

Editorial

At last a book has appeared which gives a reliable and balanced picture of the religious situation in Eastern Europe. *Discretion and Valour* by Trevor Beeson was produced with the help of a working party of experts appointed in 1971 by the British Council of Churches. Trevor Beeson himself is an Anglican priest who has had experience as a professional journalist.

"The better part of valour is discretion" claims Falstaff in *Henry IV*. Trevor Beeson in his opening chapter defends both those in Eastern Europe who agree with Falstaff, adopting a policy of accommodation with the régime in power, and those who confront the authorities in an uncompromising manner, standing up for their convictions at great personal risk. Wisely he refuses to pass judgement on the behaviour and tactics of religious leaders and the faithful in Eastern Europe: "The dilemma how to serve the higher good when in the hour of trial has a poignant reality that words can never recapture nor outsiders ever really fathom, and those who stand at a safe distance are in no position to pass judgement" (p. 25). An attitude of humility is surely needed when approaching the experience of religious believers in Eastern Europe: "What can they teach us?" is the question to be posed, and Trevor Beeson through his painstaking research has provided Western readers with much material which can help answer this question.

Theoretically, religion as part of the "superstructure" should long ago have disappeared with the transformation of the economic "base". But in practice this has not happened. The Christian faith in the USSR, for example, is attracting more and more of the educated. Solzhenitsyn in a recent interview stated: "Religion in our country has spread much more widely, and its roots are much deeper here than in the West where nobody has tried to obstruct religion, where it has been entirely free. I am counting on this spiritual strength of our people, I am counting on those forces which are born out of suffering. . . . If, as in fairy-tale images, as in ancient legend, to acquire supernatural strength one must go through death, then we can say that Russia has passed through death and can now hear the voice of God". Indeed far from dying out, Christian faith is increasing. Opposition and suffering appear to have added to the spiritual power of the believing community.

So often either the dark or the light side of religious life in Eastern Europe is selected and a distorted picture produced. *Discretion and Valour* I think shows both sides: there is much joyful news in this book

as well as much which will grieve the heart. Above all Trevor Beeson reveals to the reader how varied and complex conditions are in the various countries of Eastern Europe. At one end of the spectrum stands Albania (see the article in this issue of *RCL* pp. 4-7), where the Party has ruthlessly stamped out religious life; but at the other end there is Poland and the GDR where Bibles are freely available, churches are open and ministers of religion can wear clerical dress openly. Between these two extremes there are many gradations.

On 5 February the General Synod of the Church of England held a debate on *Discretion and Valour*. *The Times* reported the next day: "The collective leadership of the Church of England yesterday declared the Church's solidarity with Christians in Eastern Europe and Russia". Having just returned from a visit to the USSR with Sir John Lawrence, I was deeply impressed at the way distance could not undermine the spiritual proximity which many Christians in this country feel in relation to their brethren in communist countries. A dialogue was taking place between East and West during this debate. The aim of *Discretion and Valour*, claimed Sir John Lawrence in his speech, was "to bring Christians closer to each other by helping religious believers in the West to understand what believers in the East are doing and what they have gone through". In his view the book was "not a 'one-off' project but part of a process by which the unity of the Body in East and West is realized". The Bishop of Manchester pointed out that the book was only a beginning and that there was a need for continuing study and regular information. It was exactly for this purpose that the CSRC had been created, but he stressed that unless financial support was offered to it and to its journal, *RCL*, neither could continue to exist for much longer.

Earlier this year, owing to the drastic drop in subscriptions, *RCL*'s Editorial Board with great regret decided that perhaps only two issues of the journal could be produced in 1975. But with more financial support *RCL* might yet flourish – so please help us.

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