

Comment

We reprint below letters on the subject of human rights in the Soviet Union and East-West dialogue. The bulk of the correspondence is between, on the one hand, Sir John Lawrence and Peter Reddaway, President and member respectively of Keston College's Council of Management, and on the other, Canon Paul Oestreicher, Assistant General Secretary of the British Council of Churches. The correspondence first appeared in issues of the Church Times last autumn, and is reprinted here with the permission of the editor. The final letter by Peter Reddaway was too long for inclusion in the Church Times and is published here for the first time.

The correspondence arose as a result of critical comments made about the work of Keston College by members of a seven-person delegation to the Soviet Union, which left on 31 August last year for a ten-day visit. On its return, a press conference was held at the office of the British Council of Churches (BCC) on 11 September. The delegation,

which visited the USSR at the invitation of the Soviet Peace Committee, was headed by Canon Oestreicher and included among its members Rev. Donald Reeves, rector of St James, Piccadilly, and Rev. Richard Harries, Dean of King's College, London. At the BCC press conference (to which Keston College was not invited), Rev. Donald Reeves reportedly said (according to the Church Times, 14 September): "It would be a great help if Keston College presented the full facts of religious life in Russia. I was led to believe that the churches were full of old women, but this is simply not so. I wish Keston would stop presenting us remorselessly with cases of human rights and acknowledge the religious revival in the Soviet Union." The ensuing correspondence follows. Not all the letters published in the Church Times are reprinted here, but those that are appear in full. Date of original publication is given in brackets.

Sir, — It is notoriously difficult to convey a balanced picture of the Soviet Union.

In your report last week of a visit of British Christians some remarks critical of Keston College were quoted. In fairness it should be said that, at the same conference, the leader of our delegation, Paul Oestreicher, also praised the work of Keston. The College performs a unique, invaluable service to the Churches.

There is pressure on religious believers in the Soviet Union at the moment. Yet, at the same time, churches can not only exist but flourish. It is this total picture that our delegation was trying to convey.

RICHARD HARRIES.
Dean.

King's College,
Strand, WC2.
(21 September)

Sir, — If the Rev. Donald Reeves was correctly quoted in your front-page report of 14 September as saying, on his return from Moscow, "I wish Keston [College] would stop presenting us remorselessly with cases of human rights and acknowledge the religious revival in the Soviet Union," then could I, as a co-founder of Keston, ask him to read its publications more carefully?

Ever since Keston's birth, virtually every book, article and talk by, for example, its chairman, Sir John Lawrence, and director, the Rev. Michael Bourdeaux, has not just acknowledged the religious revival but rejoiced about it. So have I—most recently in a one-hour TV discussion on religion in Russia screened by the NBC network in America.

As we have pointed out many times, it is precisely this revival which leads the insecure imperialistic regime in the Kremlin

(which is holding down Eastern Europe, Afghanistan and other countries by force with its four million troops) to discriminate against all citizens who publicly confess their faith, to persecute those who oppose this discrimination on grounds of conscience, to outlaw some churches, and closely to control the leaderships of the churches it sanctions.

In the last five years the number of Soviet Baptists in prison has gone up sharply from thirty-five to almost two hundred. Other denominations have suffered a roughly similar deterioration in their position (but with lower figures both in 1979 and now). Reporting such developments may seem "remorseless". But who is responsible for the developments?

Canon Paul Oestreicher calls them but "a fragment of the full picture of religious life in the Soviet Union," and accuses Keston of presenting "selective and negative news". Did he argue this case to the wife of the Baptist prisoner whom he met? Or to the many religious communities to which prisoners of all denominations belong? Apparently not. Might that have been a bit more difficult than talking with the Kremlin-backed Soviet Peace Committee and giving a press-conference (to which Keston was not invited) in the comfortable surroundings of the British Council of Churches?

As an ex-President of the British section of Amnesty International, Mr Oestreicher would presumably not want Keston to ignore the prisoners and their appeals as being "negative news". So his main charge appears to be selectivity; Keston allegedly suppresses good, positive news.

If he would (a) try to document this supposed pattern of suppression and (b) recall the years when he served on Keston's council, he would realise that this charge is un-

fair. When a tense situation of conflict exists, the hard-news stories it generates far outnumber, inevitably, the news stories relating to the religious revival.

Analogous situations exist all over the world — for example, in South Africa's black townships. Keston's council has regularly discussed how to mitigate this intractable problem, and one of the answers has been the heavy emphasis (mentioned above) which is put on the religious revival in all suitable contexts.

On peace issues, too, Mr Oestreicher's group seems to have been regrettably one-sided. Impressed by the deep Soviet desire for peace, it was convinced that the arms race "has been fuelled more by the West than the East".

It may be useful here to mention two points. First, when a big group from America's National Council of Churches made a similar trip to the USSR in June, it too met the Soviet Peace Committee and allied bodies. The Americans so predisposed reacted like Mr Oestreicher. Other, more open-minded members like the Rev. Dr William Howland of Washington, DC, reported that "When we got the chance to ask probing questions, which was not often, we got canned, predigested replies. And we got the same ones everywhere we were allowed to ask the questions."

Second, although Canon Oestreicher's group did visit members of the main *independent* Soviet group which has a special concern for peace, he failed to mention at the press conference how severely it is persecuted for its peace work, and also to report that it does not share his own view about responsibility for the arms race.

PETER REDDWAY,

Senior Lecturer in Political Science,
London School of Economics.
(28 September)

Sir, — Peter Reddaway is right to remind your readers that Keston College has not failed to point to the religious revival that — in one form and another — characterises many communities in the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe. Nor is he wrong in his passionate defence of Keston's relentless and accurate documentation of the infringement of religious liberty in the Soviet Union. My own commitment to the many victims of these injustices is as unequivocal today as it was in my years as Amnesty's chairman in Britain.

Where then do we part ways? That becomes evident from Peter Reddaway's sneering dismissal of the slow and difficult process of dialogue that characterised my recent visit to the Soviet Union. On that visit my colleagues and I left our Soviet hosts in no doubt where we stood on the issue of human rights. The fact that we sacrificed some of the delights of Russian culture to the much more important task of visiting those whom we knew to be in trouble with the authorities was one way, but not the only one, of making our position clear.

Keston, at our request, had briefed us well.

But we had come as friends. Our task was one of reconciliation. We had come as committed opponents of a cold war and of an arms race that threatens the future of the whole human family. We went to Russia with love, love for its rulers, as well as commitment to the plight of the victims of Soviet rule.

That is a difficult role in which it is easy to be misunderstood by both sides. It is a role demanded by our obedience to Christ. Loving those often defined as enemies is costly and has nothing in common with appeasement. Our attitude is well defined in Pope John XXIII's encyclical, *Peace on Earth*.

What is lacking in Keston's implicit anti-communism is any true sense of Christian humility. There is not a single crime in Soviet communism's unenviable record that does not also characterise many Christian regimes, past and present, often when the church itself has exercised or shared power. The growth of religion is by no means always good news. To many it is what spells suffering and death, fanaticism and fear.

Good news is when communists begin to recognise that Christians are not the enemies of socialism, and that atheism is no necessary part of a communist society. In some places that is beginning to happen.

There are many setbacks, and both sides are to blame. Change for the better, if it is to come, will only come when fear diminishes and the cold war recedes; when we learn that loving our opponents, even the persecutors of the church, is the only way to the Kingdom . . . and to human survival.

Perfect love casts out fear. Even our imperfect love, by God's grace, can bring the day nearer when Christians and communists learn that vilifying and persecuting each other is no legitimate part of either creed.

In Russia we spent much of our time in explaining the very real fears of the west. Our hosts did not enjoy what we had to say, but generally listened with patience. Fear of the west in the Soviet Union is every bit as real, and now, to my own astonishment, is even shared by many dissidents.

All this, and much besides, is highly relevant to the promotion of a more open and humane Soviet society. To take account of that would be to add a whole new dimension to Keston's important work. Religious liberty will not spring from the rocky ground of peace through fear.

(Canon) PAUL OESTREICHER,
Assistant General Secretary, British
Council of Churches.

(5 October)

Sir, — As one of the founders of Keston College, and now its President, I have been trying for some time to understand just what it is that my old friend, Paul Oestreicher, has against Keston.

His letter in your issue of 5 October helps me a little but still leaves some perplexities. After stressing all that we have in common he makes the criticism that we lack both "true Christian humility", and love of our enemies. Of course we fall short here, as do all men. I must say "Lord, I love, help thou my lack of love". But what is the "cash value" of that? Canon Oestreicher says that every crime of Soviet communism characterises "many Christian regimes, past and present". I can see that from time to time a reference to wrongs committed in the name of religion can help to give perspective, but to suggest some equivalence seems to me like comparing chicken-pox with small-pox.

Canon Oestreicher goes on to say that "Good news is when communists begin to recognise that Christians are not the enemies of socialism, and that atheism is no

necessary part of a communist society. In some places that is beginning to happen." It is a fact that in the Soviet Union Christians are not the enemies of socialism, but I see no sign that the Communist Party recognises this, and I would like to know where in Eastern Europe Canon Oestreicher finds his evidence that atheism is not considered a necessary part of communism? There are Christian socialists and even Christian Marxists, but Leninist Marxism has always claimed that atheism is a necessary part of Marxism, and in that, if in nothing else, the regimes of Eastern Europe have practised what they preach.

Leninist Marxism and no other kind of socialism is what we have to deal with in Keston's field of study. Personally I believe that one day the leopard will change his spots, and then I will rejoice with Paul Oestreicher, but in the meantime, how can I?

JOHN LAWRENCE,

24 St Leonard's Terrace,
London SW3.

Sir, — The Rev. Paul Oestreicher, whom I regard as a friend, kindly acknowledges my criticism of one of his colleagues, but then, rather than answer directly the points I put to him, argues the traditional case for perfect love and total pacifism.

I do not for a moment doubt his sincerity, and I did not intend to sneer. But, not accepting this case, I do sincerely believe that his approach — when applied in his way to the Soviet regime — probably does harm to the causes that he and I both try to serve.

As someone whose job it has been for twenty years to try to understand the aims and methods of the Kremlin leaders, I believe that the latter are encouraged in their intransigence by the overall outcome of Moscow visits like Mr Oestreicher's, and the persecuted, taken as a whole, are discouraged.

I have argued this case at some length elsewhere, in relation to the similar approach of America's National Council of Churches, so will add here only two brief points.

First, I am, alas, convinced that the Soviet leaders are just as impervious to this sort of approach as were the Stalinist regime (to which most of them were apprenticed) and the Nazi regime. Second, at least one of Mr Oestreicher's travelling-companions re-

gards (with every justification) the head of the Soviet Peace Committee, which invited the British group to the USSR, as a hardened and cynical bureaucrat who has no interest in genuine dialogue.

As for Keston College, I honestly doubt whether future historians will join Canon Oestreicher in rebuking it for its "implicit anti-communism", any more than they will rebuke those who expressed implicit anti-Nazism in the 1930s. Moreover, it is sad that, as a reconciler, he now adds a further sweeping moral criticism of Keston by accusing it of lacking "any true sense of Christian humility". Humility before the witness of Soviet Christians has always been a central theme of Keston's work, just as it was of the Rev. Michael Bourdeaux's Templeton Prize address ("We've lost our nerve in affluence; they've discovered it in persecution").

Finally, your readers might like to know that, although Mr Oestreicher writes to you as an officer of the British Council of Churches, he would not want to imply that his views are those of the Council as a whole.

PETER REDDAWAY.

Senior Lecturer in Political Science,
London School of Economics.
(19 October)

Sir, — Sir John Lawrence and Peter Reddaway, whose friendship I value, are doing more than join in a personal debate between myself and Keston College, of which I remain a critical supporter. At issue are alternative ways of conducting an essential East-West dialogue, of contributing to the maintenance of peace and of affirming human rights.

In defending our recent journey to the Soviet Union I was stating a view of dialogue that has been implicit in the policy of the British Council of Churches and significant sections of the churches for the past generation. The Archbishop of Canterbury has eloquently pleaded for such dialogue, for the need to abandon the hostile rhetoric of the Cold War and for the need to love our enemies.

This is by no means, as Peter Reddaway suggests, an exclusively pacifist position. At most three of our party of seven would count themselves as pacifists — certainly not Richard Harries, on this issue an old theological sparring-partner of mine. He is as firmly committed to the dialogue and

more skilled at it than most of us.

If Peter Reddaway is saying that dialogue needs to be truthful and hard-headed, he is right. That goes well with being kind-hearted. I, too, in this context, have on occasion been critical of some of our more naive American colleagues. But Peter Reddaway is quite wrong to single out a "hardened and cynical" Soviet bureaucrat as characteristic of an unchangeable system which he compares to that of Nazi Germany.

That is the "empire of evil" approach which, if we act on it, is liable to turn into a self-fulfilling prophecy. If, as Sir John hopes, the leopard is eventually to change his spots, that will depend, in no small measure, on whether we expect and promote change or, through our hostility, impede it.

Keston's "humility before the witness of Soviet Christians" is not in doubt. The truest spiritual sisters and brothers of these Christians in Britain are those most ready, at cost to themselves, to challenge the evils in our society. The women of Greenham are only one example.

On the need for Christian humility towards communists I remain adamant. A long history of cruel Christian persecution of dissenters — not the writings of Marx — provided Lenin and Stalin with their models. Those many in this century and in many parts of the world prepared to imprison and torture real and imagined communists in defence of what they believe to be Christian civilisation (and even to risk nuclear genocide in that cause) provide me with more evidence than I need. Even discounting past centuries, today's impartial Amnesty reports (resented by Right and Left

alike) make all too clear that comparing Christian and communist betrayals of their respective aspirations is to compare small-pox with small-pox.

If my previous letter was written very much as a servant of the BCC, let me today sign much more personally as one Anglican and Quaker Christian with a great deal to learn, especially from those with whom I am privileged to debate.

(Canon) PAUL OESTREICHER,

50 Handen Road
Lee Green, SE12
(2 November)

Sir, — Paul Oestreicher is right that our correspondence is about “alternative ways of conducting an essential East-West dialogue, of contributing to the maintenance of peace, and of affirming human rights”.

As a radical pacifist, Mr Oestreicher sincerely believes in seeking reconciliation with opponents, even if their ultimate response is to put him (and millions of others) in death-camps or gas chambers. Not very many Christians share this belief.

I, too, believe strongly in reconciliation and compromise, but not beyond the point where this means trying to appease the unappeasable. Here the main need is for non-violent (or even ultimately violent) resistance to evil.

Dialogue remains essential, of course, in our dangerous world, and conscientious professional diplomats conduct it every day with the USSR in scores of countries and dozens of forums. So when concerned amateurs like Mr Oestreicher's group join in (giving themselves the somewhat grandiose title of peacemakers, which seems to imply that the professionals are less keen on peace than they, and also that a secure peace is indisputably attainable, given enough moral commitment), one prays that they do not fall into the traps set by the Soviet professionals with whom they inevitably deal. To be authentic, dialogue must take place not just with such officials, and not on terms dictated by them.

The standard aims of these professionals include the following: (a) to persuade the visiting delegation to believe that the Soviet group is autonomous of the government (though admittedly supportive of it) and composed of deeply sincere individuals; (b) to prevent the visitors from making contacts

with unofficial groups such as dissidents, on the grounds that these represent no-one, or even harbour criminals; (c) if the delegation insists on raising cases of imprisoned dissidents, to tell it not to expect any positive response unless publicity is avoided and “quiet diplomacy” strictly observed; (d) to tell it on a subsequent visit that a particular individual was freed from prison as a gesture of friendship, but only because it had observed this stricture (when, in reality, the release was governed by other considerations, and would have occurred anyway); (e) to woo the delegation in every possible way through sumptuous banquets, flattering speeches, the conferring of special awards on key members, etc; (f) to tell the visitors that certain disreputable organisations in the west are impeding the improvement of relations, and it would be helpful if these could be publicly criticised by the visitors on their return home; (g) to persuade them that — both in Moscow and at home — their greatest contribution to peace would be public criticism of the USA, but *not* of the USSR (as whatever criticisms they might have made privately in Moscow would only be compromised if they became public); and (h) to make clear to the visitors that they will continue to be classed as “peace-loving”, and therefore acceptable for ongoing exchanges, only if they respond well to the above requirements.

This June the Rev. Bruce Rigdon and the other leaders of a large American church delegation which visited the USSR, duly fell for all (but one) of these well-worn ploys. Canon Oestreicher's group, as shown in your report of its press-conference (14 September), and the resulting correspondence, was more cautious, but nonetheless succumbed to at least half of them.

Thereby, as one of the group's members has privately admitted to me, it turned itself into a useful tool of Soviet propaganda. Hence my view that the enormously powerful Kremlin must have been pleased at the outcome, and its weak and vulnerable victims — especially the Baptists and independent peace campaigners whose desperate plight was ignored at the press conference — forlorn.

This result was, in my view, the opposite of what is required, if change for the better is ever to come about in the exceptionally rigid Soviet system. Such change requires steadfast resistance to Soviet opposition and imperialism, from within and without, plus a constant readiness for genuine mutual compromise on every occasion when the Kremlin (finding this resistance uncomfortable) opts for it. Surely this is the major lesson — inadequately learned in the west — of 67 years of Soviet communism.

The lesson is also demonstrated, in penetrating depth, in the new book

Nomenklatura: The Soviet Ruling Class: An Insider's Report, by Professor Michael Voslensky. Through a mixture of historical analysis and first-hand experience, Voslensky brings out brilliantly the monolithic nature and implacable politico-military expansionism of the ruling class to which he belonged. He was, incidentally, among other things, a highly placed official of different sections of the government-sponsored Soviet peace movement, until he could not endure the manipulation, lies and hypocrisy any longer, and defected.

I honestly believe that if Mr Oestreicher and his fellow-thinkers could read this book with an open mind, and think through its conclusions in similar fashion, they might have second thoughts about how best to pursue the aims listed in paragraph one above.

Yours in conclusion,

PETER REDDAWAY.

Senior Lecturer in Political Science.
London School of Economics.

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