

Editorial

What is the essence of church-state relations in a communist country? The material brought together in this issue of *RCL* demonstrates clearly that no simple answer can be given which will apply to all such countries at all times. Bishop Schönherr (pp. 126-34) reports positively on ten years of coexistence in East Germany; here, in his view, a stable basis for church-state relations has been achieved. By contrast, the situation in Hungary is in rapid flux and the outcome unpredictable, while in the Soviet Union rumours of changes, in the spirit of *perestroika*, have yet to show concrete results.

The four items relating the religious life in Hungary in this issue of *RCL* are like four snapshots taken at different stages in a race. The Politburo resolution of 1958 (pp. 179-86) sets out the premises of the Hungarian government's religious policy over the last 30 years. In his book reviewed on pp. 154-57, Vilmos Vajta criticises what he sees as a timid theological response to the expectations of the Hungarian state as developed over the same period by the leadership of the Lutheran Church in Hungary — “*diakonia* theology”, or “theology of service” — which in Vajta's view amounts to a full identification of the Christian social ideal with that of the socialist state. Indeed, in the summer of 1987 Dr Sándor Boros, deputy head of the party's Agitprop department, seemed to be inviting the churches to be bold in taking initiatives of their own in the best interests of Hungarian society. In the interview on pp. 146-53 he accepts “competition for hearts and minds” from the religious communities in Hungary: his view is that the question as to which will have the greater number of adherents — the churches or the party — will depend on “the capacity to convince”. Finally, the most recent developments in Hungary, since early 1988, are outlined in the *Chronicle* item “A New Primate: A New Policy?” on pp. 164-68: the recently revived leadership of the Roman Catholic Church seems to have abandoned its policy of “small steps” in favour of one of “giant steps”, asking the state to consider a range of concessions which, if granted, could mean a

fundamentally new relationship between the churches and the state. It appears that the bishops may have been encouraged in their boldness by the Hungarian Prime Minister and reformist elements within the government, anxious to establish a broad constituency amongst non-party members in order better to weather the political repercussions of the country's grave economic crisis and to obtain support in the impending struggle to succeed János Kádár.

In the Soviet Union there have been rumours for at least two years now that the government envisages a revision of the 1929 Law on Religious Associations, which to this day remains the basic piece of legislation governing religious activity in that country. Until early this year, many Western observers were expecting that changes in this legislation would be announced at the time of, or even before, the Millennium celebrations in June, but recent information indicates that no changes are now likely before 1989. The uncertainty over when changes will be made and how far-reaching they will be no doubt reflects differences of opinion within the Soviet leadership itself, but bishops of the Orthodox Church are known to be involved in negotiations over legal reform and hard bargaining is no doubt going on. The article by John Dunlop (pp. 100-16) surveys a range of substantial concessions which religious believers in the Soviet Union would like to see forthcoming from the secular authorities before they will be convinced of the "reality of future *perestroika*".

As the publicity and propaganda surrounding the Millennium celebrations in the Soviet Union begin to subside we need to remind ourselves constantly of the fact that although it has often been hinted that fundamental reform in church-state relations in the Soviet Union is imminent, nothing has yet been put in writing. The danger is that as world attention is once again diverted away from religious believers in the Soviet Union, the promised legal reforms will be indefinitely deferred.

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