

# Comment

## Debate on the Vatican's *Ostpolitik*

I have undertaken to comment on Hansjakob Stehle's book *Eastern Politics of the Vatican 1917-1979*\* in response to an invitation by the editor of *RCL* to reply to Mr Stehle's very critical review of my own book *Détente and Papal-Communist Relations 1962-1978* (see *RCL* Vol. 9, Nos. 3-4, pp. 134-6). Elsewhere I have already put on record my evaluation of Mr Stehle's work (*The Catholic Historical Review*, Washington DC, forthcoming), and *RCL* has previously reviewed the German version of his book (Vol. 4, No. 3, pp. 32-3). It is an excellent book, based upon solid research and personal experience. Well written and conceived, it will undoubtedly stand as the definitive study of the Holy See's relationship with the Soviet government and the governments of Eastern Europe until such time as access to the archives is possible.

What is really at issue in this debate is the fundamental question of our time: the relationship between morality and politics. Like many scholars in the West, Stehle would separate morality and politics. He typifies the moral relativism which Solzhenitsyn so despairingly decries. From Stehle's point of view the Church's purpose is to save souls and to accomplish that task the Holy See attempts to work with any government or movement, no matter what its political or moral makeup. The Church must avoid, virtually at any cost, being caught in the political struggle between East and West—it cannot take sides. Besides, Stehle emphasizes, the political struggle would be uneven: the Church has no armies, nuclear weapons or tanks. Accordingly, it makes no attempt and should make no effort, according to Stehle, to challenge politically the Soviet government and its satellite régimes in Eastern Europe.

\*Translated by Sandra Smith, new revised edition, Athens, Ohio and London, Ohio University Press, 1981, 466 pp., \$26.95.

But here Stehle is certainly wrong. The political power of the Church and of the Kremlin is equal, in fact, the balance favours the Church, certainly not in the simplistic comparison of armies, but where politics really matters—in mens' minds, hearts and souls. The Church has tremendous influence in Eastern Europe and in parts of the Soviet Union. The only reason the communists talk to the church leaders is that the Church has power. The Church can use its position to help transform the communist countries (and, for that matter, the capitalist countries too) into just societies, but if it fails to act, its influence will soon be dissipated, for men desperately yearn for justice and moral leadership and if the Church will not provide them they will turn elsewhere. If the Church follows the path of Finlandization, which Stehle is clearly advocating, it will actively be engaged in breaking down ethical standards. There can be no peace with the unrighteous.

The Church's role is unquestionably to save souls, but it does not save souls simply by existing. It saves souls through leadership, through example, through witness to the absolute truths which its Founder passed down. Morality and politics cannot be separated in the Christian at any level. Those who seek to do so are either Machiavellian or naive, and they risk bringing ruination not only to the Church but to western civilization. It is well and good to twist and turn in nonessential matters in order to get along with the communist régimes, but it would be self-destructive for the Church to bend principle.

In this age of growing materialism and moral relativism, we desperately need sharp judgement to distinguish between good and evil. We need a piercing moral voice which will pass judgement in unequivocal terms upon neo-Stalinism, Marxism-Leninism, international terrorism, and the daily attacks upon human freedom and justice associated with the world communist movement. We need a precise and specific commitment to justice, no matter what the political cost. It will not do to disregard the Ukrainian Uniates while playing up to Gromyko or the Moscow Patriarchate. It will not do to abolish confrontation at the expense of justice. It will not do to attempt to convert the prince of peace into a prince of appeasement.

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