

# Editorial

Two articles in this issue of *RCL* illustrate how emergent communist regimes have dealt with, or planned to deal with, the churches. Czechoslovakia in the post-war period and Grenada in the early 1980s were very different, but there were many points of similarity in the attitudes and policies the new regimes adopted towards religion. Both articles are based on detailed documentation subsequently obtained from party sources. Karel Kaplan, a former party official who worked in the Historical Institute of the Czechoslovak Academy of Sciences, brought with him extensive documentation from the party archives when he emigrated in 1976. His lengthy article (to be serialised over three issues of *RCL*) gives an almost day-by-day account of discussions between government and party leaders and the hierarchy of the Roman Catholic Church. The Grenada documents, found after the controversial American invasion of the island in October 1983, show that the regime had detailed plans for curtailing the influence of the churches. The similarity between the general strategies of the two newly-fledged regimes is striking. In each case, the new regime believed it essential to subjugate the churches and limit their influence on the people in order to consolidate its power.

This raises the question of the general attitude of ruling communist parties towards religion. Whatever communists of different stripes may say in theory about their attitude to religion, in practice no communist party has taken power without at best severe tension and conflict between the regime and the churches, and at worst wholesale slaughter. Yet it still continues to be debated whether communists and Christians can co-exist, and even work together, and the question is a legitimate one. Is communism inherently anti-religious? Some communists would say no, though more, probably, would say yes. Undoubtedly it was Lenin who injected the virulent personal hostility towards religion which has been the hallmark of twentieth century communism in many countries. But Marx himself did not propose the violent destruction of religion — he thought it was obsolete and was certain to die a natural death under a new economic order — and so it

has sometimes been argued that communism, in theory at any rate, is a-religious rather than anti-religious. Why has there been a gulf between theory and practice?

It is sometimes impossible to distinguish the extent to which a given communist regime is opposed to religion as such, and the extent to which it simply wants total political control. All present-day communist regimes are in effect one-party states, and so the importance of the latter factor cannot be overlooked. If the churches in a given country hold the allegiance of many or most of the people, then that allegiance must be broken, by fair means or foul, in order to supplant it with allegiance to some variant of Marxism. In taking this stance, communist regimes, consciously or not, tend to view the churches as another form of political party, and therefore as potential or actual rivals for political power. Communism, which sees Christianity merely as an alternative ideology, is incapable of taking seriously any non-political contributions to the life of a country. This attitude often forces churches into a "political" stance, whether or not they want to adopt one. Under a communist regime, everything is "political" because everything is politicised.

This factor perhaps underlies differing interpretations of the celebrations in Velehrad, Czechoslovakia, on which we reported in the last issue. In the *Comment* section (pp. 77-80) a correspondent who was present argues that this was a purely religious, not a "political" demonstration. However, given the circumstances outlined above, it is perhaps not always easy to disentangle the two.

On pp. 105-11, a Hungarian Marxist philosopher speaks approvingly of the adoption by the Reformed and Lutheran churches of diakonia theology or the "theology of service". This holds that the church's rôle is to work for the well-being of mankind and to act as a servant to the communist society surrounding it. In Hungary, at any rate among leaders of the major churches (dissenters having been vigorously suppressed), this has led to an unqualified endorsement of Marxist-Leninist socialism. The churches, then, have avoided being forced into a "political" opposition rôle, thus in a sense overcoming the problem of political confrontation between church and state. And yet in practice they have been able to do this only by endorsing the political system in power.

There will probably never be any final answers to some of the problems of church-state relations under any form of government. In the communist countries which fall within the purview of *RCL*, however, we do well to remember that debate over the merits of differing belief systems can never be extricated from the realities of power politics.

March 1986

J.E.