

# Religion & Democracy

A Newsletter of the Institute on Religion and Democracy

July-August 1982

## Church Hunger Programs: *Feeding the Hungry or Making the Revolution?*

Protestant agencies which collect and disburse church dollars to help feed the world's hungry are under growing pressure to adopt a view of the causes of hunger held by the radical Left. Should this come about, considerable harm may be done to some of the most praiseworthy and promising work of American churches.

Every year American Christians give hundreds of millions of dollars to help feed the world's hungry. Hunger relief is one of the strongest traditions of Christian charity, with strong biblical roots and powerful institutional supports. It generates large sums of money and worldwide activities, making it a target of opportunity which looms large by comparison to many other church programs.

Giving food to the hungry often seems to be one of the few simple and direct acts of Christian kindness left in a world that has become overgrown with complexity. Here, however, is just where the debate begins. "Shouldn't our churches be dealing with the root causes of hunger," it is asked, "rather than endlessly treating its symptoms?" It's an important question — especially because modern agricultural techniques and transportation have all but eliminated traditional hunger from the industrial democracies.

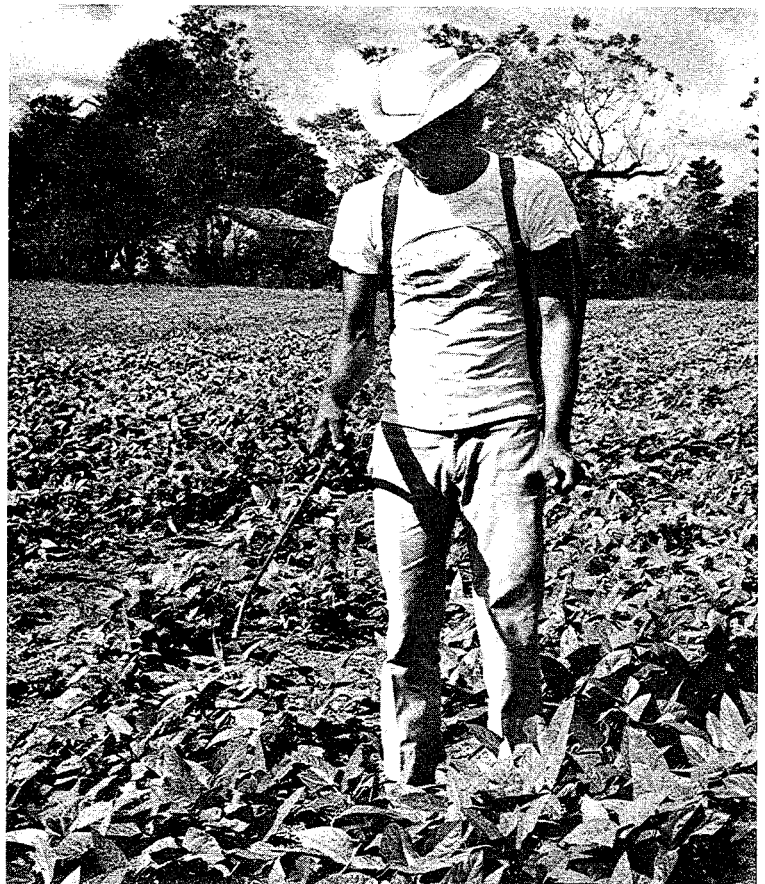
But are all those who ask this question really seeking an honest answer? For some, the solution to hunger seems preordained: only "socialist" agriculture can feed the world. Reports of the universal failure of collectivized agriculture have not tarnished its appeal to some radicals, nor has the truly stunning success of independent farming diminished the far Left's hostility to our own experience. But the big surprise is that quite a few church officials evidently accept the views of the radicals — or at least are allowing church dollars to be spent in supporting them.

In 1980, for example, the United Presbyterian Hunger Program granted \$10,500 to something called the Agribusiness Project of the North

American Congress on Latin America. The Agribusiness Project holds that "It is only in societies organized along socialist lines — where production and distribution is organized by the principle of social equality rather than private profit — that the possibility of ending hunger exists. China is a dramatic example." (Agribusiness in the Americas, Roger Burbach and Patricia Flynn, p. II.)

The Episcopal Church and the National Council of Churches have joined the Presbyterians in contributing substantial funds to the Institute for Food and Development Policy in San Francisco — an organization which advises the radical Sandinista dictatorship in Nicaragua. Leaders of the IFDP inveigh against farm mechanization where American agribusiness may be involved, but "where the workers themselves own the machines, as in China, mechanization...

Continued on page 2



Right, a member of El Salvador's independent farm workers organization — the Union Communal Salvadorense — using scientific agricultural methods in the fields. Would state-run collective farms feed more people?

Continued from page 1

frees labor for such other vital work contributed to society as a whole, not to private gain." (Food First, Joseph Collins and Francis Moore Lappe, p. 177.)

The April 30th Forum Letter of the American Lutheran Church reports that Pastor George Johnson of the ALC hunger program recently led a delegation of American Lutherans on a study tour of Nicaragua, where its members spoke with Sandinista leaders. The group not only "returned to the U.S. with a new understanding of hunger and the causes of hunger," but also, recounts Pastor Johnson, with a "feeling that Christians must begin to study the relationship between socialism and a Biblical understanding of the poor."

The IRD Executive Committee has recently proposed a study of the very kind that Pastor Johnson recommends -- although our inspiration is rather different. There is abundant evidence that the world's "socialist" regimes -- one variety or another -- are building remarkably poor records for feeding their peoples. But, even more important, today these governments often far outdo nature itself in causing famine and malnutrition.

The Soviet Union, still a comparatively strong agricultural economy in the period just after the Russian Revolution, is today beset by chronic food shortages. There is recent evidence from Soviet data of increasing infant mortality and declining life expectancy -- trends that are almost unheard of even in the poorest regions of today's world. It can hardly be explained by "sixty-five years of bad weather" -- the official party line.

Eastern Europe must also be considered a relative agricultural failure. Harvard demographer Nick Eberstadt points out that Spain and Greece were once hungrier than Czechoslovakia and Hungary -- but the reverse is true today. South Koreans are better fed than North Koreans, and the Taiwanese are better fed than the mainland Chinese. (The "Three Lean Years" that followed the Great Leap Forward may have been the most horrible famine of the twentieth century.) Cuba, despite massive Soviet aid, is one of the only societies in the world where per capita GNP has not grown for thirty years. And so on.

Such evidence plays havoc with fashionable Leftist theories: can it still be argued -- as a book published recently by a church-financed organization has it -- that "contemporary food 'shortages' exist only because of the way food is

distributed in the capitalist world economy. . ."? (Agribusiness in the Americas, p. 10.)

The far Left's anti-capitalist theories conveniently slight another important cause of mass hunger in the modern world. As Nick Eberstadt has argued (Commentary, July, 1981):

Over the course of the 20th century there has been a noticeable and distinctly unpleasant change in the character of severe hunger. In the past, famines were usually the result of bad harvests or economic crises; increasingly, they can be traced to deliberate acts of government.

Political starvation is surely an apt description for millions of deaths that occurred in the Soviet Union under Stalin or those that resulted from Hitler's campaigns against those he considered to be "lesser races." The term covers the macabre experience of Cambodia, where the death toll is now climbing beyond two million. But it also accounts for many other situations of mass hunger, which our churches often treat as if they had no relation to politics.

Didn't the starvation in the Horn of Africa have something to do with Ethiopia's war against secessionist tribesmen? Doesn't the campaign of economic sabotage being waged by El Salvador's guerrillas -- who openly admit to burning fields and food stores -- contribute something to malnutrition in the Honduran refugee camps? What about the Afghani tent cities in Pakistan? Or -- to take examples from non-Communist oppression -- what about the starvation of East Timor by Indonesia, or Nigeria's food blockade against Biafra?

It is difficult to understand how American eating habits -- be they good or bad -- can be held responsible for these horrors. Nor how the practices of our multinational corporations, even if they were as fabulously evil as Marxists contend, could justifiably be blamed. Yet these, according to a vast new church literature, are the root causes of world hunger today.

So we are told, for example, by one important church-financed organization which ostensibly devotes a large part of its energies to fighting hunger: the Interfaith Center for Corporate Responsibility. Literature of the ICCR, drawing upon policy statements of the National Council of Churches, lists

. . . four root causes of hunger: unjust economic systems, insufficient food production, population

Continued on page 4

**Religion and Democracy** is published by the Institute on Religion and Democracy, 1000 16th Street, N.W., Suite LL 50, Washington, D.C. 20036. (202) 822-8627.

You are invited to become a member of the Institute on Religion and Democracy. Membership dues are \$25.00 a year. Contributions in any amount are welcome.

# RESOURCES

The following publications are available from the IRD office. Please enclose a check with your order. IRD members are entitled to a 10 percent discount on all items. Quantity discounts (minimum 30) are available for church or conference distribution.

**Christianity and Democracy** (\$1.50). The founding statement of IRD, which sets forward the theological and social argument for a stronger Christian commitment to democratic values.

**The Nuclear Freeze: A Study Guide** (\$2.50). A collection of the original freeze resolutions, informative articles, and commentary. An important resource for understanding a significant issue before the churches today.

**Christianity, Democracy and the Churches Today** (\$2.00). An attractive booklet containing a discussion between leaders of IRD and the National Council of Churches regarding democratic values and current church policies.

**The Catholic Church in El Salvador** (\$1.50). An in-depth analysis of the position of the Salvadoran Church, which clearly establishes the Church's opposition to violence and repression -- including that of the Marxist-Leninist Left.

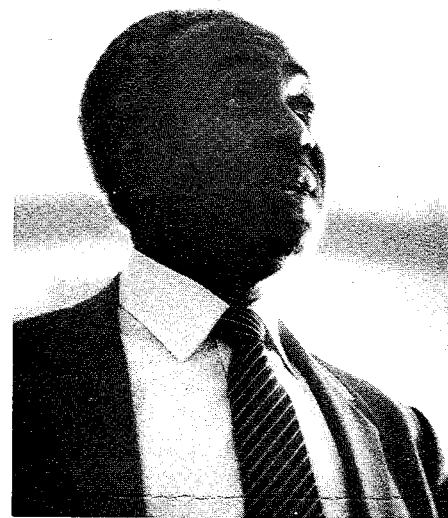
**Must Walls Confuse?** (\$1.50). A critical review of the 1982 mission study published by the National Council of Churches. This booklet argues that American churches should be more critical of religious repression in the Soviet bloc.

**Nicaragua: A Revolution Against the Church?** (\$1.50). A review of the growing assault on liberty by Nicaragua's Sandinistas and the courageous role of the Nicaraguan Catholic Church.

## North Carolinians Debate Churches' Foreign Policy Role



Above, Roman Catholic scholar Michael Novak addresses ministers and laypersons from across North Carolina. Mr. Novak set forth the Judeo-Christian roots of democratic institutions and governance. The June conference attracted over 140 Protestants and Catholics for a day and a half of vigorous discussion. Right, an exchange regarding church structure prompts one participant, James W. Ferree, to attempt to explain his denomination's "connectional" system. Below, IRD chairman Ed Robb greets Bishop William R. Cannon, President of the World Methodist Council.



**Continued from page 2**

growth, and patterns of consumption among the affluent. Corporations or corporate-related activity is cited as contributing to three of these four causes.

But how can the starvation of Cambodia possibly be accounted for by this analysis?

Many American church hunger programs deny that war, revolution, or political repression play a central role today in creating mass hunger. (Political repression within the Third World, be it that of Indonesia in East Timor or that of Nicaragua against the Miskito Indians, is as diligently ignored by our churches as it is at the United Nations -- unless, of course, it can somehow be blamed on the U.S.) But such denials are only a part of the problem. There are disturbing suggestions that some church hunger funds could at times even be supporting political starvation.

In 1979 and 1980 the World Council of Churches spent a substantial sum of money -- including \$100,000 from the United Presbyterian Hunger Program -- in post-war aid to Indochina. Some of the money supposedly went to develop irrigation in Laos -- although a United Church Board of World Ministries memorandum eventually acknowledged that "There is a great deal of confusion about the money which was spent in Laos." The rest of the WCC's money, according to the Presbyterians, was spent on a "long term plan of setting up a new economic zone in Lam Dong in order to resettle the Montagnards (hill-tribes)."

Vietnam's New Economic Zones were first proclaimed as exciting experiments in socialist farming which would enable South Vietnam, once a food exporter, to feed much of Indochina. They have turned out to be Vietnamese gulags, packed

with "excess" and "parasitic" populations, where not much flourishes besides hunger, disease and death. On June 10th The New York Times reported that no less a figure than Dr. Quong Quynh Hoa, one of the leaders of South Vietnam's Communist Party and a former Health Minister in South Vietnam's Provisional Revolutionary Government, admitted to Western journalists that malnutrition is most severe in Vietnam's New Economic Zones:

The reasons for such difficulties, she (Dr. Hoa) says, have at least as much to do with mismanagement, rigid doctrine, disastrous planning and Communist hostility to bourgeois technicians, administrators, farmers and others as they have to do with the decades of destructive war.

Were she not still in Ho Chi Minh City, Dr. Hoa might be able to tell us more about what has happened to the Montagnards -- a fiercely independent people with strong attachment to their ancestral lands -- in their new, Presbyterian-financed homes in Lam Dong. It seems unlikely that their story will have a happy ending.

Of course, most church hunger relief resources still do go to valuable programs for feeding the hungry. One of the greatest dangers in the rise of the new hunger radicalism is that, once the people in the pew get wind of its growing influence, contributions to hunger relief will decline.

But there is another danger which ought not to be dismissed. There may indeed be ways in which American churchgoers can help to strike at the true roots of hunger. Wouldn't it be sad if that effort was abandoned because in some ways it has gotten off to a false start?

---

Religion and Democracy  
1000 16th Street, N.W. Suite LL 50  
Washington, D.C. 20036