

INTOLERANCE AND TOLERANCE ARE HISTORICAL PHENOMENA

By Paul Peachey

The U.S. Catholic Bishops' "Statement on Religious Freedom in Eastern Europe" is a carefully reasoned and reasonable document. Assimilated by the constituencies to which it is addressed, it can contribute to the perestroika of U.S. attitudes and policies toward the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe that history now demands. Whether the regimes whose policies are criticized by this statement will also find the bishops' words reasonable or conducive to dialogue remains to be seen. In any case, the Marxist-Leninist regimes in Eastern Europe clearly need continued prodding.

The occasion for the statement, namely the commemoration of the establishment of Christianity in several countries, is appropriate. While the millenium of the baptism of Prince Vladimir of Kiev in 987 has likely received the most attention internationally, important historical milestones were being observed in Hungary, Latvia, Lithuania, and Moravia. With special attention thus focused on Christianity, raising the issues of religious freedom appears timely.

Nevertheless, for a statement occasioned by historical commemoration, the bishops' appeal is remarkably ahistorical in its reasoning. Admittedly the statement stresses the "complex historical, cultural, religious and political factors unique to each country" that must be taken into account. Moreover, there are many historical allusions, especially in the country-by-country review section of the paper. But the latter serve primarily as identifying markers, hardly as substantive disclosures. To be sure, strictures against religion in Soviet and Soviet-style regimes are ideologically inspired, and thus can be challenged in those terms. Yet in the end, ideology can be repealed more readily than the history and culture that reinforce it.

Obviously a bishops' statement is not a treatise in history. This statement, however, needs a bow to history in two directions, first in recognizing the continuities in the suppression of dissent before and after the October Revolution. There are differences, to be sure, nor do pre-revolutionary practices excuse present-day abuses. But historical awareness is essential to a sympathetic understanding from the outside, and this statement might well have alerted its audience to this fact.

More importantly, the statement could have been enhanced by a recognition of the ambiguity of the history of organized Christianity with regard to religious freedom. The record of established churches over the centuries in this regard, whether Orthodox, Roman Catholic, or Protestant, is hardly exemplary in this regard. Indeed, sobering parallels can be drawn between church and regime in earlier centuries in western Europe and party and regime in the Soviet system today. Moreover, adjusting for language and content, arguments against religious pluralism in the sixteenth century West are similar to those employed by Party officials and ideologists in the Soviet Union in the twentieth, at least until recently. In neither case were the protagonists of establishment able to imagine political cohesion without ideological uniformity. Civil insurrection seemed implicit in religious or ideological dissent appeared as it. Similarly, the wrath of modern revolutionaries against institutional religion finds some justification in the legitimating ties of religion to pre-revolutionary privilege.

At another point, however, the bishops' statement rightly invokes the logic of historical development. On the one hand, appropriately enough, it invokes the church's own teaching in defense of religious freedom: "Religious liberty is unique among the many essential requirements of human dignity because its object is an individual's relationship with God, the ultimate end of the human person" (p. 416). On the other hand, when speaking generally, the writers invoke various international conventions, such as the UN Declaration of Human Rights and the Helsinki Accords.. In this vein they speak in their concluding paragraph of "religious persecution and intolerance" as "unvenerated relics of an unhappy past, anachronisms with no place in modern societies" (emphasis added).

Tolerance for diversity of beliefs and practices is a socio-historical achievement. Societies, at whatever scale or level, must achieve both stability and diversity if they are to be tolerant. Globally,

tolerance is still a precarious achievement, because many societies are not yet at that stage. This affords no excuse for intolerance. To the contrary, growing global interdependence and consensus must surely speed the process. The U.S. Catholic bishops' statement is good news.

CATHOLIC GLASNOST - BY ALL MEANS

By

Robert Tobias

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The American Roman Catholic bishops' "Statement on Religious Freedom in Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union" is a small beginning step forward in Catholic-East European relationships.

While it sees a general pattern of intolerance, hostility and repression of religion in East Europe, albeit without very careful documentation, it also sees some more hopeful realities.

The bishops identify and commend some positive possibilities represented in glasnost and perestroika, herald the rise to power of new political leadership, commend some specific progressive measures in certain countries, recognize that disarmament and improved political relations will go hand in hand with improved religious freedoms.

What the Catholic bishops do not do is to recognize Rome's own share of culpability for East European leaders' distrust of Rome and Rome's apparent imperialistic intentions. For example, the Statement makes a great deal of the continued status of illegality of the Eastern Catholic (Uniate) Church in the Ukraine, and virtually that in Rumania. But the Statement does not mention that these churches were once Orthodox and became "Roman" by their forced conversion in 1595/1915-16 and 1698 respectively. What is to the American bishops (and Uniate refugees) disallowed legal status, is in Rumania since 1948 regarded as "voluntary re-integration" into their mother church. In this, as in many other matters, Rome has an obligation to exercise its own glasnost - honest openness - if it wishes to have a new base of trust on which perestroika - re-structuring - towards religious freedom can take place.

When Rome is ready to sit down with Eastern governments, lay on the table its own sad history of feudal oppression (10 million acres of serfdom in Hungary alone), concordats with oppressive regimes, participation in political intrigue and suppression with Dollfuss in Austria, Pilsudski in Poland, Mussolini in Italy, condemnation over the past 200 years of every major statesman in Italy (Massini, Garibaldi, Cadorus, Umberto, D'Szeglio) until Mussolini whom it did not condemn, support of the Nazi German invasion of Russia from the west and Fascist invasion from the south, collaboration in war crimes through Cardinal Stepinac in Yugoslavia, exercise of authoritarian methods and doctrinaire content in education, marriages and press wherever Catholicism holds strong power and influence, manipulation of political decisions through Christian (Catholic) Democratic Parties. Rome will have to deal openly with that side of its history if it expects credibility from Communists, some of them its former victims, concerning its own "new leaf" and a restored "religious freedom" which will not be grossly abused. The American bishops could probably help make that happen, though their Statement's pretense to being innocent victims while calling on U.S. diplomacy to pick up their cudgels will hardly prove to Communists that Rome has changed.

The bishops' "starting point for action"... "is to inform ourselves." Fine, the whole story. "We must respond to the dire need or education about the complex realities of the situation.... avoid the polemics, over-simplifications and self-righteousness which are so tempting in this area." Fine. That means to get acquainted in open dialogue with what East Europeans have experienced at the hands of Rome.

But what the American bishops can probably best do is to demonstrate in this land how a Catholic church with much power and religious freedom exercises that in matters of social and economic justice (their statement on this subject is a very positive factor), in landlording, spiritual openness in

education and marital institutions, third world and poverty concerns, nuclear weapons and military escalation - and then talk with East European Communists, with all that is sordid as well as promising openly laid out - glasnost - on the table. Some great perestroika might conceivably follow.

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