

CHURCH/STATE RELATIONS IN THE SOVIET UNION

Recollections and reflections on the 'Cold War' years

This article is written at the request of the editor of the *Baptist Quarterly* who has asked me to recollect, as best I can, the uneasy and often traumatic relations between Church and State in the Soviet Union during the period of the so-called 'Cold War' and to reflect upon them. The particular occasion for this request was an article entitled 'The Gospel according to Marx' in the *Reader's Digest* of February 1993, which criticized the World Council of Churches (as on previous occasions also), alleging that that organization had allowed itself to be used by the Marxist communist regime in the USSR during those dark days when Christians, in company with men and women of other faiths, had to endure much oppression and suffering at the hands of the State authorities.

As the title indicates, this is a personal recollection and reflection. It is based on twenty or so years' personal involvement, albeit on a limited scale, in Church/State relations in Eastern and Central Europe, and in particular in the Soviet Union. It does not claim to be a carefully annotated historical analysis of the situation and is no doubt open to the charge of subjective judgment and limited understanding. Be that as it may, I can but record what I have both seen and heard!

The policy of the Soviet Government was self-evidently atheistic and so had little or no room for religion of any kind. At best, religion in general and Christianity in particular were a superstition which, up to a certain point, might have to be tolerated; but the time would come in the not-too-distant future when it would inevitably fade away and cease to exist. Meanwhile the Constitution of the Union laid down the basic principle of the separation of Church and State. The Church must not interfere in the affairs of the State. The reverse of this, however, was not at all obvious because, almost from the very beginning, the State was prepared to go to any lengths to ensure that the Church - and religion generally - was kept within prescribed limits. The story of repression and persecution over a period of many years makes troubled reading. The years of the 'Cold War' were no exception. As in the time of Joseph Stalin so also in the time of Nikita Khrushchev many church buildings were closed or else turned into store-rooms or museums; the clergy were drastically reduced in number; churches, in order to be given legal recognition, had to be registered with the authorities and to submit themselves to restrictive regulations; profession of the Christian faith meant limited opportunities of higher education for one's family and restricted job opportunities for oneself; travel abroad was curtailed, as were contacts with Westerners; the Church's involvement in social affairs such as the provision of hospitals or homes for the elderly was forbidden; the publication and distribution of Bibles and other Christian literature were strictly controlled; many laws were introduced (particularly in 1929 and in 1961) which blatantly denied the exercise of religious freedom. Resistance to such laws was condemned as 'hooliganism'; employment in work not recognized

by the State was described as 'parasitism'; and criticism of the State was described as 'slander'. In such circumstances there was no room for any dissentient voice.

This state of affairs was common knowledge among people in the Western world, but I myself was given new insights in the years following my appointment as General Secretary of the Baptist Union of Great Britain and Ireland in 1967. My involvement was at three different levels: as a member of the Central Committee of the World Council of Churches from 1968 to 1983, which introduced me not only to Baptist leaders in the Soviet Union but also *inter alia* to the Orthodox hierarchy; as the British Council of Churches representative on the Churches' Human Rights Programme for the Implementation of the Helsinki Final Act, co-sponsored by the World Council of Churches, the Conference of European Churches and the National Councils of Churches in Canada and the United States; and as a member (and for two years President) of the European Baptist Federation. These connections made possible fairly frequent visits to the Soviet Union and elsewhere in Eastern Europe and gave opportunity for many personal contacts with both Church and State representatives. These were visits 'with a purpose' - to identify at first hand the restrictions placed upon Christians there and the opportunities open to them, to plead directly on behalf of religious and political prisoners of conscience, and to help supply much needed medicines and Christian literature, including Bibles, in the Russian language.

It was at the Central Committee of the WCC that I began to sense the tensions that existed, not only between Church and State, but also among the member Churches themselves. It was obvious that the Russian Orthodox members, for example, were particularly sensitive when even veiled criticism of their Government was made 'from the floor'. I myself was one of those who, from time to time, made such well-founded criticisms. Along with other members of the Central Committee, I was aware of the delicate situation in which the Orthodox members found themselves and the embarrassment to which they were at times subjected. Out of deference to their feelings, such criticisms were sometimes muted or put into 'coded language', as on the occasion when I pleaded that the 'veil of silence' covering the plight of dissidents and prisoners of conscience be lifted: in so doing I alluded to the situation in *Albania* with no specific reference to the USSR, although the criticism was quite clearly meant to apply equally to the situation there also!

Membership of the Central Committee made it possible to have private conversation with influential members of the Orthodox hierarchy and to press home even more firmly the deep unrest felt by fellow-Christians in the West. In such circumstances one became more readily aware that these Church leaders were held accountable for what they said - and did not say - not only by their own Church authorities but also by the State. Matters would become much worse for them and their people back home if it was seen that they did not 'toe the party line'. This fact helped others to understand better the otherwise bewildering things that were sometimes said in what came to be known as 'passport speeches'. The adoption of

such a stance was one of expediency which, they would argue, had helped to keep the Orthodox faith alive, not just under the existing regime, but also through many preceding centuries under the Tsars.

This is a reminder that Church/State relationships in the Soviet Union have to be interpreted and understood against the background of centuries of Russian history and culture as well as of Orthodox spirituality. To that Church what matters essentially is the survival of the Christian witness, and on this score, it could be argued, such expediency was justified. I myself, as a Westerner and a Baptist, was more than a little uneasy about such a stance and felt obliged on occasions to give voice to my feelings in the light of the obvious oppression and persecution of Christians within the Soviet Union. In so doing I was, I hope, sensitively aware of the unenviable position in which the Orthodox members found themselves and was deeply impressed by the depth of spirituality shown in their public worship as well as in their private devotional life.

The charge has often been made that among the Orthodox members of the Central Committee there were some who were either 'stooges' of their Government or else had been 'planted' there to exercise an influence that would be beneficial to the Soviet regime. It is difficult to know how to interpret the word 'stooge' in this connection, having in mind the high regard in which patriotism was held by the 'rank and file' as well as by the leadership of the Churches, though there was a common perception among Central Committee members that some of their number did not seem to 'fit'. The leadership of the WCC was not unaware of this, as a recent statement from Geneva makes plain: 'The WCC was well aware,' it records, 'of the interest of intelligence agencies, particularly from Eastern Europe, in the Council (as in all international organizations in which their own nationals were involved)'. To be forewarned in such circumstances was no doubt to be forearmed.

Allegations have been made that the KGB so penetrated and manipulated the WCC that it was able to advance thereby Soviet foreign policy. This is flatly denied by the WCC itself, which strongly insists that there is in fact no evidence to support any such assertion. My own judgment is that, although some WCC statements were quite clearly to the left of centre politically, this is not to be explained by reference to 'KGB infiltration' or 'Soviet influence', but rather by the fact that there was a great uneasiness and indeed sense of guilt on the part of some Western representatives, particularly those from the United States, concerning perceived injustices perpetrated by their own systems and Governments and by the fact that the membership of the WCC now comprised a much broader spectrum of nationality and political persuasion than had once been the case. It has to be recognized that the WCC's decision-making processes are open to all its members, whatever their political stance may be, who have opportunity to speak in debate and to influence policy. There were times when it was generally felt that 'left wing influence' was too pronounced or that members of staff were exercising too strong an influence at the Committee and Hearings stages of debate. Members had the right to challenge

this situation and did so on a number of occasions. One weakness, in my opinion (shared by others), was that not enough corresponding criticism was made of the oppressive tactics of Marxist Governments. This is to be explained by the fact that, in the words of the World Council itself, 'as a deliberate policy, the WCC refrained from public criticism of several countries (not all of them socialist or Marxist states) when it felt that such criticism would create serious problems for the churches there and weaken their participation in the WCC. Avenues other than that of public statements were sought to bring issues before these Governments'.

This reluctance to criticize in public statement is well illustrated in a debate on human rights and the celebrated Helsinki Agreement which took place at the WCC Assembly in Nairobi in 1975. Dr Jacques Rossel of Switzerland proposed an amendment to a rather innocuous resolution urging the Churches to appeal to the signatory Governments to implement the Helsinki Agreement without delay. The amendment added these words to the final clauses: 'The Churches will also be concerned with those clauses in the Helsinki Agreement which deal directly with their own position and function (religious freedom, freedom of belief and worship, contacts between the Churches, exchange of information, etc.). They will make clear to the Governments their own understanding of these sections and how they can best be implemented . . . The WCC is concerned about the restrictions on religious freedom, particularly in the USSR. The Assembly respectfully requests the Government of the USSR to implement effectively the clause of the Helsinki Agreement which has to do with principle number 7 (respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms, including the freedom of thought, conscience, religion or belief)'. This amendment was seconded by the Revd (later Bishop) Richard Holloway of the Episcopal Church in Scotland who boldly stated that 'the USSR is in the forefront of human rights violations, but to mention this fact apparently is unsporting. I think this tradition ought to end. The USSR ought to take its place in the public confessional at the WCC along with the rest of us from the Western, white, oppressive, neo-imperialist bloc, who are already there, and I assure them that we'll be more than happy to shift along a bit to let them in'. The cat was well and truly thrown in among the pigeons!

To cut a long story short, after defensive speeches by Metropolitan Juvenaly and Metropolitan Nikodim and others, the amendment was put and carried by an overwhelming majority. This was immediately followed by a flurry of 'points of order' and, on the technical issue that the Moderator had not called for a vote on closing the debate, the matter was re-opened. On the recommendation of Dr E. A. Payne, it was referred back to a drafting committee for further discussion. The following day a 'revised amendment' of a much more bland kind was presented and passed. This referred to the importance of the Helsinki Agreement in upholding human rights and indicated the need for commitment to this end on the part of signatory States, but made no reference to the Soviet Union by name.

A highly respected member of the Central Committee, Professor Roger Mehl of

France, voiced the feelings of many others when he deplored this turn of events which, in his judgement, called in question the credibility of the WCC. At the same time he recognized how difficult it was for representatives of Churches in Eastern Europe to vote for a text in which their own country was severely criticized and how understanding others must be of their plight. The dilemma was there for all to see. But, as the WCC statement quoted above indicates, there were other ways whereby protest could be made and Governments pressurized. Some of these measures will be noted presently.

Meanwhile we may observe two significant statements made by the same Nairobi Assembly which are of no small importance in clarifying the relationship between Church and State in the Soviet Union. The first of these concerned the nature and content of human rights: a statement on which, for the first time, the Churches expressed a consensus. This was not at all easy to arrive at, having in mind the fact that the Churches represented countries, systems and governments at variance with one another on such issues. In the end, however, they were able to sum up their agreement under six headings: the right to basic guarantees of life, to self-determination and cultural identity (with particular reference to minorities), to participation in decision-making within the community, to dissent and to the exercise of religious freedom.

The last mentioned, the right of religious freedom, was the subject of two special Hearings at the Nairobi Assembly, out of which came the second significant statement. This affirmed that such freedom implied 'the freedom to have or to adopt a religion or belief of one's choice and freedom either individually or in community with others and in public or in private to manifest one's religion or belief in worship, observance, practice and teaching . . . Religious freedom should also include the right and duty of religious bodies to criticize the ruling powers when necessary on the basis of their religious convictions'. In this context it was noted that 'many Christians in many parts of the world are in prison for reasons of conscience or for political reasons as a result of their seeking to respond to the total demands of the Gospel'. This statement, I believe, had its limitations (e.g. the right to 'manifest' one's religion or belief is limited in scope, no mention being made, for example, of the right to witness or evangelize) and made no specific reference to restrictions in the Soviet Union or any other country. Nevertheless, it laid down an important 'marker' and gave clear indication of a clear consensus on the part of Assembly members.

These statements gave evidence of the ongoing work of the WCC Commission on International Affairs, which proceeded to call two important conferences on human rights in 1976 and 1977 to which were submitted all complaints received concerning the violation of human rights and the denial of religious freedom in Eastern Europe. One result was the establishment of the Churches' Human Rights Programme for the implementation of the Helsinki Final Act, to which reference has been made above. I was privileged to serve on this for a period of eight years. I

can vouch for the valiant efforts made there to grapple 'conceptually' with the meaning of human rights within different social, political, cultural, ideological and religious settings. The work had its 'practical' side also. It received from many sources complaints and pleas of different kinds which were documented and made available to members of the Group appointed to carry out the work of the Programme. In company with a Russian Orthodox member, I was given the responsibility of 'vetting' this information and singling out for action such 'cases' as might be within our competence. These were pursued with vigour - by appeals to the Governments involved, by visits to complainants, by letters to Embassies and by letters of support. The work was time-consuming and often frustrating. Much of it was of a private and confidential character and was carried out without publicity and 'the beating of the big drum'. It is difficult to assess what practical results followed from such efforts, although there was evidence that in some cases at least the work was effective in what it sought to accomplish (my personal files relating to these matters have been lodged with what was at that time the British Council of Churches).

A celebrated 'case', taken up directly by the WCC, was that of the Baptist pastor, Georgi Vins, General Secretary of the so-called Reformed Baptists who had separated themselves from the All Union Council of Evangelical Christians-Baptists (AUCECB). Vins was one among many dissidents and prisoners of conscience whose plight had been taken up by the WCC over the years. Vins, who had already been in prison 1966-69, was put on trial towards the end of 1974. In November of that year Philip Potter, General Secretary of the WCC, sent a letter in Vins' support to the Soviet authorities. This elicited no response. The WCC then issued a public pronouncement stating: 'We have reason to believe . . . that the charges against Mr Vins are made primarily because of his religious convictions and activities. We call upon the Government of the Soviet Union to contribute towards international understanding by according permission to a legal observer to attend the trial'. This plea was turned down and eventually Georgi Vins was sentenced to five years in prison to be followed by five years' internal exile.

His trial and his sentence roused great concern in the West and was the object of much protest. I myself became involved, chiefly because at that time I was serving as President of the European Baptist Federation (1974-76). The EBF in general and I myself in particular were faced with a rather delicate situation: Georgi Vins was leader of the Reformed Baptists who, for reasons that need not be reiterated here, were extremely critical of the All Union Baptists who, unlike themselves, were members of the WCC, the Baptist World Alliance and the European Baptist Federation. Relationships between the two Baptist groups were tense. For the President of the EBF to 'take up the cudgels' on behalf of Vins could be interpreted as a breach or even a betrayal of Christian fellowship. As one leading Russian Baptist said to me at the time, 'we thought you were our friend'. I felt, however, that some action had to be taken, despite the risk, and for the next

three years wrote copious letters to the All Union Council explaining my action and soliciting their understanding, to the Soviet authorities in Moscow and Kiev and to the Soviet Embassy in London, as well as making pleas through the medium of the Home and Overseas Programmes of the BBC. These were followed by personal interviews in London with the Soviet Embassy staff, in Moscow with Mr Viktor Titov, Deputy Chairman of the Soviet Union's Council for Religious Affairs, and in Kiev with Mr Litvin of the Ukraine Council for Religious Affairs. The interviews were courteous but firm. The contention of the Soviet authorities in each case was that Vins, like many other 'dissidents', was being imprisoned not because of his religious beliefs but because he had broken the law. My counter-argument was that the law was such that, at many points, it was altogether unfair to religious people and to Christian believers in particular. In this connection I felt obliged to write a long letter to the Soviet ambassador in London, spelling out in some detail what I saw as the limitations and restrictions involved in the application of the laws relating to religious affairs, using as evidence material contained in an important article on this topic written by Dr Walter Sawatsky, a Canadian Mennonite, whom I had come to know quite well through his work in Europe and at Keston College in England.

On the occasion of my visit to Kiev, I requested to be taken to Georgi Vins's church and on arrival there met his wife and members of their family. My request to preach was considered by the elders and approval was given. I was then able to convey assurance of the prayers of support of Baptists and others in the West and to preach a message of encouragement and hope. Many people in the West had been working tirelessly for Vins's release and in the end their efforts were rewarded. In 1979 he and four others were exchanged for two Russian spies and he was deported to the United States, where I met him a few weeks later at a reception in Washington given by the officers of the Baptist World Alliance.

It ought to be added that, in spite of the tensions that existed between the Reformed Baptists and those of the All Union Council, the officers of the latter body facilitated my visit to Georgi Vins's church and at various times made appeals to the authorities for those who had been persecuted and imprisoned from among the Reformed Baptists. The breach between them remained, but a number of Reformed Baptists, in course of time, began to associate again with their fellow Christians in the AUCECB.

Space does not permit more than the briefest reference to certain others, priests and laymen alike, within the Orthodox Church, who were bold enough to raise the voice of protest and who suffered imprisonment as a result of their stand. As early as 1965 Father Gleb Yakunin had written to the Patriarch pointing out ways in which the Government's own Council for the Affairs of the Orthodox Church in the USSR was itself contravening the laws of the Soviet Union on the separation of Church and State. In 1975, together with a young layman, Lev Regelson, he wrote an appeal to the delegates of the WCC Nairobi Assembly, drawing attention to the

suffering of the Church in the Soviet Union and asking for support in certain specific and specified ways. It was this letter that was chiefly instrumental in producing the debate on human rights and the Helsinki Final Act to which reference has been made above. In 1976 Yakunin, in company with two others, set up a Christian Committee for the Defence of Believers' Rights in the USSR. In 1979 he was arrested on a charge of 'anti-Soviet agitation and propaganda' and sentenced to five years in prison and five years in internal exile.

Another dissenting voice was that of Alexander Ogorodnikov who had established a religious/philosophical Seminar in Moscow. He too was arrested that same year and sentenced to six years' strict regime labour camp followed by four years' internal exile. A fourth name - among many others that could be mentioned - is that of Father Dimitri Dudko who made outspoken comment, not only at regular services of worship, but at a number of special Saturday evening events which drew large crowds. Eventually, after much harassment, he too was arrested in 1980 and charged with anti-Soviet agitation and propaganda. After some months in prison he made a confession, quite out of character it would seem, that he had failed to comply with patriarchal requirements concerning the Church's relations with the State. By 1980, then, the voice of Orthodox dissent was largely silenced.

Not so, however, the voice of the WCC itself and its constituent members. In 1980 Konrad Raiser, Acting General Secretary of that body, wrote to the Orthodox Church expressing the WCC's 'continuing pre-occupation' with the earlier arrests of Christian believers, mentioning by name Yakunin, Regelson, Ogorodnikov and Dudko, and commenting 'We find the kind of sentence pronounced in the trials already concluded to be disproportionate with the seriousness of the crimes which have allegedly been committed'. The matter surfaced again three years later at the sixth Assembly of the WCC in Vancouver, both in plenary session and in press interviews. It is worth noting that two years earlier the WCC had played a somewhat similar mediating role between the USA and the USSR in the matter of 'the Siberian Seven', a group of Pentecostals who had taken refuge in the American Embassy in Moscow.

These recollections and reflections seem far removed from the present-day situation in the new Russia. The changes that have taken place there in recent years are little short of miraculous, though new circumstances have brought new difficulties and dangers in their train. The 'Cold War' period, however, must not be forgotten, nor must those men and women, known and unknown, who despite many obstacles have run the race and kept the faith.

D. S. RUSSELL *General Secretary of the Baptist Union of Great Britain, 1967-82*

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For the joint conference of the Association of Denominational Historical Societies and Cognate Libraries, 28-30 July 1995, see inside back cover.