

Editorial

Can a Communist Party be tolerant towards religion? Marxists like Roy Medvedev, who admires the Czechoslovak Party reforms of 1968, and some Eurocommunists consider that it can. And they still claim to be Leninists.

Enrico Berlinguer, leader of the Italian Communist Party, recently sent a letter to Mgr. Luigi Bettazzi, Bishop of Ivrea (see *The Times*, 22 October 1977), in which he gave the views of the Italian Communist Party on religion. The bishop felt that his fellow bishops would regard this letter as a positive document. Berlinguer denied that his Party would impose or give a privileged position to atheism and described his Party as "lay and democratic, and as such not theist, atheist or antitheist".

Such ideological tolerance, some members of the Italian Communist Party argue, should also be extended to Party members. A controversy has arisen over the clause in the Party statutes, which requires members to subscribe to Marxist-Leninist principles. According to Professor Lombardo Radice, interviewed in *La Stampa* (16 September 1977), this clause might be modified at the next Party congress. He described it as a "dry branch" and said:

It is necessary to cut it off, to remove obvious grounds for misunderstanding . . . I believe that there will be no problems about getting it modified at the next Party congress . . .

In fact there is already a clause (inserted by Palmiro Togliatti) in the Party statutes which leaves Party members free to hold any philosophical or religious convictions, so long as the Party's political line is supported. Professor Radice went on to say that the "Italian Communist Party does not want to be a doctrinaire party possessing a truth laid down once and for all, but a party open to all cultural contributions, not monolithic". But such tolerance is by no means shared by some other Party members: for example, on 17 September Gianni Cervetti, a member of the Secretariat and Directorate, insisted that Marxism-Leninism was an essential heritage of the Party which could not be given up.

In the Soviet Union, Roy Medvedev, who believes in the potential of a reformed Marxist-Leninist Party, shows great tolerance towards those who hold different convictions from his own. According to an interview printed in this issue of *RCL* (p. 259), he enjoys discussing theoretical questions with a well-read Christian. So he advocates dialogue with believers: "At present Marxists and representatives of any religion could establish an entirely new relationship . . ." He bemoans Marxists and believers "who are extremely intolerant towards any criticism or any expression of differing views". When asked about the present position of religion in the Soviet Union, he calls the situation abnormal and criticises the hostile attitude of the Soviet authorities to the Church in the late '20s and during the '30s, and calls Khrushchev's anti-religious campaign of 1959-64 "quite unjustifiable". There should be freedom of conscience, he believes, and the Church should be free from state interference. Furthermore,

Since believers exist, religion must of course not only be tolerated, but must occupy a definite place in our public life.

In his book *On Socialist Democracy* Roy Medvedev again stresses the need for freedom of conscience, as well as freedom of speech, press and thought, and he claims that "minority opinion" must be protected. He goes further: "If the rights of the minority include being able not only to formulate but also to defend a point of view on any issue, this in fact means opposition". And by opposition he means one which is loyal and legal and which promotes reform.

But can a party which follows Leninist principles permit the existence of even a loyal opposition? The historical evidence which Medvedev presents in *On Socialist Democracy* is not adequate to support his view that Lenin did permit the existence of opposition groups and parties. There is much evidence which shows the contrary to be true. By 1921 all opposition within the Party and outside it had been removed, and by this time there existed the Party apparatus to maintain a monopoly of control over Party members and the rest of the population. It was Lenin who created a centralized Party which demanded ideological conformity, and it was he who created the machinery which later enabled Stalin to establish his dictatorship.

Whether the Italian Communist Party, once in power, would permit ideological nonconformity or even relinquish its own ideology, is a matter for conjecture. But if it did, such a party would be very different from the one which Lenin created.