

Religion & Democracy

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Religious Freedom and the WCC

Thousands of delegates and participants will gather on July 24th in Vancouver, British Columbia, for the Sixth Assembly of the World Council of Churches. Will these Christians find a place in their prayers and their program for the millions of their fellow believers who bear the cross of totalitarian persecution in countries which the mincing language of diplomacy -- as though they were victims of mere geography -- describes as the "Eastern bloc"?

A search through the many publications prepared for the WCC Assembly gives much cause for concern: none of the eight issue papers presented to the delegates discusses religious persecution in the Communist world, and the newly published history of the WCC by Leon Howell is in good part an apology for the ringing silence of recent times.

The advance program for the two-week-long Assembly includes discussions of threats to the beauty of nature, sessions on "Is God Male?" and "The New Economic Order," and relentless agitation against the attraction some believe our democratic nations feel for nuclear war. The liturgical locus of the Assembly -- Heaven forbid -- is even this (we quote directly):

Native wood carvers from the Agassiz Mountain Penitentiary will be carving a 42 foot long native totem pole on Campus throughout the Assembly. At the conclusion of the Assembly it will be presented to the W.C.C. and transported to Geneva to be erected on the lawn of the Ecumenical Center there.

But from all evidence scarcely a word will be said in the course of this spectacle on behalf of Baptists who have been transported to the deadly wastes of Siberia, about priests in the Lithuanian SSR "accidentally" run over by trucks, for Orthodox believers locked in Soviet psychiatric wards, or in defense of young Lutheran peace demonstrators in East Germany, glimpsed through the barbed wire while being hustled into unmarked trucks.

As concern has mounted about this omission we have been assured that a 90 page "dossier" on Eastern Europe will be available to the delegates as the Assembly opens. One must always

have hope. But if this publication follows the spirit that has ruled the WCC in recent years, it will only add the insults of self-justification to the present injuries of silence.

The WCC once did take sound and balanced positions on issues of religious freedom. At its founding Assembly in Amsterdam in 1948 the WCC declared that Christians

...are concerned that religious freedom be everywhere secured.... The rights which Christian discipleship demands are such as are good for all men, and no nation has suffered by reason of granting such liberties.

This basic position was strengthened by the WCC Central Committee a year later in Chichester, England. That statement employed the now-taboo word "totalitarian," and declared that:

We appeal to the Churches to interpret and apply God's will to all realms of life. We warn the Churches in all lands against the danger of being exploited for worldly ends. In countries where the state is antagonistic to Christian religion or

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After their small church was confiscated by Soviet authorities, this Baptist congregation from the Moscow suburb of Dedovsk began holding services in the forest nearby.

Photo by International Representation for the C.E.B.C. of the S.U. Inc., Georgi P. Vins



Father Gleb Yakunin is currently serving a five-year sentence in a Soviet prison camp, having been charged with "anti-Soviet agitation."

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indeed wherever full religious freedom is denied...we urge the Churches to bear clear corporate witness to the truth in Christ...."

This wholesome spirit continued through the early 1960's. The New Delhi Assembly (1961) set forward an ambitious program for what was called the WCC Secretariat on Religious Liberty, and included a welcome stress on "freedom to proselytize." But by the end of that wayward decade the temper of the WCC had also begun to change.

In 1967 the Secretariat for Religious Liberty fell vacant, and was left simply to wither away. At the 1974 consultation on "Human Rights and Christian Responsibility" in St. Polten, Austria, this ambiguous proposition was set forth:

The right to religious liberty exists in order to serve the community according to the demands of the Gospel.

In brief, the WCC moved away from the conviction that religious freedom is a fundamental right which man exercises in serving God. It has moved toward the view that religious freedom is an instrument with which Christians may "serve the community." It is not far from this to the position that, at times and places, religious freedom may be an inconvenience.

And so, the WCC record shows, it has in fact become -- for the WCC bureaucracy, although perhaps not for all its constituents. At the last WCC Assembly (Nairobi - 1975) delegates did respond warmly to an appeal from a dissident Russian Orthodox priest, Gleb Yakunin. Father Yakunin chided the WCC for its silence about religious repression in the Communist world, and

called upon the ecumenical movement to take up this cause. Although the delegates did adopt a strongly-worded resolution in support of Father Yakunin, pressure from WCC officials forced the withdrawal of the resolution after it had been passed. In its place, the delegates were promised a committee to study religious persecution by countries which had signed the Helsinki Accords.

This committee submitted its report to the August 1976 Central Committee meeting of the WCC. Since then the WCC staff has conducted many meetings with representatives of the official churches of the "socialist" states, and the government ministries which seek to supervise them. But the most visible evidence of concern the WCC has shown for authentic Christian communities of the Communist world is its steady stream of explanations about why the Council remains silent toward the persecutions suffered by its brothers and sisters. This failing has produced such mortification even in Europe that a Zurich-based religious rights organization, Christian Solidarity International, will sponsor unofficial hearings on religious persecution in both Communist and non-Communist societies during the opening days of the Vancouver Assembly. Appropriately enough, these will be titled the "Yakunin Hearings."

The WCC's justifications for its silence are dutifully repeated in Leon Howell's official history, published for Vancouver. Howell makes sweeping claims about the intensity of the WCC's behind-the-scenes campaigns for the victims of Communist persecution -- claims which, of course, he is never permitted to document. (Howell even lapses into the idiom of The East to denounce one critic of the WCC's silent diplomacy -- The New Republic magazine, edited by Jimmy Carter's chief speechwriter -- as "cold warrior.")

There are, in Howell's portrayal, three reasons why the WCC cannot openly bear witness for the victims of the totalitarian state:

1. Public criticism of Communist governments will provoke them to greater wrath.
2. Criticism of religious persecution by Communist governments weakens detente, and increases the danger of nuclear war.
3. The positions the WCC takes cannot conflict with the positions of the official churches of the Communist world which are WCC members.

Two of these arguments were commonplace in world affairs debates a decade or so ago. No, they survive only in the impenetrable bureaucracies of the ecumenical movement. There has been no dissident group inside the "socialist" bloc which does not plead for public support from free

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peoples -- the more forthright, the better. And Soviet strategic theory quite openly acknowledges that its military policy -- its decisions about whether to be aggressive or restrained -- is geared to the political and moral vigor of its adversaries: the so-called "correlation of forces." It follows that those who are not afraid to speak out about Communist abuses of human rights are also more likely to be spared Communist military provocations. Peace -- a true detente -- is therefore not served by our moral silence.

Howell's third argument -- the privileges of WCC membership -- reveals how profoundly the WCC today is ruled by the ethos of bureaucratic ecumenism, at no small cost to the spirit of Christian solidarity. The official churches of the Communist world, with few exceptions, are being further and further transformed into instruments of totalitarian politics. Their representatives to the WCC speak less and less for Christian communities behind the barbed wire frontiers, and more and more for a narrowly undemocratic, repressive, and atheistic state. The Soviet Union, in particular, is not content with mere religious repression, and tirelessly works at religious subversion.

A true ecumenism will not seek to curry favor with the persecutors of the children of Christ. It will scorn them, and embrace their victims. No one has said it better than Pope John Paul II:

I would prefer a persecuted church a thousand times more than a church of compromises.

Will this spirit arise among the delegates at Vancouver? We pray that it will.

Photo by International Representation
for the C.E.B.C. of the S.U. Inc., Georgi P. Vins



"For unto you it is given in the behalf of Christ, not only to believe on him, but also to suffer for his sake..." Philippians 1:29.

BRIEFS

■ There are encouraging signs that responsible church leaders are beginning to listen to the growing army of outraged church members who question the direction of their church's social action agenda. The United Methodist Council of Bishops, responding to the request of the South-eastern Jurisdiction's district superintendents, has named a nine-member study panel to conduct a "thorough review of recently made allegations" about the WCC, the NCC, and, significantly, related United Methodist agencies. The committee, which reports at the next council meeting in November, was even instructed to "include a statement of the process established to implement the final decisions of the council." A minority of bishops strongly opposed the establishment of the committee, although the final resolution includes an affirmation of the ecumenical bodies and their continued financial support.

At its June General Assembly the new Presbyterian Church U.S.A. also formed a seven person Special Committee to "study the causes of the questions, misunderstandings, and suspicions" which have "arisen about the work" of the NCC and WCC. The Moderator was instructed to appoint and convene the committee which is to include clergy and laity "representing the diversity of viewpoints" in the Presbyterian Church.

Responses to the media flare-up earlier this year regarding the mainline churches and the Left have not been limited to church bodies. Writing in the June 13 issue of The New Republic, Joshua Muravchik commends CBS "60 Minutes" for breaking the taboo against critical discussion of extremism on the Left--a taboo which may be the most important of the several harmful legacies of the McCarthy era. Others aren't so soft on CBS. The Soviet news agency Tass railed against the "unbridled campaign of persecution against religious organizations" represented by CBS-TV "acting upon orders from the White House." Morley Safer in the pocket of Ronald Reagan?

■ According to the report by Religious News Service, the 1,400 evangelical Christians who gathered in Pasadena over Memorial Day weekend for a conference on nuclear disarmament gave only one of their many speakers a standing ovation: "Jim Wallis, a so-called 'radical evangelical' who had been temporarily released from a Washington, DC jail just long enough to attend the conference." Mr. Wallis urged civil disobedience to protest U.S. nuclear arms strategies.

Now comes a Gallup poll, commissioned by the National Association of Evangelicals, which shows that evangelical Christians are more wary of the Soviet Union than the general public, are more fearful that a Soviet advantage in nuclear

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weapons will increase the chances of nuclear war, and are less disposed to favor the nuclear "freeze" movement. Like so many others, the organizers of the Pasadena Conference have discovered how hard it is to keep the activist Left from dominating these kinds of events.

■ The Western press often refers to the Ayatollah Khomeini as an "Islamic fundamentalist." It's another of the confusions of secular society. The man is simply a maniac. There is, our Muslim friends tell us, no writ whatsoever in the Koran for such atrocities as the Ayatollah's terror campaign against Iran's 350,000 Bahai.

The Bahai's world headquarters is in Haifa, Israel, which in the Ayatollah's eyes make them Zionists. The Bahai believe that men and women are equal, which leads the Ayatollah to the view that the Bahai marriages are a form of prostitution. ~~The President of the United States has spoken out against the executions of Bahai, so that makes them CIA agents.~~

As the horrors in Iran continue, world opinion is bound to become more open to the proposition that some "responsible" power should step in to end the outrages. Given the impotence of the West, one wonders who that could be. Remember Cambodia?

■ A recent Action Guide, circulated through the United Methodist Women's network, offers dozens of suggestions to influence U.S. policy in Central America -- from organizing an interfaith service "to commemorate the martyrs of Central America" to offering one's church as sanctuary for Salvadoran and Guatemalan refugees. Education and witness suggestions include a "Bible study...around Central American concerns," and signing a "Peoples' Peace Treaty." And if your Sunday morning service still seems a bit irrelevant, the guide goes on to "suggest that an 'offering of letters' be taken up during worship."

RESOURCES

IRD Board members have been writing books. **Michael Novak's** latest, Confessions of a Catholic: Reflections on the Nicene Creed, has been praised by Notre Dame's distinguished Professor Gerhart Niemeyer for being "...grounded in sound theology, and yet alive with his personality and experiences....It is likely to be read and cherished by Christians far beyond the Roman Catholic obedience."

Ira Gallaway's book on the United Methodist Church has been "selling very well," says an editor at Abingdon Press. The book, Drifted Astray, combines recollections from Dr. Gallaway's impressive ministry with a sensitive yet powerful critique of his denomination's drift away from a balanced commitment to personal salvation and social witness.

George Weigel has written a most useful book for the IRD itself: Peace & Freedom: Christian Faith, Democracy and the Problem of War. As Richard John Neuhaus says, "George Weigel's excellent pamphlet gets the nuclear arms debate back to a theological basis--where it belongs." Weigel's book is especially designed for use by church study groups and university classes, where Christian history and theology are used to examine the current debate.

George Weigel's book is available from the IRD for \$6.00. We will be glad to forward requests for Ira Gallaway's and Michael Novak's books.

If you don't have your copy of A Time for Candor, IRD's documentary study of mainline church involvement with the extreme Left, now is the time to place your order. The 100-page booklet includes 126 footnotes and 10 original source documents -- so you can see the context of controversial statements. Order a copy for your pastor, too. **\$5.00 each.**

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