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NEW TENDENCIES IN STATE POLICY TOWARD THE RELIGIOUS GROUPS
IN EUROPEAN SOCIALIST COUNTRIES

by Dr. Ingo Roer

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V. Kuroyedov: "We take religious forces into account."

There are observable signs in most socialist countries¹ that a new relationship is being attempted between the state and religious denominations. Instead of mutual negativism common efforts in certain areas are developing. Ideological disputes seem to diminish in the face of practical cooperation, particularly in the areas of peace and the humanization of society. Socialist states no longer proceed on the assumption that religion will die out in the foreseeable future. They no longer view religious authorities across the board as reactionary. They expressly accord a certain legitimacy to religious activity; cooperation of religious groups in certain social tasks is being expected and they are therefore inclined to grant them a larger sphere of influence than before. Conversely, today the churches do not assume that socialist governments will break down in the near future.

On the occasion of the first full session of the Ecumenical Council of Churches in 1948 in Amsterdam, John Foster Dulles had declared the socialist state to be a false deity "which has usurped for itself the throne of a spiritual absolute power and which robs the individual soul of every free, moral, cultural, and intellectual self determination." This is the way in which the Czech theologian Joseph L. Hromadka had summarized Western criticism at that time in his own speech at Amsterdam. The churches are frequently prepared to admit today, that in

¹Editor's remark: Roer uses the term "socialist countries" in relation to the Soviet Union and its Eastern European allies. It would appear that many of his remarks are inapplicable at the very least to Albania and Yugoslavia.

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regard to social questions, things were not always done and supported by
the churches, which might have been necessary and economically feasible.
The Czech theologian Jozef Smolik formulates it this way: "Churches no
longer wish to overlook the area of jurisdiction and the offer of grace
and promise, which the socialist state represents."

Christians and churches in the socialist countries are prepared to
take a realistic attitude toward the post-Constantinian age, which has
already begun for them. They are beginning to recognize that the state
in which they live is a government viewing itself as completely secular.
This state has its foundation, according to its own self-definition, in
the will of the working class and in the recognition and acceptance of
historical legality and necessity. This state rejects the idea of an
origin in God and also rejects the idea of subordinating itself to God's
mission.

On one hand, the radical way in which Marxism embraces atheism
makes the existence of churches in socialist countries anything but
easy. On the other hand, atheism is a clear position, which allows the
churches on their part to formulate their mission as clearly as the
state does and to separate it from the ideology of the Communist Party.
From the beginning there was a tension between the ideological claim,
according to which atheism is a fundamental part of Marxism (and not
solely historically, as Hromadka asserted) and the recognition of the
legal existence of religious denominations, which are sometimes
partially funded by the atheistic state (as, for example, in the Soviet
Union). These problems between the state and religious denominations
have been aired politically in recent years, specifically, in conver-
sations and negotiations with one another. Signs of this development may
have been observed in all the socialist countries. Some socialist states
reacted to the placement of new missiles in central Europe with
restrictive measures against religious groups. The condition for the new
relationship between the state and religious congregations are so
different in each country anyway that this process must be examined
separately for each one.

USSR

Under Krushchev there was a new wave of open persecution of
believers. Undue bureaucratic influence and muzzling, as well as the meddling of the state in purely religious matters, were effectuated partially by means of new rules, partially simply by dint of oral commands, against which no protest was possible. Then in March 1980 the chairman of the Council for Religious Affairs in the Council of ministers of the USSR (referred to simply as "Council" from now on) V. Kuroyedov expressed the following assertion in a fundamentally important article in the periodical Kommunist (The Communist): "There are individual cases, in which local governments occasionally permit illegal measures to be taken against churches and their members. Every such case is being viewed as a crass violation of the constitutional principle of the equality of religious and non-religious people before the law."

This means that under Brezhnev and Kosygin open persecution was officially suspended and no serious efforts undertaken to establish atheism by means of the destruction of religious communities. Nonetheless they remained restricted within a very narrow legal framework. It is true that the summarizing statement, which the deputy chairman of the "Council", Viktor Furov, gave in 1975 to the Central Committee of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union (C.P.S.U.) and which was entitled "The Religious Cadres and Measures for the Restriction of their Activities under the Law" sounded very different from Kuroyedov's remarks. Significant parts of the Furov report became known in Western countries in 1979. According to this document, the "Council" systematically uses the legally granted comprehensive control device of "registration," that is, the power to grant approval to church personnel and organizational decisions, according to its own discretion, for the purpose of subjecting church leadership and the episcopate to a close scrutiny in matters of personnel and administration.

Furov believed that, according to their degree of willingness to collaborate, he could divide the 58 bishops of the Russian Orthodox Church (ROC) into three groups of roughly equal size: 1. the "patriots", without any particular spiritual activism, among whom he numbered Patriarch Pimen and the director of the foreign office, Archbishop Yuvenaliy, 2. the largest group, the "merely" loyal, who would do everything in their power within the bounds of the law to strengthen the
church—this group was led by Archbishop Nikodim of Leningrad and Novgorod, who died in 1978; and 3. those bishops, who do not avoid conflict with the authorities in the execution of their duties. Furov asserted that "a certain concern is caused by the activities of some young bishops, who were attracted in different ways to work with foreigners, but who often display great religious zeal in their own country and are not mindful of the recommendations of the authorities and of local governmental agencies." This criticism is quite noteworthy. It should make it possible to judge the effect of the foreign relations of the church with more discrimination than has been heretofore exercised in Western countries, especially as regards representatives of the Russian Orthodox Church. It frequently happens that they are condemned by their Western brothers and sisters and by the "Council" with the same arguments.

The sensitive points for the relationship between the government and religious communities are, formally considered, first, the practical implementation of decrees, second, on the local level, and third, for the individual. For all three points it is valid to say that in recent years there is clearly more freedom of movement here, that is, one can point to more rights.

The Russian Orthodox Church with its 40-50 million members has presently in its service only around 7,000 priests, two theological academies and three seminaries. At the present there is a shortage of opportunities of study for the priesthood. Because of this, the state is recognizing more lay people as religious; church buildings are being opened again; in some cases they have even been rebuilt. The Russian Orthodox Church has only one periodical and the complaint is heard that insufficient quantities of this journal and particularly of calendars, are being printed. This was Archbishop Pitirim's [in charge of church publications editor's remark] comment to a listener's question on Radio Moscow on September 1, 1982. "In recent years the religious organizations in our country have published 80 titles of theological literature with a combined circulation of more than 1.5 million copies."

Some religious figures definitely allow themselves the liberty of naming injustices, for example, Feodosiy, bishop of Poltava and
Kremenchug, in his appeal to Brezhnev concerning the concrete concerns of Orthodox Christians in the Ukraine (10/26/77). Additionally, priests no longer disappear without a trace or are declared to have died as they used to, such as those who preach the whole gospel, as the priest Dudko did, whose case was widely covered in the Western press.

A spiritual renewal of dimensions which should not be underestimated seems to be taking place by means of the spread of individual piety. Otto Luchterhandt, generally considered an expert on the religious picture in the USSR, asserts: "Today, aside from old women, young people actually make up about 40% of the attendees at Orthodox services." This individual religious devotion among intellectuals in particular has spread to the so-called religious-philosophical seminars in many cities of the Soviet Union, Luchterhandt reports.

The relations between the state and the individual religious communities are quite different and of varying degrees of cordiality. In his definitive article, Kuroyedov complains particularly about the Baptist-Initiativniki (Reformed Baptists), for example, who formed a Community in 1960 and who "wanted to live not according to Soviet but according to divine law." Kuroyedov also accuses the Jehovah's Witnesses of circumventing laws and of arousing dissatisfaction, among the membership, with the politics of the Soviet state and the Communist Party toward religion and the church.

As a matter of note, it is precisely these two religious groups which have the largest growth rate in the USSR. The growth of just these communities is certainly also a sign of the tremendous yearning for meaning in life and an indication of a new awakening which is taking place in the Soviet population. But above all in these two communities--because of their evolution, if nothing else--opposition to the socialist system expresses itself in an entirely different way than can be the case in the Russian Orthodox Church. The Reformed Baptists, for example, do not have a hierarchical, but rather a democratic structure. They have a great liturgical mobility (they are not bound to church buildings) and they have the long underground experience of Russia's free churches.

To these communities flock those people whose primary interest is
in their personal salvation, their emancipation in the spiritual realm regardless of all social restrictions. They are little concerned with any specific formulation of the interests of the church or with anything political. Viewed in this way, these religious groups are the complete alternative to the "Soviet way of life."

The relation between the Soviet state and some religious groups can be tense for another reason, too. Here, too, the article by Kuroyedov is of significance. In it, he complains about priests in the Catholic Church, particularly in Lithuania, who encourage their members to seek for permission for those activities in the church which are not provided for in Soviet laws (to strive for the previously mentioned "registration"). The source of the "Council's" discomfort is revealed in the following closing comment by Kuroyedov. "Such extremist attempts, by the way, are supported by the Vatican."

The more connections a religious organization has with "imperialist" foreign countries, or if its main headquarters is located in Western Europe or the U.S., the more criticism it draws from the "Council". The Russian Orthodox Church has a special position insofar as this church is divided throughout the entire world, yet all Russian Orthodox churches in socialist countries recognize the Patriarch of Moscow and of all Russia as their leader. The remark by Kuroyedov about the Catholic Church contains an official confirmation of what many religiously interested visitors to the Soviet Union have reported, namely that the fear of admitting to being a Christian and of accepting a function in the church is receding.

Another aspect of the foreign relations of a religious group can be illuminated by means of the example of a correspondence in the reader's column of the periodical Neues Leben [New Life] (2/3/82, 3/24/82, 5/19/82). In this major newspaper of the Soviet-German population the question of which nationality Mennonites who live in the Soviet Union hold was discussed. Are they Germans or are they Dutch? Behind this discussion the political question of how much freedom can a religious organization obtain by appealing to Soviet policies concerning foreign nationalities, in other words, to what extent are national prejudices catered to under the cover of religiosity. In fact, Mennonites tried to
achieve exemption from the confiscation of personal property during the Revolution by claiming they were Dutch. Today certain Mennonite circles try to encourage the spread of the German language by using German customs and by asserting that they are of German extraction. Therefore, by means of both a tie rooted outside of the Soviet system and also a religious tie, which is often connected to a nationalistic one, the expected political loyalty to the socialist order can be diminished. The problem of having roots outside of the Soviet system, whether they be ethnic or religious, or whether they come from one's identity as an individual, affects more than any other group the Jewish minority in the USSR, which is two million strong. It also offers a minimal explanation for their situation, which is one without human rights, a position which could hardly be worse. The extensive halt called to exit visas, which were granted relatively generously until 1970, is directly connected to this divided loyalties problem as well as to the more strident politics of Israel (and of the USA) in the Near East. This fact proves our thesis again, that the increased surety of their rights and freedom on the part of religious communities is directly dependent on the international relations of the USSR and on political détente. Conversely, the escalation of the arms race causes even more obvious reactions on the religious plane than even on the economic scene.

Since the late Archbishop Nicolay of Krutitz and Kolomma spoke in front of the World Peace Conference in Paris on April 22, 1949, the Moscow patriarchate of the Russian Orthodox Church has participated in the work of international peace, but at first only as part of the activities of other groups (the World Council of Churches, the Christian Peace Conference, and the Conference of European Churches, among others). In May of 1952 the Russian Orthodox Church then began to organize its own arrangements, in which the specific contributions of the world's religions for the preservation of peace were emphasized. The concept "peace" had already undergone a significant expansion in the context of the Christian Peace Conference (C.P.C). Over the years, numerous questions which concern the creation of just relationships on earth which are only indirectly related to the danger of a new war were also included. Thus there evolved, starting in the mid-sixties, an
independent concern in the Russian Orthodox Church with the theological questions raised in connection with the peace effort.

Since 1977 the Russian Orthodox Church appears to be building up its own forum in a systematic way, outside of the Christian Peace Conference, for treatment of the peace question and for the cultivation of international relations. In this regard, Kuroyedov praised the Church in his address on the occasion of the official celebration of the birthday of Patriarch Pimen on July 23, 1978:

In the last 10 years the Moscow Patriarchate, led by the idea of peace, has considerably increased its activities in different international and social organizations . . . In this connection the important World conference of Religious Workers for Lasting Peace, Disarmament, and Just Relations between Nations cannot go unmentioned. This conference took place in Moscow in the year 1977 on the initiative of the Russian Orthodox Church and with its direct participation. To the present day this conference has lost nothing of its relevance.

In contrast, in 1977 the Western response was still hesitant, but in the follow-up meetings, Western participation grew to such an extent that in 1982 it can be termed a significant participation. The Russian Orthodox Church has built a forum here, which includes, beyond the Christian churches, Muslims and Buddhists and which clearly surpasses the Christian Peace Conference, through which the international peace work of the Russian Orthodox Church had been primarily accomplished until the establishment of this forum. Conversely, the ROC has brought its relations with the C.P.C., the W.C.C., the Conference of European Churches, as well as its relations to the larger church coalitions, into this new forum. This structure, which includes, in addition to the Christians, Muslims and Buddhists, is in agreement with the governmental view, that the global problems of peace makes it necessary that there be a widening of cooperation between all people without regard to their different world views or to their religious affiliation.

The leaders of the "World Conference of Religious Workers for the Salvation of the Sacred Gift of Life from Nuclear Catastrophe" extended
an invitation to Moscow for a round-table discussion from March 6-10, 1983. "All people of good will" were to work toward achieving negotiations between the major nuclear powers with the aim of a total nuclear freeze. The title of the declaration reads: "Freeze on Nuclear Weapons--a Turning Point--Moral Command and Economic Necessity."

Professor Max Stackhouse, of Andover-Newton Theological Seminary in Massachusetts, evaluates this discussion in his Open Letter to Patriarch Pimen of April 13, 1983 as follows: "The Round Table Conference on Nuclear Threat (March 6-10) which you convened, suggested to me and to several other representatives of religious bodies from around the world, that the Russian Orthodox Church was beginning to develop those wider perspectives which would allow her to engage in comparable assessments of Soviet policy."

Almost simultaneously with the Round Table Discussion in Moscow, Patriarch Pimen directed an open letter to President Reagan, which he had published in the Easter 1983 edition of the New York Times (section 3, p. 16 E) as an advertisement. Professor Stackhouse criticised this open message from Pimen in a letter of reply and asserted that this message ran counter to the effort of the Round Table because of its nationalism. Stackhouse objected that "Christians everywhere acknowledge a propriety in patriotism so long as [it expresses only] loyalty to that divine reality which transcends every people, country and political entity." Stackhouse poses the question of how independently the Russian Orthodox church can express itself, or just how far her Western sisters and brothers can trust it. Out of the latter comes the question of the extent to which these statements of Pimen as well as those of Stackhouse are covered by belief in the temptation of Jesus Christ.

Patriarch Pimen wrote to Reagan, among other things: "With bitterness and sadness in my heart I have read your bellicose appeals, which sow the seeds of hatred and enmity against my homeland, Russia, and which jeopardize peace throughout the world. These appeals are all the more sinful because they are couched in the guise of Christian morality."

For two reasons Pimen's letter and especially his nationalism were understood in the United States differently than they were meant. First,
in the United States an understanding of the horrors, which Hitler's soldiers perpetrated on Russian soil, is lacking, as well as insight into the setting forth of literally every single force—including that of the church—to repulse this enemy. The result of this experience is a desire for peace in the Russian people, which is only equaled in nations which have had similar trials. The Patriarch of Moscow and all Russia thus expresses in his letter the anxieties of the majority of congregations and clergy, who surely share them with the rest of the Russian people.

Secondly, the understanding of sin and reconciliation in Orthodox theology is not so strongly determined by juristic categories like sin and punishment as in the Western churches. Therefore Pimen's appeal to Reagan is meant much less as a moral condemnation than it sounds. The theology of the ROC does differentiate between God's peace and peace in the world. Although it is evident that fundamentally peace is a gift from God and with God, nonetheless the Orthodox Church insists that efforts by Christians toward peace on earth contribute to the development of conditions in the world which strengthen what is good, and that these efforts by Christians therefore will serve the ultimate reconciliation of the world with God.

Understood in this way, the peace mission of the ROC is first of all the intimate concern of the church, and to a lesser degree a concession to the Soviet state or even less a mandate from the government, as is continuously insinuated in the West. For many Orthodox Christians in the USSR, the peace mission is much more closely connected with the question of one's personal reconciliation with God and with the task of the church to bring about the perfection of the world than is the case in most Western churches. Those who not only hear political statements, but who also consider the peace theology of the Moscow Patriarchate, will inevitably take its commitment to peace more seriously than has happened in the West up to this point.

In his definitive article Kuroyedov writes: "The inclusion of religionists in the practical struggle for the construction of socialism and communism, and at the same time the constant propagation of a materialistic view of life among the populace, that is the scientifi-
ally established way to overcome religious convictions."

In this statement Kuroyedov clearly describes the opportunity and the cost of the new politics of the atheistic state toward the religious forces in his country. The cost is as follows: the atheistic state expects not only a neutral stance toward the socialist state, but the active effort of religious forces toward the strengthening of socialism. That does not mean that ministers or priests would be obliged to preach socialism, but rather that religious groups take part in the peace effort, that they make their contribution at home to foster a new social morality, and that they resist anti-communism in all its forms abroad. Of course, there really is anti-communism in religious garb! From the very beginning Christianity has been portrayed as an ideology opposed to communism. But is middle-class Christianity really the last and genuine form of Christian belief? In addition, is bourgeois democracy the form of government which conforms with Christianity most suitably? If the religious authorities make their own contribution to the work of peace in the widest sense, while maintaining an ideologically critical stance, then their efforts are not only helpful to the atheistic state, but the genuine quality in the contribution of the religious groups will stand out that much more clearly.

With this, we have come to recognize the opportunity in this new politics for the religious communities, which is that they gain living space through participation in the international peace movement. This space is claimed by the churches as part of the gospel (for example, "Jesus Christ, the life of the world," the motto of the Vancouver, Assembly of W.C.C.) but it is obviously not granted to them by the atheistic state. Participation in the international peace movement is the sanctioned way out of the social ghetto for religious communities. Through this avenue they are permitted to transcend the very narrow confines of a community of worship; they can express themselves "politically" and claim their place in the ecumenical arena, that is, they can cultivate international relations. Concerning the efforts toward peace, religious groups can serve as a bridge--on the one hand to circles not reached by official politics, and on the other hand they can transmit the opinions and attitude of the "grass roots" to the plane of
official politics. Such mediation in itself promotes peace in a time of
renewed cold war and of the suspension of negotiations on the official
political level. There is an opportunity here for religious groups,
which, if it is used honorably by both sides, can become immeasurably
valuable.

In this way the ROC, still rooted in czarism, the "underground"
Baptist Church, the anti-Communist Catholic Church and the middle-class
Lutheran Church in the Baltic republics of the USSR can undertake the
immense task of being a convincing witness to "Jesus Christ, the life of
the world" for the present day. This can certainly be accomplished only
through ecumenical cooperation in an exchange with the churches in Latin
America and Asia and with the religious communities of Western Europe
and the United States which are often still captive of their own
interest only in each other. This becomes possible in the form of
cooperation between all peace groups, regardless of their stance toward
religion, something which is desired by socialist countries and which is
certainly necessary in order to solve the global problem of peace and of
world wide disarmament.

Interest in cooperation on part of all, regardless of their
world-views, is definitely evident on both sides. Obviously motivations
for cooperation are different. Whether cooperation can be carried out
when the interpretation of contemporary problems differs, depends surely
on the integrity of both sides. Only practical experience will provide
the answer.

Translated from German by
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