

## Six Years "On Thin Ice"

### A Religion Reporter's Quest for Integrity in the Church

At first, Roy Beck fits the image of a mild-mannered reporter. But his quiet courtesy should mislead no one. He's about to shake up the mainline church establishment (again) in a big way. His new book, entitled *On Thin Ice: A Religion Reporter's Memoir* (Bristol Books, 1988), covers the story of his work on the staff of *The United Methodist Reporter*, the nation's largest independent church weekly newspaper. *On Thin Ice* reports the story behind the stories he wrote for the paper. For six years he covered the United Methodist Church, the National Council of Churches, and the other mainline churches -- from the inside.

His book documents a radical Left agenda -- and a church establishment willing to indulge half-truths, deceptions, and intellectual dishonesty to pursue that agenda. In the process, Roy Beck argues, the church betrays the very concern for the poor and oppressed which it says it wants to advance. In the end, however, the book is not about politics; it is about integrity. And its conclusions are profoundly disturbing.

The first major controversy of Beck's career at *The UM Reporter* involved his blowing the whistle on distortions about the National Council of Churches in a fundraising mailing by the conservative Religious Roundtable. But Roy soon found that it wasn't only the Religious Right which fell short of full truth-telling. And for a mainline, social-activist type like Roy Beck, what happened next -- becoming a perceived enemy of the left-liberal church establishment -- was a decidedly uncomfortable experience.

An early chapter, for example, documents his coverage of a 1981 church-funded conference on ending apartheid in South Africa. At first, Roy saw the event as a needed summons to Christian action. But as he delved deeper, he learned that while church leaders had given endorsements and money to the conference, its steering committee was

controlled by another ideological perspective:

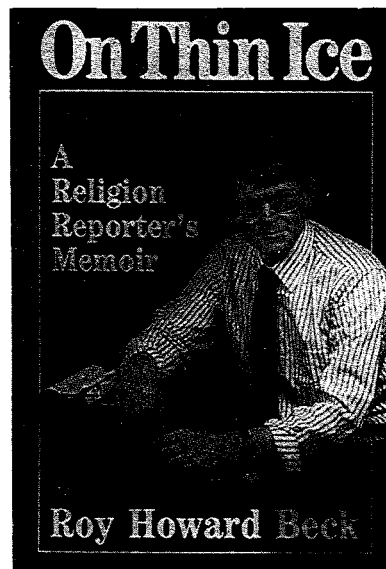
... I had fairly certain identification of more than half the steering committee. Besides the staff member from the United Methodist Women's Division, the rest were identified with the U.S. Peace Council, the U.S. Communist Party, ANC, SWAPO, the International Association of Democratic Lawyers and groups identified by themselves or by the U.S. government as affiliates of the lawyers' "Soviet front group."

Over and over again, Beck documents a similar leaning to the far Left. He tells of having dinner one evening with Nora Boots, the head of the United Methodist mission board's Latin American section:

As I took my first bite of a BLT sandwich, Nora took a bite into my profession. "There's nothing particularly free about the press in the United States," she said. "The press is much freer in Cuba." Nora had a way of offering ideas for people to choke on....

From examining the effectiveness of the United Methodist Church's ethnic minority emphasis to questioning the accuracy of the churches' claims supporting the Sanctuary movement, Roy Beck documents his challenges to the religious Left's "sacred cows." One of the most poignant stories, given Roy Beck's personal commitment to racial justice, was his involvement in the controversy surrounding mainline church support for an indicted black Mississippi mayor, Eddie Carthan. The United Presbyterian Church in the U.S.A., the Lutheran Church in America, the United Church of Christ, the United Methodist Church and the National Council of Churches all gave thousands of dollars to efforts to defend Carthan against charges of corruption, assault, and murder. Yet in analyzing the materials upon which the church agencies based their decisions to support Carthan, Roy Beck observed, "Truth continued to be a casualty.... I checked out every claim as it came. None could be substantiated.... The literature containing the severely distorted information, if not straight lies, continued to be distributed...."

(On Thin Ice, continued on page 3)



# Religious Liberty Alert

## Uganda: A Return to Religious Persecution

The very name Uganda conjures up memories of the awful atrocities committed under former dictators Idi Amin and Milton Obote. However, two years ago there was a break in the cycle of violence and abuse Ugandans have suffered. Yoweri Museveni, leading a band of rebels, toppled a military government and installed himself as president. He promised an end to human rights violations and a return to the rule of law. Since then Museveni has brought a semblance of peace to his chaotic land.

But now there are reports that the Museveni government is reverting to the tactics of repression. Religious freedoms and other human liberties seem to be narrowing.

Under the rule of Idi Amin in the 1970's, many Christians were openly persecuted, tortured and executed. Religious toleration greatly improved with the accession of Museveni. Bishop Misaeri Kauma, Anglican prelate of Kampala, was optimistic in early 1987: "For 20 years people have been killed. Dead bodies everywhere. When you compare the kind of things we've gone through and what it is now, we are miles ahead from where we've (been) and we have to praise God."

Unfortunately, in the past months there have been actions by the government that represent a backsliding in religious toleration. Recently, many churches have lost their tax-free status, and many are no longer allowed to import items duty-free. Relief supplies destined for church groups are now also subject to taxation, and the churches' access to the radio airwaves has been restricted.

Government troops have been accused of burning down Christian mission stations, particularly in the northern sectors of the country where a dissident movement is still functioning.

The evangelical churches seem to be particularly targeted by the Museveni government. According to Peterson Sozi, the president of the National Council of Pentecostal and Evangelical Churches, Uganda "is reverting to the policies of the earlier administration of Idi Amin in recognizing only Anglican, Roman Catholic, and Greek Orthodox churches."

In a government decree that hits particularly at the evangelical churches, all "public preaching" is banned. The government directive prohibits any Christian worship services in locations "other than proper religious places of

worship." Many evangelical congregations in Uganda do not have a fixed place of worship and frequently meet under tents, in public places or private homes. Under the new government regulation, religious meetings in such places are unlawful.

The motivation for the government's recent violations of religious liberty is unclear. There is some speculation that the Museveni government is under pressure from Arab allies to allow Islamic advances in Uganda. It is difficult to determine whether the attack on the churches is connected to any Muslim missionary efforts; however, the Museveni government does receive substantial military support from Libya. Some observers are also concerned about what they regard as signs of Marxist influence in the Museveni government. Scattered reports have mentioned Marxist indoctrination in army officer training and secondary education.

Others view the latest crackdown on the Christian community as simply a warning to all who do not fall in line with the government. Dr. Tokumboh Adeyemo, General Secretary of the Association of Evangelicals of Africa and Madagascar, believes:

If the various (political) opposition groups in Uganda were to subside tomorrow and come to terms with the government, the next target of opposition would be the church. Because the church, then, would constitute the only opposition group and the only one who can question the government about implementing its programs. And that would mean that persecution may be imminent."

Express your concern to:

Her Excellency Princess Elizabeth  
Bagaaya-Nyabongo, Ambassador  
Uganda Embassy  
5909 16th Street, NW  
Washington, DC 20011  
(202) 726-7100

-- Walter H. Kansteiner



Forbes, The Christian Science Monitor, 1988 TCSPS

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# IRD Special Report

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## The 200th General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.)

When 700 commissioners from around the country gather in St. Louis June 7-15, the meeting will mark the 200th General Assembly of what is now the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.). The round number suggests a significance which this General Assembly may fulfill. The greatest controversy in St. Louis will likely revolve around a proposed denominational statement on "Christian Obedience in a Nuclear Age," the result of several years of study of the question of "resistance." Our first article will put the new statement in the context of the debate aroused during the study process. The Presbyterian assembly will also have before it another report and resolution on Central America, which will likely repeat the pro-Sandinista and anti-U.S. positions taken in past General Assembly actions. Our second article discusses a report adopted by last year's General Assembly, now being published under the title *Central America Update*, and a critique of that report recently released by Presbyterians for Democracy and Religious Freedom.

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## Proposed Statement on "Resistance" Makes Moral Equations U.S. on a Level with U.S.S.R., Law-Abiding with Law-Breaking

The Presbyterian debate on "resistance" is reaching a new -- and perhaps conclusive -- stage. This year's General Assembly will vote on a proposed statement of denominational policy on "Christian Obedience in a Nuclear Age" (abbreviated CONA).

The proposed statement straddles the question of whether peacemaking is to be pursued by illegally resisting U.S. government policies or by participating in our country's democratic system. CONA accepts both courses of action as legitimate, depending on individual conscience:

Because of the strong presumption for obedience to duly constituted human authority in both Scripture and the Reformed tradition, actions of non-cooperation or disobedience to that authority should not be undertaken quickly, rashly, unthinkingly, or automatically.... At the same time, because of the extraordinary and unprecedented nature of the current situation, cooperation with and obedience to duly constituted human authority should not be a matter of course, undertaken quickly, unthinkingly, or automatically.... "God alone is Lord of the conscience," and the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) at all levels should respect and support the right of individuals to follow either course.

The subject of resistance became an issue in 1986, when the Advisory Council on Church and Society released for congregational study a paper entitled *Presbyterians and Peacemaking: Are We Now Called to Resistance?*. The paper provoked an outcry with its denunciations of U.S. "militarism" as "demonic" and nuclear deterrence as "idolatrous," as well as its implication that Christian peacemaking might require the church to adopt a "stance of resistance" to U.S. government policies (*Religion & Democracy*, March/April 1987). Responses to the paper were digested by a special Task Force on Christian Obedience in a Nuclear Age, which then drafted the toned-down statement to be considered by the General Assembly.

"Christian Obedience in a Nuclear Age" retreats from the suggestion in *Presbyterians and Peacemaking* that resistance be made a matter of *status confessionis* -- an essential point of

Presbyterian faith. "The recent study and response process indicates that the authentic general consensus that would make a declaration of *status confessionis* meaningful and effective for the corporate church is not present at this time," CONA admits. Nevertheless, it maintains the earlier paper's rejection of the U.S. defense posture, and it grants a special claim on church support to those who "resist" it.

### Less Spicy Language, But Same Basic Recipe

While dropping the most inflammatory rhetoric from *Presbyterians and Peacemaking*, CONA often merely substitutes milder phrases which ultimately advance the same arguments. For example, the new statement forswears the pejorative "militarism" as descriptive of U.S. society, conceding that our nation does have some legitimate defense needs. Yet it still attacks "the pervasiveness of militarization in our society." Likewise, CONA refrains from calling nuclear deterrence "idolatrous" or "demonic"; instead it judges deterrence "immoral," even for an interim period of arms reduction. Strangely, though, the statement denies that this condemnation of deterrence would imply advocacy of unilateral disarmament.

CONA acknowledges the "potential threats involved in competition with the Soviet Union and other countries whose ideologies or interests differ with our own." It criticizes, however, our "pervasive ideology of the enemy" -- an exaggerated fear of the Soviets and of communism, generated by "the power of hostile imagination." Nowhere does the proposed statement recognize a fundamental *moral* distinction between the Soviet and American systems. Indeed, it portrays the two superpowers as equally driven by the malevolent forces of "militarization," deterrence strategy, and "ideology of the enemy."

The term "resistance" is less frequently used in CONA, which prefers to speak of illegal acts as an alternative form of "Christian

## Scotchmer to Direct PDRF



The Rev. Paul Scotchmer has been appointed the first Executive Director of Presbyterians for Democracy and Religious Freedom. PDRF is a group, similar in purpose to the IRD, which seeks to renew the commitment to democratic values and religious liberty within the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.). Since its recognition as a caucus within the denomination in 1986, PDRF has grown rapidly. Its base of members and

supporters has expanded from 200 to over 4,000, and it made a major impact with a book of essays questioning a Presbyterian Church study paper on "resistance."

PDRF President John Boone sees "tremendous significance for PDRF and our church" in the naming of Scotchmer. Boone adds: "Our newsletter, our fundraising, and the books we have published have all been the work of volunteers. Hiring an executive director not only underscores our success; it marks a major shift to full-time, professional leadership."

Scotchmer, an ordained Presbyterian minister, received his Master's of Divinity from Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary and his Ph.D. in Religious Studies from Drew University. He has taught at Northwestern College in Iowa and served a pastorate in Vermont. Most recently, he has been a consultant to the World Without War Council in Seattle.

obedience." This approach presupposes a moral equivalence between law-abiding and law-breaking: "The whole thrust of this policy statement is to recognize the faithfulness of Presbyterians who make a variety of responses in the interests of just peace, when those responses stem from serious search and informed conscience." The statement singles out "the open refusal to pay willingly a designated portion of a tax honestly reported (as an) honorable expression of Christian conscience."

### The Bottom Line:

#### Backing Options Rejected by Most Presbyterians

The CONA Task Force report contains a revealing appendix which tabulates responses to a survey of groups which studied the earlier paper. Even though these groups tended, more than average Presbyterians, to sympathize with radical notions of "peacemaking," they still expressed strong opposition to any Presbyterian Church blessing for resistance. Sixty-six percent rejected official support for tax resistance. Church endorsement of all other types of illegal resistance also met with majority disapproval. By 52 to 31 percent, study participants felt that

church teaching should give more emphasis to obeying the government than to resisting it.

Given these responses, CONA concludes: "There is a broad consensus in the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) that the primary course to be pursued in seeking the transformation of political and economic policy necessary to just peace is the vigorous and creative use of the ordinary and legal means available to us as citizens of the United States." Therefore the statement recommends intensified church politicking against U.S. military policies. It authorizes denominational officials to do more lobbying, to seek more media exposure, and to put more pressure on corporations to further the church's "peacemaking" agenda.

As this proposal would seem to benefit the bureaucratic Presbyterian Left, so CONA also offers reinforcement to the more radical individuals on the battle lines of resistance. These "individuals who otherwise feel very cut off from the community of faith of which they are a part" would have their morale "enhanced" by means such as "counseling of resisters and their families, group discussions, and providing financial and legal assistance." But no such specific institutional aid is promised to the majority of Presbyterians, who support bipartisan U.S. defense policies and respect our laws. They would receive only the generalized "support and cooperation of the congregation."

### Still "Inappropriate" and "Unacceptable"

To whatever extent "Christian Obedience in a Nuclear Age" represents a moderation of *Presbyterians and Peacemaking*, Presbyterians for Democracy and Religious Freedom (PDRF) and the Presbyterian Lay Committee are responsible. PDRF published a set of essays critical of *Presbyterians and Peacemaking*, which many congregations studied together with that official document. Lay Committee activists promoted overtures from at least twenty presbyteries requesting a more balanced study process. Even the CONA report notes that the involvement of these and other organizations "helped achieve a more honest expression of the diversity that characterizes the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.)."

But Lay Committee and PDRF leaders do not regard the changes in CONA as an adequate response to the objections they had raised against the earlier paper. Lay Committee President Bob Campbell evaluates the new statement:

It is certainly much improved over *Presbyterians and Peacemaking*. It does allow for more than one viewpoint, suggesting different options for peacemaking, and it has a mellow tone. But we still feel that the bottom line in the document is promoting resistance in every form, and for that reason we still find it unacceptable.

PDRF Executive Director Paul Scotchmer comments:

It is inappropriate to ask the entire church to give its blessing and financial support to a small minority within the church who feel led by their consciences to break laws in protest of policies widely supported by the members of our society and church. Doing so can only alienate the majority within the church whose consciences dictate otherwise.

-- Alan Wisdom

# PDRF Joins Debate on Central America

In the tradition of *Presbyterians and Peacemaking: Are We Now Called to Resistance?*, the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) has come forth with another one-sided "study paper." And once again Presbyterians for Democracy and Religious Freedom (PDRF) has published a critical response, urging congregations to gain a balanced view by studying the two documents together.

This time the subject is Central America. The Advisory Council on Church and Society, the source of the earlier resistance paper, is distributing *Central America Update*, a report produced by a special task force and adopted by the 1987 General Assembly. The report claims to confirm the basis of previous General Assembly actions which spoke favorably of the Marxist Sandinistas, criticized their democratic neighbors, and opposed the U.S. role in the region.

*Central America Update* pronounces the Sandinista regime "a morally as well as juridically legitimate government." It says that the Sandinistas have followed "the logic of the majority" in "fashioning a new economic system designed to meet the needs of the country's peasants and workers." As a result, "hope abounds among the poor people of Nicaragua," and the government "enjoys the support of the majority of the Nicaraguan people." Insofar as Sandinista leaders hold "a commitment to Marxism as a tool of social analysis," the report contends that they are simply following "the instinct of the masses of Nicaragua's poor" -- and doing so quite "pragmatically and eclectically."

Regarding problems of human rights and religious liberty in Nicaragua, the Presbyterian task force cannot bring itself to utter a forthright condemnation. It assures readers that the Nicaraguan constitution guarantees all the "civic and political freedoms that citizens of the United States associate with 'democracy,' as well as some economic rights the United States Constitution does not guarantee." Where these guarantees have been broken, "the government has admitted some abuses and has taken steps to correct them."

Moreover, *Central America Update* shifts the blame for many of these Sandinista abuses onto other parties. It claims that CIA subversion "provides a historical basis for the Nicaraguan government's preoccupation with counterrevolutionary activities in its country." The report then asserts that "the U.S.-supported contra war is at the root of most human rights violations in the country, whether by government or contras." Discounting the Nicaraguan Catholic bishops' "fear that the Sandinista leadership intends to control all aspects of society and to limit the church's role and access to the people," it declares that "the war of the contras against Nicaragua must be ended before any such tendency can be credibly demonstrated."

## A Double Standard

By contrast, the democratic governments of the nations surrounding Nicaragua receive no such benefit of the doubt. The task force refuses, in fact, to apply the label "democracy" to most of them. It says rather that they have some elements of "electoral or procedural democracy," which "may serve to mask the persistence of nondemocratic power." As long as human rights violations persist, the military retains significant power, and wealth continues to be unequally distributed, *Central America Update* declares "there can be no real democracy in El Salvador" and "nothing fundamental has changed in Guatemala." Major improvements in all of these areas and in civil liberties are dismissed as "statistical" and "of a superficial nature."

The United States is the target of still harsher denunciations. For instance: "The poor of Central America -- widows, orphans, refugees, hungry and homeless -- are suffering and dying from the regional implementation of the policies of the U.S. government and very specifically from its support and encouragement of the



Randy Frame, Christianity Today

A poor family in Masaya, Nicaragua. Masaya was the scene of recent demonstrations against forced conscription into the Sandinista Army. Demonstrators were attacked and beaten by Sandinista mobs.



A men's Bible class in Nicaragua. The pastor of this church was detained and interrogated by Sandinista authorities in 1985.

### RESOURCES

*"Christian Obedience in a Nuclear Age,"* is available for \$2 from the Office of the General Assembly, 1201 Interchurch Center, 475 Riverside Drive, New York, NY 10115.

*Central America Update* may be obtained for \$1 from the same address.

*Central America Focus* is available for \$4 from PDRF; 30 Burton Hills Blvd., #500; Nashville, TN 37215.

use of military force throughout the region." The report characterizes U.S. aid to the Salvadoran government as an "affliction" on the Salvadoran people. It faults our policy in Honduras for a situation in which "self-determination, democracy, and political and economic sovereignty are eroding rapidly." The task force warns that U.S. "intervention" in Costa Rica may become "a major contributor to the toppling of the only genuine democracy and the only relatively stable economy in Central America."

The PDRF reply to *Central America Update* comes in the form of a book entitled *Central America Focus*, written by K. L. Billingsley, author of *The Generation That Knew Not Josef* and other works on the churches and politics. Billingsley follows the strategy of measuring the denominational report by its own explicit standards of "honest inquiry." He accuses the Advisory Council of prejudging the issues it was to study, by naming an unrepresentative task force and giving it a biased mandate. In addition, according to Billingsley, the task force's own bibliography and tour itinerary betray a closed mentality which ignored facts and opinions that would contradict its assumptions. Not surprisingly, he concludes, the product of these labors falls far short of expectations:

The most cursory examination of the report reveals that it uses a double standard. It refuses to make judgments of Nicaragua, but freely criticizes all other parties, often in the harshest terms. It judges the U.S. and its allies on their record and worst cases, but judges the Sandinistas on their intentions, visions, and rhetoric.... What can one say of an inquiry purporting to be guided by scriptural and Reformed principles, and which claims to be fair and balanced, but which upholds a double standard? It fails on this most basic of tests.

-- Alan Wisdom

Finally Roy Beck discovered the common link between this and other controversies he had covered. It lay in the politics of the main organization behind Carthan, the United League of Holmes County:

United League leaders were guided by Marxist-Leninist tactics and analysis.... The evidence was indisputable....So I understood what was unique about the United League. I could not understand, and hated to speculate, why the national church professionals of several denominations in New York chose to align themselves with the league.

The January 23, 1983, CBS "60 Minutes" broadcast, which Beck calls "one of the most savage reporting jobs ever done on the National Council of Churches and the World Council of Churches," prompted *The UM Reporter* into doing its own investigation of the political involvements of the ecumenical bodies. Beck's analysis was

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perhaps less savage, but no less disquieting. Using the NCC's own 1963 human rights policy statement as a guide, he analyzed every press release and resolution issued by the NCC for the previous five years. He found a four-to-one imbalance in NCC human rights actions -- with four complaints against regimes of the Right for every one against a leftist government.

"And even that purely mathematical statistic severely understated the tilt," he continued. To illustrate he contrasted a one-time statement on behalf of the case of the Siberian Seven, a Soviet Pentecostal family (the statement "doesn't mention anything about why or what they were trying to flee, nor whether religious persecution was a factor"), to a situation in which the right-wing government of Taiwan jailed a Presbyterian minister. In the later instance, "the NCC not only expressed concern for him but also condemned religious repression in general in Taiwan. It held a public forum to fully air systemic problems related to Taiwan's government."

What may have most stung the churches about the "60 Minutes" broadcast was the charge by Lutheran pastor Richard John Neuhaus that the church is "telling lies" when it paints a "rosy picture" of places like Indochina after the U.S. withdrawal. These church officials, the IRD board member charged, "consort with the persecutors of the church of Christ." Official NCC rebuttals stated categorically that the NCC "does not fund or otherwise support Communist governments or movements or any other government anywhere in the world." But when Beck discovered that hundreds of thousands of dollars of aid to

Vietnam were being funneled to a quasi-government agency and were specifically designated to government development projects, NCC officials told him that their assurances of no aid to communist governments had been a form of "shorthand."

Through the controversies in which he became embroiled, Roy Beck sustains the optimistic assumption that once church leaders and members get accurate information about church activities, they will rise up with one voice and change course. Alas, Roy (and his readers) are constantly disappointed. Those committed to the hard Left, of course, tended to reaffirm proudly what had been exposed. Another typical tactic was to smear the messenger -- Roy was called a racist, a McCarthyite, and, he has told me, a "CIA plant." (Yet for six years he also won award after award from his fellow journalists.)

As troublesome as such harsh reactions on the part of church leaders were and are, *On Thin Ice* points to what is even more destructive -- the tendency to turn a blind eye to the serious problems which exist. One can easily argue that it is the head-in-the-sand institutionalists who bear greater responsibility for the state of the church today than the relatively small number of committed anti-democratic Marxists who may occupy agency staff positions. Beck recites example after example of attempts to ignore the issues raised, to accept half-truth alibis, and to avoid dealing with the root causes of the problems. One local church official cut to the bottom line when he protested: "Did you deliberately plan to run this expose just before Stewardship Sunday?" "Hasn't Roy Beck ever heard of a ministry of silence?" another church leader fumed.

Apparently he has not; Roy Beck's book even broke the silence on yet another issue in the church -- sexual infidelity. He suggests a link between the cover-up of sexual misconduct and other forms of manipulation within church bureaucracies, causing a further erosion of trust in church agencies.

Beck's book is more than a dreary compilation of the failings of the church. Like the Ozark storyteller he is, he weaves a captivating tale which reader after reader tells me "can't be put down." The authenticity of the book is enhanced by Roy's generous use of anecdotes from his family life. When his young son makes his first \$5.00 donation to hunger relief, asking anxiously whether "all of it" will go to feed the hungry, we all can identify.

Roy Beck's passion is the integrity of the church. He thinks the first step in restoring this integrity is telling the truth about what's going on in the American churches. And he has written a book which does just that.

-- Diane L. Knippes

***On Thin Ice: A Religion Reporter's Memoir* by Roy Howard Beck (Bristol Books, 1988) is available from the IRD, 729 15th Street, NW, Suite 900, Washington, DC 20005, for \$7.95.**

# Letters

To the Editor:

The article "The WCC and the 'State of the Union'" (*Religion and Democracy*, March 1988) uses selective quotations from a WCC staff paper as evidence for its thesis that "the World Council of Churches takes a dim view of the United States."

Those who saw the *R&D* article without having access to the paper itself (which was reprinted in *Ecumenical Press Service*, January 1988) will not be aware of two important paragraphs of "preliminary considerations" at the beginning of the paper: "The size and population of the country is vast..., so generalizations are usually wrong. Diversity and complexity prevail. There are no easy descriptions.... Our purpose here (is) to point to some underlying trends in current U.S. society that may suggest some clues about the future. These trends, as stated, may be disputed, they may be overgeneralizations, they may hide from view more crucial developments. The U.S. diversity and complexity suggest the wisdom of humility in description."

The *R&D* article speaks of "a long list of U.S. ills" catalogued in the WCC paper. Every single item in that list is taken out of its context, which is in each case a brief statement of what the *R&D* article itself admits is "a series of genuine problems." It is *R&D* -- not the WCC paper -- which has turned an attempt to identify trends into a "nightmarish recitation..., a litany of gloom."

The *R&D* article alleges that the WCC "warns of 'a major catastrophe.'" In fact, the WCC staff paper, in a paragraph headed "The unpredictable," asks *how* the U.S. would react to a major catastrophe, "something the U.S. is not used to and is mentally unprepared for." Far from "predicting" anything, the paper says: "No one knows."

As to the tendentious remark that "it may be evening in America, according to the WCC, but not quite night," the WCC staff paper in fact asks: "Are there elements of hope in U.S. society? *Yes, many.*" (emphasis added)

The *R&D* article suggests that the WCC sees only one benefit of U.S. democracy -- the system of political checks and balances. Apparently the writer overlooked the last line of the paper: "The press has much freedom." The *R&D* article is a useful reminder that this freedom of the press, besides being a sign of hope, may also create the space for misrepresenting others.

Elizabeth G. Ferris

Moderator, WCC North America Task Force

The Editor replies:

Ms. Ferris charges us with "misrepresenting" the WCC. Apparently she would have us credit the WCC with a rather brighter

view of the United States than we had observed. We earnestly hope that such might be the case, for the WCC could gain much from a fuller appreciation of the strengths of our democratic system and our pluralistic society.

Unfortunately, the report of the WCC's North America Task Force does little to foster that hope. Of the fourteen points in the report, only one offers a positive assessment of the U.S., while two describe trends of mixed impact. The other eleven points have an overwhelmingly negative slant.

We tried to summarize the WCC report accurately -- although necessarily in condensed form. Our article covered both its negative and positive aspects. Indeed, if we overstated either aspect, it was the positive. We included almost all of the "elements of hope," except for the single sentence on freedom of the press. By contrast, we omitted many a grim phrase which would not fit our allotted space.

For example: "The U.S.A. is in many ways a very strong nation (militarily, productively, politically) but at the same time it is amazingly weak (it cannot control its borders, it is very dependent on foreign energy and metal resources, it is subject to many international economic factors beyond its control). From being a 'First World' nation, it is taking on characteristics of what we have long thought described 'Third World' nations. One consequence of this is to confuse strength with force."

There are, as we said, some "genuine problems" here. But when they are recited, one after another with mounting hyperbole and scarcely an encouraging word, any reader would get the impression that the WCC takes an exceedingly -- almost obsessively -- dim view of the United States.

As to Ms. Ferris' other objections: (1) We took the "preliminary considerations" to be the sort of protestations of humility which so often precede a series of audacious statements -- hardly noteworthy. If, however, Ms. Ferris actually wishes us to discount the fourteen points as "overgeneralizations" that "may hide from view more crucial developments," we will gladly do so. (2) Our article indicated that the "major catastrophe" mentioned in the WCC report was an hypothesis. But if the WCC task force made a major point of speculating on how Americans might react to such an event, must it not have considered the hypothesis to be at least a serious possibility?

We thank Ms. Ferris for her letter. We are grateful for any opportunity to communicate with the ecumenical organizations to which our churches belong.

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**Religion and Democracy**  
729 15th Street, N.W., Suite 900  
Washington, D.C. 20005