

Comment

The Kremlin and the Vatican: *Ostpolitik*

Should the Vatican be negotiating with communist governments? Some of the Vatican's critics in the West still maintain that it should not. To negotiate with the communists will, they say, make sense only if and when communism has abandoned its claim to the monopoly of truth in theory and committed itself to some form of pluralism in practice. Until then, it is wiser to sit tight. On the communist side, the only regimes which absolutely refuse to have anything to do with the Vatican are the Chinese and the Albanian. Under its new post-Mao leadership, China may yet change its mind – and the Vatican clearly hopes that it will and is said to be making preparations for the moment when direct negotiations are possible. But the militantly anti-religious Albanian regime under its leader, Enver Hoxha, shows no sign of relenting. On the contrary, hardly a week passes without the Albanian press berating its “revisionist” rivals in the Soviet bloc for conspiring together with “that chieftain of the world’s reactionaries”, as the Albanian communists call the Pope.

The great merit of Professor Dunn's brief but closely argued essay (“The Kremlin and the Vatican: *Ostpolitik*” in *RCL* Vol. 4, No. 4, pp. 16–19) is to demonstrate all the different calculations on both the communist and the Catholic side which have gone into making the dialogue between the Kremlin and the Vatican. Clearly, both sides are still finding it worthwhile because Vatican emissaries continue to travel to East European capitals, while more and more communist leaders call on the Pope at the Vatican. Who has gained most from the decade and a half of papal *Ostpolitik*? It is obviously still too early to say, but an observer following the situation on the ground in Eastern Europe would find it hard to disagree with Professor Dunn's implied conclusion that, from the Catholic point of view, the results of the past decade of parleying with the communists have been modest. These results include one fairly good deal with the Tito regime in Yugoslavia; one with Hungary which was bought at the cost of the humiliation of Cardinal Mindszenty; and a rather disastrous one in

Czechoslovakia. Elsewhere, in Poland, East Germany, the Soviet Union, Romania and Bulgaria there has been little change.

Professor Dunn does not mention the Vatican's agreement with Yugoslavia. Yet in my view, that agreement represents the only solid achievement of the papal diplomacy to date – even though at the time the way it was reached (over the heads of the Catholic bishops in Yugoslavia) caused considerable bitterness. But it is no accident, as the communists would say, that the agreement was reached in 1966, the year when Yugoslavia embarked on a process of unprecedented liberalization which almost turned it into the first communist pluralist State in the world. Almost, but not quite, because in 1971 President Tito ordered a wholesale retreat from the liberalism and the tolerance of the preceding five years. Pressures on the bishops and the faithful have certainly increased since then as part of the general tightening-up, but open confrontation has been avoided. Characteristically, the main Catholic weekly, *Glas koncila* (*The Voice of the Council*) in Zagreb (Croatia), stated on 20 March that a four-hour long transmission about the Church on Zagreb television earlier in the month had “left the impression that responsible communists in this society want the faithful to feel as free men”. In February, the Archbishop of Zagreb, Mgr. Franjo Kuharic, delivered a sermon on the 17th anniversary of Cardinal Stepinac's death, in which he openly demanded an end to the insulting official practice of referring to the late Cardinal as a “war criminal”. There can be little doubt that the existence of the agreement with the Vatican has given the Church in Yugoslavia greater self-confidence in its dealings with the regime. The agreement has also probably held back the more militant elements within the regime who are anxious for a confrontation with the Church.

Progress was bound to be slower with the Soviet bloc regimes, which are less relaxed internally than Yugoslavia (until 1971 at any rate) and less in need of showing an acceptable face to the West. Professor Dunn asks whether, while adjusting to the realities of international politics, the Church may have sacrificed her moral principles. But, as he himself concedes, one of those principles is to deal with any power when this is necessary for spreading the Gospel and alleviating the lot of the local Church. So it would perhaps be more appropriate to ask whether the Church has made mistakes in this era of *Ostpolitik*. One mistake was the appointment of pro-regime bishops in Czechoslovakia in 1973. This was an unhappy compromise which caused consternation among Catholics in Czechoslovakia and elsewhere in Eastern Europe. Furthermore, the treatment meted out by the Vatican to Cardinal Mindszenty in 1974–75 has, at the very least, left a bad taste behind. In Poland, however, the Vatican has realized that any agreement reached without involving Cardinal Wyszynski would damage the Church in Poland. Many East European Catholics feared that the Vatican could, or would, overrule Cardinal Wyszynski

who runs one of the few really successful parts of contemporary Catholicism. But this danger has not materialized. So it could be argued that the Vatican's *Ostpolitik* has done some good after all, or, at the very least, no lasting harm.

But a new situation has arisen in Eastern Europe which is bound to complicate matters for the papal diplomats. The political ferment will probably go on. The struggle for human rights too will go on. It would be dangerous for the Roman Catholic Church to remain silent while others, non-Christians as well as Christians, bear witness to their convictions. Cardinal Wyszynski, in expressing his solidarity with the Polish workers persecuted after the 1976 June demonstrations, has shown yet again that he has understood what the Church's response should be to the new situation. But bishops in other East European countries will have to respond too. Otherwise they may risk being left behind by their flocks. It is to be hoped that the Vatican will not hold them back too much. If President Carter can so fearlessly and openly espouse human rights in communist countries, can the Pope afford to remain discreet?

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