF AN EITHER/OR MENTALITY

The issue of religious freedom in Eastern Europe and the many instances of suppression of religious freedom in that area should not be misused for ideological or political advantage by Western churches, church groups and institutions. The temptation exists to either overlook religious persecution in Eastern Europe in order to cooperate with the official churches of Eastern Europe and work for peace and detente or to highlight Eastern European suppression of religious freedom in order to increase the ideological conflict at home and abroad and to justify anti-Communism and the arms race. These temptations have been significantly increased as certain interest groups manipulate these issues in order to promote their narrow political goals.

For instance, on July 10 and 11, 1983, the Institute on Religion and Democracy organized a conference in Washington, DC, on "Religious Freedom East and West: The Human Rights Issue of the Eighties." This topic is of great concern for C.A.R.E.E., the publishers of OPREE, so I consented to participate on a panel on "Religious Freedom in the Communist World." It is to the credit of the Institute on Religion and Democracy to have invited speakers and panelists espousing different views on the subject matter. However, it was obvious that the organizers tended to use the issue of religious persecution in Communist-dominated areas as a pretext for an uncritical support of the Reagan Administration's policies as well as an attack on the World Council of Churches, the National Council of Churches and the mainline Protestant churches for allegedly showing little or no concern for religious freedom in Communist countries in order to pursue peace and justice concerns. It appeared to them that the W.C.C., N.C.C. and the mainline churches were uncritical of socialist countries and hostile to the U.S.A. and Western democracies in their pursuit of peace and justice. It was evident that those speakers who were most closely associated with the Institute on Religion and Democracy vowed to fight the W.C.C. and N.C.C., whom they perceived to be overly concerned with issues of peace and justice and insufficiently concerned for the freedom of religion in Communist countries.

Obviously some people think it to be an either/or situation. People on the political right wing tend to feel that issues of peace and justice need to be downplayed while issues of religious freedom in the U.S.S.R. and Eastern Europe need to be highlighted. They perceive that the opposite is being practiced by the nameless bureaucrats of the W.C.C. and N.C.C.. Needless to say, people on the political left wing see matters differently.

There is something fundamentally wrong with presenting issues of peace and justice and issues of religious freedom as alternative rather than complementary concerns. It is equally wrong to be selective about which abuses of peace and justice or of religious freedom will be singled out for criticism. Sometimes American church agencies did not issue resolutions criticizing religious persecutions in Eastern Europe because they felt that such criticism has little impact on the Communist governments except to increase pressure on Eastern European churches and to add to international tensions. Some Christians in the East--especially the dissenters and the silent sufferers--have hoped for voices of concern from the West but often they were not forthcoming from the W.C.C. or the N.C.C.. Yet those same agencies were quite willing to criticize abuses by the U.S. government and some of the right-wing dictatorships allied to the U.S. for breaches of justice and religious freedom. Such criticism is partially understandable because these regimes are open either to pressures of public opinion (in democracies) or of economic and military nature (in dictatorships allied to the West).

An observer may soon perceive that such selective criticism might be ideologically based. Surely the totalitarian Communist countries deserve equal criticism for the same violations which have evoked condemnation in the right-wing dictatorships. It is hard to believe, for instance, that North Korea is not as bad a violator of human rights as South Korea is, yet church groups have shown more indignation about South Korean human rights violations. Tactically this makes a great deal of sense because the South Korean government is much more vulnerable to U.S. pressures than North Korea is. Nevertheless oppression is oppression no matter where it takes place!

The religious and political right wing has gone on the offensive by espousing religious freedoms. Espousing religious liberties is good! But they seem to be concerned about limitations of religious freedom only in Communist countries. At the Washington conference it became transparent that many of the representatives of the Institute on Religion and Democracy thundered about the silence of the churches in face of crass violations of religious liberty in Eastern Europe and other Communist countries (e.g. Cuba and Nicaragua) but when a concrete appeal was made by two Eastern Orthodox participants--one of whom was a bishop--about the severe limitations of religious freedom of the Ecumenical Patriarchate in Istanbul by the Turkish government, this appeal was met by evasion and silence. Thus the same sin of omission was perpetuated by the very same people who minutes earlier charged such sins of omission to the W.C.C. and N.C.C.. What irony!

The Institute on Religion and Democracy, however, does not hold monopoly on such inconsistencies. We all have our blind spots and our self-righteous arrogancies. The lessons are clear:

--It is not a choice between peace with justice on the one hand and religious liberties on the other. The religious moderates and liberals must not overlook the severe religious persecutions in Communist countries (which, of course, vary significantly from country to country and from one period to another, but are so well-documented that there is no question that persecution is taking place). They must not allow the appearance that the religious and political rightists are the only defenders of those in Eastern Europe who cannot defend themselves against totalitarian oppression. Moderates and liberals as well as conservatives must show passionate concern for the suffering of persecuted people wherever it takes place even if this should incur protest by the official church leaders of Eastern European churches. But at the same time they must not let up on their peace-making efforts. This prophetic voice must be heard both at home and abroad. It should not be targeted at a restricted group, though, as with the Israelite prophets, the most pointed criticism is to be directed at one's own group or society, where, hopefully, one has the maximum influence.

--The misery of persecuted believers must not be exploited for

narrow ideological, political, economic, or religious interests. Helping them is an end in itself, rather than a vehicle for advancing one's own cause.

--The ultimate purpose, for Christians at least, is human salvation and reconciliation. Thus issues like religious freedom in Eastern Europe--or elsewhere--are not to be used for divisive reasons or to sow distrust and animosity.

OPREE will endeavor to present both issues of religious liberty and of peace with justice as they relate to Eastern Europe. One cannot promise any artificial balance because papers are published as various authors write them. The eliciting of scholarly studies in this field is no easy task. We simply do not have the ability to "commission" papers on this or that problem, but tend to depend on the availability of papers as they are produced by authors or on the willingness of scholars to be persuaded to write something for OPREE in the area of their expertise. However, we shall not consciously narrow our focus only to the study of violations of religious liberty and on dissenters or only on the ecumenical relations with official churches, or only to the peace-making activities of such organizations as the Prague Christian Peace Conference. OPREE will be a vehicle of expression for a diversity of views and concerns. We are of the conviction that religious people need not be a single-concern people, but can concurrently promote a number of crucial values.

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This issue reflects our editorial policy. The first article is a survey of the smaller denominations in Yugoslavia by Rudolf Grulich translated from German from Glaube in der 2. Welt (Zollikon, Switzerland). The article aims to supply basic information about the existence and activities of minority religious groups in a country which has given relatively free range to religious activities (this is not to say that the Yugoslav government makes no effort to supervise and restrict their activities). The membership of many of these groups has consequently tended to expand when compared to the pre-World War II situation. The

Jewish religion is an exception to that trend.

The second article is a report from Poland about the publishing activities of religious groups during the first part of the imposition of martial law. It is an unsigned article reprinted with permission from the English version of the Information Bulletin of the Christian Social Association in Warsaw. The article testifies to the vigorous expression of diverse views by the religious publications after their temporary suspension by the military authorities. Have the censors been generous in order to attempt to portray the diversity which is tolerated in Poland? Or does it reflect the strength and courage of religious groups which have asserted their rights and thereby extracted concessions even during the difficult martial law conditions?

Finally, we also publish a letter to the editor by a former contributor, Peter Prifti (see OPREE, Vol. 3, No. 3). He provides some helpful corrections to the statement on "Religion in Albania" which we published alongside his own original article. Thoughtful responses by our readers are welcome and so are follow-up reports and analyses by our former authors.

Paul Mojzes, editor