

Religion & Democracy

A Newsletter of the Institute on Religion and Democracy

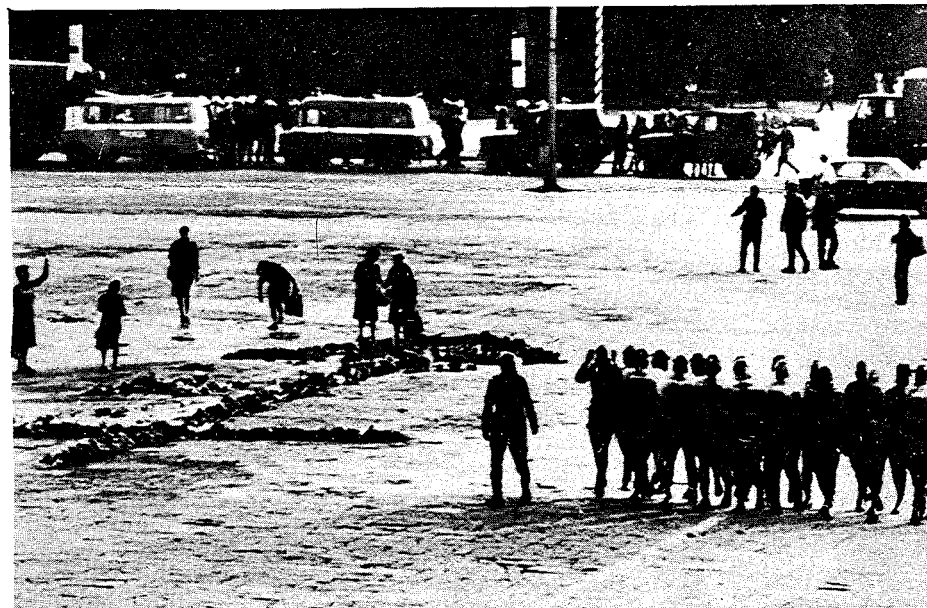
October/November 1982

Church Stands Provoke Media Storm

Debate about mainline Protestant support for groups on the radical Left has finally broken out in the national media. Much of the furor, curiously, centers on two reports that have not yet even appeared in public: an article on the National Council of Churches which, according to rumor, will appear this winter in the Reader's Digest and a report by CBS News "60 Minutes," which is expected to be broadcast on November 21 or 28.

The mere prospect of such press attention has sent the National Council of Churches and its affiliates into a frenzy of protests and preemptive rebuttals. This by itself has caused other reporters to wonder if something may be seriously amiss.

On November 3, New York Times reporter Charles Austin wrote that the National Council of Churches "has taken extraordinary steps to counter magazine and broadcast reports" which question the Council's appreciation of democratic values. Related articles have appeared in the Los Angeles Times, on the United Press International wire, and on the NBC-TV "Today Show," where Austin and IRD Chairman Ed Robb were



A simple Christian symbol — a cross of flowers — remains a powerful emblem of the Polish people's yearning for freedom. Above, a squad of Polish riot police moves in to destroy such a cross in Warsaw as women hurry away. (Religious News Service photo.)

interviewed -- the NCC declined to send a representative. Austin's newspaper story explained that mainline Protestant officials -- who in the past have been able to dismiss their critics as rightwing extremists -- are troubled by criticism which now comes from "a small but well-organized coalition of theologians and others who consider themselves political centrists."

Dr. Arie Brouwer, a member of the NCC's governing board, reportedly allowed that "I don't think the critiques have had much direct effect on us." But almost as he spoke, the NCC was mailing out thousands of a special 12-page tabloid edition of NCCC Chronicles, a publication which mixes lengthy reports on the good works of the NCC with testy rebuttals to its critics.

Some observers joke that the massive Left-leaning church bureaucracies may be attempting to stupify their members and critics by the sheer volume of their printed responses. The NCC has circulated throughout its structure a detailed before-the-fact rebuttal to the reports expected in the Reader's Digest and on "60 Minutes." According to a UPI wire story, A. James

Armstrong, United Methodist bishop of Indiana and the current NCC President, has also sent an "18-page, single-spaced pastoral letter to 3000 Indiana Methodist leaders and other church officials." Ten ecumenical dignitaries have signed a lengthy defense of the social action program of the World Council of Churches which has been reprinted and circulated in a dozen different formats. The United Methodist magazine engage/social action published an oration by a Methodist minister, Jack Crum, which assails the IRD. And so on -- and on.

How this avalanche of print was set off by the allegedly false charges of a small, unrepresentative band of critics will no doubt mystify church historians of the future.

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Meanwhile, U.S. Catholics have their own public controversy. Just one week before the last election -- in which defense spending and the nuclear freeze were hot topics -- reports blossomed in the press about a proposed pastoral letter on issues of nuclear strategy by the National Conference of Catholic Bishops. The draft letter denounces NATO's threat that it might use tactical nuclear weapons in the event of a Soviet invasion of Europe. It questions the ethical propriety of those who are occupationally involved in maintaining the U.S. nuclear deterrent. And it explicitly endorses the language of the Kennedy/Hatfield nuclear freeze resolution that came before the U.S. Senate last summer.

An early draft of the pastoral letter prompted a lengthy response from Rome -- and recently the Pope met with special U.S. envoy General Vernon Walters. There are also signs that the controversy aroused by the letter may give focus

to several newly-formed Catholic lay organizations in the U.S.: the American Catholic Committee and the Catholic Center for Renewal. The latter, at 226 Massachusetts Avenue N.E. in Washington, D.C., is planning a public statement which argues that the approach reflected in the Bishop's draft makes nuclear war more likely -- not less so. Although the Catholic Center for Renewal was initiated by traditionalists and conservatives, it has been making genuine efforts to reach out to others who share its approach on issues of strategic defense -- with some significant success.

Many Christians may be uncomfortable with the attention these church debates are receiving in the secular press. But when churches decide to speak up on specific issues of public policy, it may be better to have serious controversy about such stands than to leave them to closed circles of church leaders whose training and experience may yield them only a partial understanding of these complex matters.

Mid-East Conflict Has Democratic Dimension

American churches have spoken out strongly about the violence and abuses of human rights in the Middle East -- and often their criticism has had a pro-PLO, anti-Israeli tilt. In this interview Michael Novak, a Roman Catholic scholar, IRD board member, and Chief of the U.S. Delegation to the UN Human Rights Commission, suggests that U.S. church leaders may be missing an important dimension of the problem:

Does Israel's conduct in the occupation of southern Lebanon impel Christians to take a more positive attitude toward the Palestine Liberation Organization?

Sympathy for the Palestinian refugees is not the same as sympathy for the PLO. Now that Israel has broken the military grip of the PLO on a hapless population, there is a new chance for a political arrangement that will end the refugee status of the latter. For 30-some years, the scandal has been that Arab nations have used the refugees as a weapon of politics. Yet the Palestinians are an unusually talented people, who have suffered much, and are now, at last, closer to a political settlement.

How would you compare Israel's record of respecting the human rights of Arab peoples in areas under its authority to the record the PLO established in southern Lebanon?

The Arab peoples in the occupied territories have exercised a wider range of human rights

than most Arabs in states like Syria, Iraq, Iran, and others. Nonetheless, they chafe under the rule of an "occupying power," and their condition has been abnormal. Reports on the arbitrary and often murderous role of the PLO in southern Lebanon during the past seven years indicate a level of repression which explains the popular welcome given the Israeli forces last June. Ironically, Arab nations claimed Israeli human rights abuses but ignored those both of neighboring Arab regimes and those of the PLO.

What about the massacres of Palestinian civilians in the refugee camps?

The massacres by Lebanese units occurred during a period of Israeli responsibility and represent a horrible outrage. But as Edward Said has generously pointed out, the public revulsion of Israelis against their own government exceeds any public expression open to Arab populations. Television cameras followed the Israelis, as they do not follow any Arab nation in the region, and so the massacres, even though they represent only a small fraction of Arab bloodletting in Syria, Iraq, Iran, Jordan, and Egypt since World War II, have become a powerful symbol of horror and suffering.

We sometimes hear that a distinction is made at the United Nations between the human rights of individuals and the rights of peoples and

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states. When the PLO talks about human rights, what does it mean?

The PLO announces the right of self-determination for the Palestinians, and this is good. But in its own practice and theory, the PLO is committed to the rights of individuals in the Soviet way, not the American way. This is sad. A truly democratic movement among the Palestinians would have given the last two decades a quite different history.

So in terms of your values, would a PLO state be likely to bring genuine self-determination for the Palestinian people?

A state led by the PLO would be a state within which Yasir Arafat, no democrat, would be a moderate figure, less extreme than many other leaders of armed factions. Such a state would not be committed to a U.S.-style Bill of Rights in theory or in practice. Irridentist PLO claims against both Jordan and Israel mean little promise of future stability on its borders. Lack of individual rights within would augur much future suffering.

You have followed the history of other peoples who have sought self-determination. How does the approach taken by the PLO differ from other attempts?

Thus in this century the homeland of my ancestors, Czechoslovakia, was organized by leaders in exile -- great democrats like Masaryk and Benes, who based their governments-in-exile on democratic principles and respect for human rights. After World Wars I and II, the peoples of the world rejoiced to turn leadership over to such dedicated democrats. Under Hitler and Stalin, both movements were later smashed. The PLO would have commanded great moral prestige if it had followed this model, rather than that of hatred, revenge, irridentist warfare, and rule by the gun. Now that the PLO has been weakened a fresh start may be possible for Palestinian self-governance.



Above, Michael Novak talks with a conference participant after he addressed an IRD-sponsored dinner in North Carolina last June.

Methodists Disclose Gifts to Radical Left

Those who imagined that the rising outcry about church support to groups on the extreme Left is only sensationalized half-truth will be sobered by official financial disclosures made recently by an arm of America's largest and wealthiest mainline Protestant denomination. The General Board of Global Ministries of the United Methodist Church has just made available a 150-page report of its contributions to "outside" organizations. This document will prove a gold mine for students of religious radicalism -- and a source of dismay, no doubt, to many United Methodist churchgoers.

This report was compiled and made available to UMC members as the result of efforts by IRD members and others at the church's 1980 General Conference. The Conference turned down a proposal for the creation of a blue ribbon inter-church committee on financial accountability, but later agreed to more limited legislation requiring UMC boards and agencies to make full disclosure of all cash and in-kind contributions to outside organizations. The recent report is the first fruit of that decision.

Many UMC agency staff have argued that the demand for financial accountability reflects a mean-spirited and suspicious outlook on the part of those who make it. Its supporters contend that accountability is essential for responsible Christian stewardship: official UM materials teach the "meaning of stewardship of life, time, talent and material possessions as evidences of the fruits of the spirit." In this view, a church contribution is not a tribute one pays for the privilege of church membership; it is an offering of oneself, and one is accountable to God for the way it is put to use.

This debate is likely to grow more intense as a result of the Board of Global Ministries' first official financial disclosure. For one thing, the report proves that for United Methodists, mission is big business. (The 1981 treasurer's report shows that total income of this one UMC program board -- there are three others -- was over \$70 million, and that its year-end assets were close to \$150 million.)

Second, there is an unmistakable and profound political bias to the agency's giving. A thorough analysis of the enormous catalogue of groups which receive funds will take a great deal of time and research, but anyone with a passing familiarity with the extremist organizations that flourished in the 1960's and 1970's will find them much in evidence here. What is doubly surprising is that the usual liberal organizations -- the likes of Common Cause, the National Organization of Women, or the NAACP -- are conspicuously absent. The politically-involved groups which are

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listed generally represent the far fringe of the Left -- the proponents of radical social upheaval at home and socialist revolution abroad.

For example, to take but one area, grants on Latin American concerns alone go to groups such as the North American Congress on Latin America, EPICA, CELADEC, Committee in Solidarity with the People of El Salvador, and Theology in the Americas -- all of which sympathize with the revolutionary Left.

To be sure, the majority of groups receiving grants from the Board of Global Ministries are not primarily political policy groups. They are straightforward educational and charitable programs -- most of them no doubt worthy and efficient. The problem lies in that considerable minority which are policy organizations. The Women's Division, one subdivision of the Board of Global Ministries, is evidently the most deeply involved with radical political groups, while the United Methodist Committee on Relief (UMCOR) best avoids them.

Many of the United Methodists who helped to found the IRD fear that the ideological hue of the policy organizations which receive UMC funds is now beginning to color more and more of the church's mission and service work. They argue that

these ideological linkages are not mere indiscretions -- they represent a pervasive trend in the thinking of agency staff which can only be altered by determined and well-conceived action by conference and local leaders.

Local United Methodist administrative boards may obtain a copy of the 1981 financial disclosure report by writing the Board of Global Ministries, 475 Riverside Drive, New York, NY 10115.

Readers Respond. . .

From **Father Philip Bloom, Office of Mission of the Archdiocese of Seattle, Washington**, commenting on our September story on the failure of liberation theology in Nicaragua:

". . . after re-reading the Pope's letter several times, I could find no reference in it to 'liberation theology.' It therefore seems unfair to take the letter as a criticism of that rather broad category of theologizing. I consider your comments as an example of how we as Americans try to simplify complex phenomena in other countries."

Editor's reply: The meaning of the term "liberation theology" is much disputed, and nowhere in our article did we directly attribute any definition of it to the Pope. We merely argued that his letter to the Nicaraguan bishops "goes incisively to the flaw of liberation theology" -- a flaw which, in our judgment, is proving fatal.

From **Msgr. George G. Higgins, of the Catholic University of America, Washington, D.C.:**

"In the September issue of Religion and Democracy you have quoted me out of context with reference to my resignation from the Board of Advisors of People for the American Way. The words which you have cited in quotation marks were directed, not at PAW, but at a book written by two journalists who, to the best of my knowledge, are not associated with PAW. . . .

"This is not to say that I fully agree with everything that PAW itself has said in its series of ads against the New Christian Right, but simply to keep the record straight."

Editor's reply: The Religious News Service story (August 20) on Father Higgins resignation from PAW described the authors of the work in question as "associated with PAW." Evidently they are not.

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Address Correction Requested

