

Editorial

On pp. 131-51 we publish a carefully-argued article on the World Council of Churches' relationship with its member-churches in communist countries. The author, Dr Hans Hebly, has had a distinguished career in the ecumenical movement. His article provides an excellent sequel to Michael Bourdeaux's article on the same subject in our last issue. Where Mr Bourdeaux wrote as a specialist on church life in Eastern Europe, Dr Hebly writes as an "insider", a longstanding member and consultant of the WCC, and has some constructive proposals to make regarding ways out of the WCC's present dilemma. He demonstrates that the attitude of the WCC towards churches in communist countries has changed since the days of its founding fathers, which has led to inconsistencies in its identity over a period of time, or "diachronic identity". He is especially critical of the role of the Churches' Commission on International Affairs (CCIA) and suggests that member-churches might function more effectively without it. His chief recommendation is that member-churches should take more responsibility in adopting an informed and responsible approach in bilateral relations with churches in communist countries, and not allow full responsibility for the nature of those relations to devolve upon the WCC.

We have been disappointed at the lack of response to Michael Bourdeaux's lecture, which, it was hoped, would generate constructive public debate. The WCC has decided not to respond publicly (as noted in our last editorial) and such private comments as its officials have made do not, unfortunately, include any clarification of or constructive comment on the issues raised by Mr Bourdeaux. A background paper prepared by the British Council of Churches contains sections critical of some aspects of his lecture, and this is being sent privately by WCC staff in Geneva to enquirers: but as it is marked "Not for publication" it cannot be considered a contribution to public debate. It is to be hoped that talks in London at the end of June involving WCC staff-members and the BCC will see the overdue start of such a debate. It would be a pity if public discussion on an issue of such crucial importance to the ecumenical movement should con-

tinue to be impeded by institutional defensiveness — a point tellingly made by Dr Hebly in his article.

The only constructive comment so far has been made, very ably, by Professor Nicolas Lossky in Paris, a member of the WCC's Faith and Order Commission (*Service Orthodoxe de Presse* No. 96, March 1985). Professor Lossky strongly defends both the lecture and the work of Keston College as a whole: in conclusion, he disagrees with Michael Bourdeaux over the feasibility of the WCC's establishing contacts with the confessing or unofficial churches in Eastern Europe, and suggests that the WCC should announce that, if they cannot have a completely frank discussion of human rights issues, they will not discuss them at all.

It is unfortunately the case that public criticism of international church bodies such as the WCC often leads to the critics being castigated as "anti-ecumenical". This phrase often amounts to no more than a convenient label to stick on one's opponents in the hope of earning them the opprobrium of persons uninformed as to the nature of their criticism. Such designations have the damaging implication that bodies such as the WCC have a monopoly of ecumenical spirit. In this case, however, such a charge could not possibly be made to stick. Nothing could be closer to the spirit of true ecumenism than an insistence that the voices of *all* church members in communist countries, and not only those of a handful of church leaders, should be heard. Furthermore, Dr Hebly's record of active involvement in the ecumenical movement, and his reasoned approach, should obviate any such superficiality.

On pp. 221-27 we publish extracts from a *samizdat* life of Sevastian, a *starets* (elder, or spiritual guide) of the Russian Orthodox Church. This moving account of his fatherly care for his "spiritual children", his pastoral concern for those in need, and his spiritual depth and insight, reflect the greatest qualities of the spiritual tradition of his church, and the irreplaceable role which it still has in the life of its people. Even as the Russian Orthodox Church, as the largest member-church of the WCC, continues to be the object of misunderstanding, suspicion and often ignorance abroad, dedicated Christians like *starets* Sevastian are demonstrating by the very fabric of their lives that what is best from their past is not only relevant but indispensable to the future of their country.