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Editorial: Ecumenical Fellowship and Ecumenical Realism

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ECUMENICAL FELLOWSHIP AND ECUMENICAL REALISM

This issue of our publication contains a single essay which concerns a fundamental question: How can churches in the rest of the world relate to churches and Christians in Eastern Europe so as to support them in their witness and increase their opportunities, not strengthen the ideological and political bonds which restrict them? The author, J. A. Hezly, is Professor of Ecumenics at The University of Utrecht in the Netherlands. He brings to this question considerable scholarship and experience, and is preparing a book on the subject from which the article in this issue is taken.

Professor Hezly concentrates on the relations which have developed in the World Council of Churches. His analysis will probably draw protests from both ends of the political spectrum. He examines rigorously -- some would say too strictly -- the political and ideological pressures under which the churches in Eastern Europe, especially in the Soviet Union, operate. He questions the illusions which many Christians in the Western and Third World have about the kind of relationships which are possible given these restrictions. How are we to know when and to what degree our Christian colleagues in these countries are setting forth perforce the views of their governments or the dominant Communist parties in their countries, and when or in what way, direct or indirect, they are speaking from their own faith and convictions? How are we to know when and how a political tactic is being pursued in ecumenical meetings and when a real dialogue, with conclusions open to the work of the Holy Spirit, is taking place? The author does not pretend to answer these questions, but only to make us aware of them. His argument is that too often in the ecumenical movement we have assumed a freedom and an openness to new social perspectives which is not permitted to our friends in Marxist-Leninist societies, and is indeed excluded by the terms according to which their governments permit participation in ecumenical fellowship. He will be roundly criticized by those who deny that there is such repression in Eastern Europe or that the churches are restricted by it.

But strident anti-communists, before they cheer Professor Hezly on, would do well to read to the end. In the first place, this essay is not an attack upon ecumenism and the World Council of Churches, but a constructive critique
of its style from within. During the past twenty years the World Council's consideration of social questions has tended to shift from a deliberative dialogical method bringing radically different perspectives into conversation aiming at new and transcendent insight, to a concentration on actual programs and direct involvement for liberation and justice in various parts of the world. But this shift assumes freedom of action and openness to change in ways a world organization can influence and openly debate. It is the difficulties of this style for East-West relations that the author explores.

Second, Professor Hebly is first of all concerned for the welfare of the churches in Eastern Europe themselves, for their survival as communities of worship and witness in the common life, given all the ambiguities and compromises which that requires. We often, he suggests, lead these churches into temptation, and at the same time into greater bondage, by making their representatives play the role in the ecumenical scene of a bloc whose policies are dictated by Marxist-Leninist governments. Our relationships should be much more subtle than this. The ecumenical movement would do better to be an enabler of many informal contacts rather than the promoter of just a few formal ones. Mutual understanding and intercession is needed more than common action. But this mutual understanding must be sought with all churches in the whole spectrum of their variety and degree of conformity or nonconformity to the principalities and powers of their societies, not just with those we ideologically approve.

With this defense of Professor Hebly's contention, a few questions can still be raised to his analysis itself. Does he underrate the sophistication and realism of Western and Third World participants in the ecumenical movement? Is the propaganda victory which Soviet and East European governments seek in ecumenical meetings not a hollow one? Church representatives from Eastern Europe can say all they like about the Christian goodness of the Marxist-Leninist socialist system, but such language rarely gets into an ecumenical document and is often met in conversation with tolerant and compassionate smiles. However much one may regret that World Council of Churches meetings become too often power struggles in which an Eastern bloc swings its weight, participants from the rest of the world are well aware of this problem and work to minimize it in many ways, including personal contacts with East European delegates themselves.
Second, does the author give enough credit to church people in Eastern Europe for their often wonderful capacity to juggle and balance the political forces weighing on them, and to make room for human relations among Christians across ideological lines to grow? The "passport speech", which delegates to ecumenical meetings from Eastern Europe must so often give, is an example. The real business of the meeting, we all know, is not what is said there but what happens between us as we get to know one another better. In a sense political conformity is itself a Christian tactic, part of the bargaining process which helps to open the channels through which real ecumenical influences can flow.

Third, does the author take adequate account of the radical differences in various countries in Eastern Europe? His model is clearly the Soviet Union and the relation between Russian Orthodoxy and the now atheist Russian state which prevails there. He draws also on the policies of the Reformed and Lutheran churches in Hungary. But already here the political and social situation is quite different in its orchestration of conformity, compromise and resistance. Different again is East Germany whose church witness Professor Hebly finds more congenial. One could go on with illustrations. The pattern of church-state relations, the style of the expression of dissent, the possibilities for modifying the inhumanities of a Marxist-Leninist regime differ in all these countries. The pattern of their influence on the ecumenical movement therefore differs as well.

Despite these questions, the problem which Professor Hebly raises merits further debate and discussion. We hope it will take place in these pages.

Charles C. West
Associate Editor