

Geneva: The Defence of Believers' Rights

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Discrimination against believers in Eastern Europe has at last become a subject for debate in the WCC. At the Fifth General Assembly in Nairobi (November-December 1975)* resolutions were adopted which called for solidarity with all those being persecuted for their faith in God. The General Secretary, Dr. Philip Potter, was instructed to see :

That the question of religious freedom becomes the subject of serious discussion with WCC member-Churches whose countries have signed the Helsinki Declaration, and that the results of this discussion are presented to the WCC's Central Committee at its session in August 1976.

The General Secretary was thereby placed in a difficult position. He was being asked, as a Christian and as the head of the biggest religious organization in the world, to defend his fellow Christians who were being persecuted for their faith. But as General Secretary he is the representative and plenipotentiary of the WCC member-Churches, including those from Eastern Europe, and as such he is obliged not only to consider statements by the leadership of individual Churches, but also to place complete trust in this leadership. So what is the General Secretary to do when believers in the socialist countries report on religious persecution and ask for help, whilst the official leaders of the same Church not only reject offers of help, but actually assert that no persecution exists? This conflict confronted the General Secretary at the WCC's Central Committee meeting in Geneva last August.

The Moscow Patriarchate criticized the Nairobi resolution on human rights in countries which signed the Helsinki Declaration. On 3 March this year the Holy Synod of the Russian Orthodox Church addressed a special letter to Archbishop Scott, the chairman of the WCC Central Committee, and to the General Secretary, Dr. Potter. This letter stated that the resolution :

* See "Nairobi: A Door Opened" by David Kelly in *RCL* Vol. 4, No. 1, pp. 4-8. *Ed.*

. . . was exploited by some Assembly delegates to compromise the Soviet Union, suggesting that it had violated principle VII of the Helsinki Final Statement, the section dealing with religious liberty.

The letter continued :

. . . objective elucidation of this matter was hindered in particular by the fact that in the course of the preparatory work for the Assembly, not a single representative of WCC member-Churches from the Soviet Union or any other socialist country was included in the official representation on the Plenum which debated the numerous topics that were to make up its agenda. Consequently, participants in the Assembly were chiefly limited to information provided by the Assembly newspaper *Assembly Target* and the newspaper *Target*, and numerous tendentious statements by émigré church leaders from the Baltic States. Church representatives from our country who wished to speak during discussions of the Assembly Plenum about various subjects on the agenda were rarely given the opportunity to do so . . . Moreover, representatives of Western Churches were able to give wide-ranging information in report form about their church life, and did so. (Letter of the Holy Synod of the Russian Orthodox Church, *Journal of the Moscow Patriarchate* No. 4, 1976, p. 11).

In the same letter Patriarch Pimen reproached the WCC leadership for putting the question of the persecution of believers in socialist countries to the vote. The so-called principle of "silence", which had applied until then to the Soviet Union, had thereby been violated.

Meanwhile, on the initiative of the Moscow Patriarchate a campaign was organized in the USSR and Czechoslovakia: collective letters were sent to the WCC by clergy and believers, who condemned the statements of Fr. Yakunin and Lev Regelson* and called upon the WCC not to believe "this type of slander". But at the same time the General Secretary received other letters, written by Soviet citizens who claimed that they were indeed being persecuted. They gave concrete facts and explained that the persecution was not haphazard but the result of Soviet anti-religious legislation. Additional information was provided by three West European research centres which compiled a detailed report on the situation in the USSR. This report, entitled *Religious Liberty in the Soviet Union*,** was also presented to the WCC.

Thus the WCC could no longer ignore the matter. On 19 March 1976

* Their letter to the Nairobi Assembly is printed in RCL Vol. 4, No. 1, pp. 9-14. Extracts from their letter to Dr. Potter, dated 6 March, 1976, are printed in this issue of RCL pp. 9-15. Ed.

** Michael Bourdeaux, Hans Heblly and Eugen Voss (eds.), *Religious Liberty in the Soviet Union: WCC and USSR - a post-Nairobi Documentation* (published by Keston College), London, 1976.

Dr. Potter informed the Churches in those countries which had signed the Helsinki Declaration that he intended to call a "small unofficial conference" to discuss the situation of believers in some countries of Europe and North America. This conference took place in Montreux (Switzerland) at the end of July. About 30 people were present, including nine representatives of the East European Churches. Those taking part were given: (a) all the documentation relating to the correspondence between the General Secretary and individual Churches in countries which had signed the Helsinki Declaration; (b) a folder giving a brief survey of all letters received by the WCC during the past year from Eastern Europe; (c) information about current laws in Western Europe and North America, on the basis of which believers in these countries can or could be subjected to restrictions in the area of religious liberty. A special memorandum containing the results of the Montreux discussions was drawn up and presented to the WCC's Central Committee at its Geneva meeting.

The Geneva meeting took place from 10 to 18 August. Key WCC workers, 123 members of the Central Committee, and some specially invited advisers and guests were present. The Moscow Patriarchate was well represented.* According to the agenda, human rights and religious liberty in Eastern Europe was to be debated on the third day of the conference, that is on 12 August. But in fact the matter was raised earlier. Members of the Central Committee, and particularly journalists who were present, kept referring to this subject. Both inside and outside the conference room the atmosphere was tense. Eventually the situation seemed so serious that Archbishop Scott, the chairman of the Central Committee, was forced to admit at a press conference on 10 August that there could be serious differences of opinion during the debate on human rights. On 9 August, at another press conference, some journalists were indignant at Dr. Potter's statement on the WCC's attitude to, for example, total disarmament, aid to national liberation movements in Africa and Latin America, and the struggle against imperialism in South Korea. But what was the WCC doing to save Cambodia from annihilation? What did the WCC intend to do to defend believers in Eastern Europe? To such questions Dr. Potter gave evasive answers: one should

* The representatives were: Metropolitan Nikodim of Leningrad and Novgorod, one of the WCC presidents; Metropolitan Yuvenali of Tula and Belev, chairman of the Department for External Church Relations at the Moscow Patriarchate; Bishop Kirill of Vyborg, rector of the Leningrad Theological Academy; Protopresbyter V. Borovoi, a professor at the Moscow Theological Academy; A. S. Buevsky, secretary to the Department for External Church Relations at the Moscow Patriarchate; N. Teteryatnikov, a student at the Leningrad Theological Academy; and also Bishop Makari of Uman, who lives in Geneva. Other visitors from the USSR were Archbishop Petros Berberian of the Armenian Apostolic Church, Archbishop Janis Matulis of the Evangelical-Lutheran Church of Latvia, and A. Bychkov, Secretary-General of the AUCECB (All-Union Council of Evangelical Christians and Baptists).

not argue about whether persecution exists or not, he said, but rather help create the circumstances in which these questions can be discussed constructively. But this did not satisfy the journalists. Their interest in Eastern Europe was increased, moreover, by letters from religious dissidents in the USSR which began to circulate among the press. These letters asked the WCC for help.

The Soviet delegation reacted by attacking the WCC. On the second day of the conference Metropolitan Yuvenali expressed the Moscow Patriarchate's dissatisfaction at the WCC's inadequate response to the letter (3 March) from the Holy Synod of the Russian Orthodox Church :

For the last six months since the Russian Orthodox Church made its response, we have heard nothing more about our letter. I still do not know from today's reports whether the response of the Churches is to be studied at this meeting or not . . . Before drawing individual Churches and church communities into a closer relationship with the WCC, it must be demonstrated how they are supposed to relate to it . . .

Metropolitan Yuvenali's statement was supported by other representatives from the socialist countries. The most categorical statement came from the Hungarian Bishop Bartha, a well-known figure in the Christian Peace Conference :

The East European Churches are putting questions to the WCC and they expect answers to these questions. The East European Churches are particularly grieved by the lack of Christian understanding about the problems which exist, and by the attempt to apply political principles in mutual discussions.

By 12 August the tension at the Geneva conference had become acute. The journalists were annoyed because, contrary to conference regulations, they were not given advance texts of Dr. Potter's report. The General Secretary was not pleased with the discussion that preceded his report. The delegates from Eastern Europe were afraid of an open scandal; they feared that they might have to leave the conference room, and even walk out of the WCC. Representatives of the third world were displeased because public attention was focused on matters which were not related to them.

Thursday 12 August. The meeting room was packed, despite a thorough check at the entrance door. The room was quiet except for the movement of radio and television reporters who were constantly rearranging their equipment. Many people expected some sensational statements. But they were disappointed. Dr. Potter's report was simple in form and extremely clear in content. The struggle for human rights and religious liberty was indissolubly linked, in Dr. Potter's opinion, with

the solution of many other and no less important problems. These included, for example, the question of the co-existence of different political systems, the problem of disarmament, and so on. Every struggle demanded considerable time, and so all questions connected with the defence of the freedom of believers could not be decided at this conference, but must be transferred to a special body for investigation. Dr. Potter went on to suggest that two commissions be formed: one should be part of the WCC Commission on International Affairs, and should gather all possible information, sift it and prepare it for discussion; the other, composed of representatives of European and North American Churches, should take appropriate decisions.

The General Secretary's report evoked lively discussion both in the conference room and at the subsequent press conference. Many of those who spoke, particularly Prof. Meyendorff, Pastor Rossel, Pastor Appel and Bishop Lonning criticized much of the report's contents. They mentioned the need for Western Christians to study Soviet legislation on religion, and the need to define what is meant by the words "religious liberty". Those who spoke asked that active support be given to all those who were suffering persecution for their faith.

Representatives of the East European countries spoke against forming a special commission composed of representatives from European and North American Churches. In their opinion, such a commission was unnecessary. Representatives of the Moscow Patriarchate attacked the West European research centres* which had prepared the report on the persecution of believers in Eastern Europe (*Religious Liberty in the Soviet Union*).

The General Secretary's attempt to compromise and thus to restore the outward, and possibly even the inward unity of the WCC failed. Nevertheless, as a result of the debate the Central Committee decided to establish machinery to deal with the question of religious liberty more effectively.

*The CSRC (Keston College), Keston, Kent, England; Glaube in der 2 Welt, Zurich, Switzerland; the Inter-Academical Institute for Missiological and Ecumenical Research, Utrecht, Netherlands. *Ed.*