

Editorial

The changes that have swept across Central and Eastern Europe in recent months are the product of a host of political, economic and social undercurrents that have been gathering pace for two decades or more. Equally important has been the fact that, at a time when these strains and tensions were coming to a head, the USSR underwent a succession struggle out of which emerged a leader acutely aware of the need for change in the region. Under Gorbachev, and to some extent with his encouragement, society learnt to breathe again and increasingly took on a life of its own. The aim was to overcome alienation between state and society. In the satellite countries this meant leaving the local leaderships to find their own legitimacy without the aid of Soviet tanks. The problem, as it turned out, was that they had no legitimacy!

If it was the socio-economic problems facing the Soviet bloc that were more obvious at the beginning of the 1980s, it should be pointed out that these countries were also facing a 'moral crisis'. The failure of post-totalitarian systems to create a 'new man', the pervasiveness of the 'lie', and what Gorbachev called the 'gap between words and deeds' were plain to see. And in this situation religious ideas and even institutions proved increasingly attractive in many of these countries from the late 1960s onwards. In practice the semi-tolerated position of religious bodies in communist systems brought its own problems, as believers and church leaders sought to balance accommodation and protest. Nevertheless, and leaving aside theological motivations, many saw in the churches a source of alternative values.

On occasions religious individuals and institutions have acted more directly in resisting or opposing the ruling communist parties. In Poland and East Germany, albeit in very different ways, the churches provided a shelter and protecting veil for nascent civil society. More recently, the Polish Catholic Church played a key role in the round table talks which left Poland with a Catholic premier; the East German churches gave shelter and protection to those

demonstrating against the Honecker regime; and in Romania it was the clumsy attempt to evict Pastor László Tókes from his church which provided the spark for revolution. (In June we shall produce a thematic issue of *RCL* devoted wholly to the question of religion and change in the Soviet bloc.)

And yet there can be no Christian triumphalism here, for the churches have not been the main instruments in the ending of tyranny, nor have Christians been the only advocates of spiritual and moral renewal. Indeed, some of the most coherent defences of the need to 'live in truth' have come from secular intellectuals, men like Václav Havel who have grown to appreciate the moral values associated with Christianity whilst feeling unable to describe themselves as believers. The failure of the attempt to create from above a 'new man' has destroyed the belief in human perfectibility and the inevitability of progress. And this 'turn of the tide' has in turn brought closer together those who wish to 'live in truth', believers or otherwise, and stimulated a moral resistance that surely contributed to the collapse of the party states of Eastern Europe.

In any revolution the first part is usually the easiest, for destruction of the old is simpler than creating the new. Adopting the economics of the IMF and the Adam Smith Institute will bring its own difficulties, whilst democratic forms cannot solve every problem, even assuming that they can be evolved. And if, as Havel has suggested, the 'post-totalitarian system' is only an extreme aspect of the incapacity of 20th-century humanity to adapt to its new situation in a world dominated by technology, some form of spiritual renaissance is essential. And this requires that the churches look outwards, away from their internecine conflicts — which may well be exacerbated by political freedom — and towards the wider world.

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