

State Authorities for Religious Affairs in Soviet Bloc Countries*

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Only Albania has totally outlawed religion; every other state, whatever its social system, faces the necessity of regulating relationships between the state and the religious communities. Arrangements in this respect must obviously be extremely varied. The constitution of the state concerned may recognise the principle of ideological "neutrality" or "non-identification" and subject religious communities to the same general laws which apply to all citizens; or the state may be a totalitarian one, of a communist kind, in which the ruling ideology regards all religions with suspicion or indeed with hatred.

There can be no doubt that it is in the relationship between state and church that differences between political systems become particularly apparent. Whereas the liberal state has no need of special organs for the supervision of religious communities, such organs generally assume considerable importance in a totalitarian state. A survey of such supervisory bodies in the Soviet bloc makes this point clear. Recent developments in church-state relationships, particularly in Czechoslovakia, Poland and the GDR, have demonstrated how varied the situations of religious communities in socialist states can be. This variety is particularly clearly reflected in the institutional relationships between state and church.

Two Elements in Communist Religious Policies

The differences mentioned above can be understood only if the two basic controlling factors which determine church-state relationships in socialist states are borne in mind. Their relative importance varies from country to country.

The first factor is the basic ideological hostility to religion common to all socialist states. This attitude, held to be "scientific", regards every kind of religion as a distorted reflection of reality, preventing mankind from seeking his salvation wholly in the material world and striving for a truly

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humanistic order of society. In the communist blueprint for the society of the future there is no place for religion. Historically speaking, religion has only the relative, restricted legitimacy of a temporary phenomenon, a social force that is undoubtedly still present, but doomed to wither away. It therefore follows that the aim of the leadership of party and state is completely to separate the religious realm from the political organisation of the community. The aim of its special tactics in respect of religious communities is to limit as far as possible the religious communities' scope for action in society.

The second factor is of a pragmatic character. It springs from the more or less strongly held conviction that attention must be paid to the confessional, national, social, intellectual and cultural aspects of religious life, which are deeply rooted in the history of the country concerned. The importance attached to this factor varies widely amongst the socialist states. An important consideration in each country is the significance of the predominant Christian confession from the point of view of national traditions. In Russia, Ukraine, Belorussia, Georgia, Romania, Bulgaria, Macedonia and Serbia the Orthodox Church predominates; in Poland, Lithuania, Czechoslovakia, Croatia and Slovenia the Catholic Church; in the GDR and Estonia the Protestant Church. Only in Hungary and Latvia is there a marked denominational split; in Hungary the Catholic Church is certainly in the majority, but there are sizeable Reformed and Lutheran minorities.

Government Attitudes

In almost all countries of the Soviet bloc the affairs of the religious communities are the concern of an independent department at government level. This department is superintended by a special organ which has different titles in different countries: "Council for Religious Affairs" (USSR); "Ministry for Religious Affairs" (Poland); "Office of the Secretary of State for Church Affairs", often simplified into "Secretariat of State for Church Affairs" (GDR); "State Office for Church Affairs" (Czechoslovakia); "State Church Office" (Hungary); "Department of Cults" (Romania). The only exception is Bulgaria: in that country the supervision of religion is exercised by a department of the Foreign Ministry – an arrangement which constantly causes surprise among observers. It arises out of the fact that the Bulgarian Orthodox Church has been intimately involved with some of the country's most sensitive foreign interests.

The state authorities for religious affairs are directly responsible to the relevant Council of Ministers (that is to say, to the government); at the same time they are inferior to ministries in status. It is only in Poland that the Minister for Religious Affairs has Cabinet rank. The elevation in rank

fell to the lot of Kazimierz Kąkol, after his predecessor had been granted the rank of Deputy Minister because of the need for an appropriate representation in Rome on the occasion of the canonisation of Father Kolbe.

In every country the state authority for religious affairs has a relatively small administrative staff. In the Soviet Union, Czechoslovakia and Hungary the authority has "plenipotentiaries" or "secretaries" who have the duty of collaborating with the local state authorities, but who in practice are wholly subordinate to the latter. In Poland, Romania and Bulgaria, on the other hand, the authority has the right to issue directives to all state organs which become involved in religious affairs. In the GDR the Secretary of State has no more than the right to confer with the state authorities which have competence in religious matters, and the small size of his staff (about 15) is symptomatic of his lack of any real power. The staff of the Polish office is only about 35, and the number in Bulgaria may well be smaller. Totals (even estimated ones) for other countries are not available.

In this connection it is worth mentioning that the state authorities for religious affairs are rarely described in the publications of the socialist countries; in some cases they are not even mentioned. Their regulations are published only in part (Poland, Czechoslovakia, Hungary and Romania may be taken as examples). The details of their activities are passed over in complete silence. There are two reasons for this reticence: firstly, of course, the desire to give as little publicity as possible to religious communities in a socialist society; secondly, to protect the authorities for religious affairs, whose activities in most countries are extremely questionable, from critical examination, and in particular to avoid the production of written material which might at some future date be used in evidence against them.

Legal and Political Areas of Competence

The areas of jurisdiction of the various state authorities for religious affairs, and their duties towards the State, are generally similar; there are however noteworthy differences in their powers to make decisions affecting religious communities.

The state authorities for religious affairs form the institutional link between the highest organs of Party and State on the one hand, and the religious communities on the other. There is a special need (one indeed that has become more and more important) for such organs in the socialist countries, because the religious communities are the only legally permitted organisations which cannot be completely integrated into the closed communist system and which therefore remain as foreign bodies within it. The state authorities for religious affairs must inevitably collaborate closely with the Ministry of the Interior and security services of

the state concerned. An example of close collaboration can be found in the person of Paul Verner, a member of the Politburo of the GDR Socialist Unity Party, whose jurisdiction over internal security also includes church affairs.

Within the government and in contact with other state institutions the state authorities for religious affairs have their (generally similar) areas of competence: preparing relevant draft legislation for the attention of the law-making bodies; exercising a coordinating role among the numerous organs of state which have legal powers in religious matters (finance, building, culture, education and so forth); giving legal opinions, interpretations and policy directives affecting religious questions to local authorities, courts of law and social organisations; controlling the activities of religious communities in legal and other respects; evaluating the significance of important religious data.

As far as these activities are concerned, there are no significant differences in the way the state authorities for church affairs work in various Eastern European countries. What varies is the *degree* to which they are significantly involved in the activities of religious communities and able to influence religious life.

USSR and Czechoslovakia

The most oppressive religious policy, the policy most thoroughly dominated by ideological hostility to religion and totalitarian intensity, is that pursued in the USSR and in Czechoslovakia. The state authorities for religious affairs play a key role here. The Council for Religious Affairs attached to the Soviet Council of Ministers and its local plenipotentiaries have the last (and very often the first) word in all important questions of church organisation, appointments, finance, economics, training institutions and publishing. In Czechoslovakia control is even more thorough since the clergy are paid directly by the state; the "State Office for Church Affairs" and the Church Secretaries are authorised to share in shaping decisions, not only in legal matters, but in strictly religious questions. True, the law does not go as far as this in the USSR, but in practice the Council for Religious Affairs, improperly using its position of overwhelming power and in particular playing on the fear and opportunism of many priests and laymen or exploiting their openness to blackmail, successfully exerts a destructive influence on the church.¹ In both countries all but the most ordinary day-to-day activities of the religious communities require state approval, and the criteria to which the authorities are subject are in no way fixed by statute; indeed, their decisions may be purely discretionary, or guided by political expediency. For this reason one can speak of a lawless treatment of religious communities, under a veil of legality. Universal practice confirms the truth of this general state-

ment. The extent to which clergy and lay people are prey to the cynical manipulation of the state cannot be fully revealed, because the plenipotentiaries and Church Secretaries prefer to give their instructions by word of mouth, or at least without making their official instructions public; in this way they evade control of any kind.

Romania and Bulgaria

As regards the supremacy of state power, there is no significant difference between these countries' state authorities for religious affairs and those of Czechoslovakia and the USSR. The catalogue detailing the eighteen areas of competence of the Romanian Department of Cults² makes it perfectly clear that the religious communities cannot legally take any decision of importance without state authority; furthermore, to judge from current practice, it seems that the functionaries of the Department consider themselves to have authority even in purely religious matters such as religious services and the administration of the Sacrament. On the basis of the law governing religious communities of 26 February 1949 the Department of Cults of the Bulgarian Foreign Ministry possesses just as wide powers for joint decision-making as does the Soviet Council for Religious Affairs.

The classification of Romania and Bulgaria separately from the USSR and Czechoslovakia is due to the fact that in both of the former countries the Orthodox Church is the national Church, and is recognised even by the communist regime, against a background of virulent nationalism, as an aspect of national, cultural, and historical self-awareness. The prime aim of the party's religious policy is not to neutralise or exclude religious communities, but to restrict them within the bounds of a national church and absorb them in a national whole. The point, however, should not be overlooked that as far as the smaller religious communities are concerned the Romanian Department of Cults constantly uses its far-reaching administrative powers with the aim of destroying church life; in this respect there is no difference between Romanian practice and that of the USSR and Czechoslovakia.

Hungary and Poland

It may seem surprising that Poland and Hungary should be grouped together. The reason is that, in the strictly legal sense, the jurisdiction of the state authorities for church affairs in these countries does not differ significantly and is markedly less far-reaching than in the countries previously dealt with. In practice, however, there are considerable differences in the exercise of power by the state authorities. In Hungary the lack of confessional homogeneity (in contrast to the situation in Poland), disunity within the Catholic Church, the much stronger dependence of the

Catholic Church, historically speaking, on the state, and the correspondingly much less well-developed sense of self-awareness on the church's part have aided the State Office for the Church and its staff of secretaries; they have thus been enabled to use their powers of joint decision more effectively, in particular in the supervision of senior church appointments, in financial affairs, in education and in publishing, and to act, generally speaking, in a manner hostile to the interests of the church.

It is certainly true that the Vatican, through the (partially successful) agreement of 15 September 1964 with the Hungarian State, reserved to itself a considerable measure of influence in the appointment of bishops. In other matters, however, including the appointment of men to key positions in church administration, the state is able to exercise its authority almost without restriction. The means preferred by the Church Secretaries is that of making the grant of legally prescribed authorisations (for example, in religious education, building projects, etc.) dependent on church concessions and cooperation in spheres in which the state has, strictly speaking, no legal right to interfere.

This extra-legal extension of state power on the level of administration pure and simple is the result of a circumstance which is of fundamental importance for the working of state authorities for religious affairs in the whole Soviet bloc: namely, the concentration of the power to determine the law affecting religious bodies wholly within a central state authority. This situation means that the leadership of party and state is able to carry out its church policy in a standardised and well-orchestrated manner in all departments of church life.

In Poland the state's legal powers over the church exist to a considerable extent on paper only, since for a considerable time the Catholic Church has been successful in disregarding administrative regulations which have been enacted by the regime in order to obstruct religious practice. A prime example is the Ministry of Education's ordinance of 19 August 1961 on catechetical practice. The object of this measure was to place the organisation and the practical details of the church's own religious education programme under state control. This attempt to attack one of the most important citadels of the church, its catechetical instruction in the parish, came to grief, as the episcopate united to oppose the measure openly, instructing the parish clergy not to carry it out.

In the case of Poland it should also be pointed out that the powers of the state with respect to the affairs of the Catholic Church have never been adequately clarified. The legal grounds for the present Polish regime's repudiation of the Concordat concluded on 19 February 1925 are extremely dubious, and up to now no new workable agreement between church and state has been concluded. The understandings between the episcopate and the government reached on 14 April 1950 and 2 December 1956 were of a purely political character, and became

obsolete very soon after their adoption as a result of the attitude adopted by the state. Through the decree of 13 December 1956 the state assumed to itself the power of joint decision in the making of church appointments; the secular authorities, however, have never been able to use this regulation as a means of undermining the church, because the unity of the church and its strong support by the population have always compelled the state to follow a pragmatic policy of negotiation and compromise.

The GDR, a Special Case

The state authority for religious affairs with the weakest powers is to be found in the German Democratic Republic. The Secretariat of State for Church Affairs is not so much an operational organ for state intervention in the life of the church as the institutional link between the GDR government and the two major churches.

Instructed by the "Church Affairs Section" of the Socialist Unity Party's Central Committee, the Secretariat of State has certain main functions: in regular conversations and other contacts, to explain to the church leadership the views of the government on both domestic and foreign questions; to get to know the attitudes of the churches; and to clarify practical questions and problems which arise at all levels in church-state relations, insofar as the churches require the cooperation of the State in solving such matters (as for example the organisation of the large-scale events of the Luther year). It has become more than ever clear, since the "Conversation" of 6 March 1978 between the Chairman of the GDR Council of State and the governing body of the Conference of Leaders of the Protestant Churches of the GDR, that the most important task of the Secretary of State is to do his utmost, by means of diplomatic manoeuvrings and pragmatic solutions, to achieve some kind of equilibrium in the situation of tension and conflict that inevitably divides church and state.

As is the case in Poland (in practice if not in theory) the state does not interfere in the domestic affairs of the religious communities. Within the institutional framework granted to them, these communities have a good deal of freedom to conduct their affairs in accordance with their own teachings and traditions; they can even, though under severe restrictions, reach out into the life of society.

It is clear that the bitter hatred of religion which characterises Marxism as a totalitarian ideology does not nowadays dominate the religious policy of the Socialist Unity Party.

Central Direction from Moscow?

Are religious policies in the countries of the Soviet bloc influenced or indeed directed by Moscow, and if so, to what extent? Official sources

give no guidance on the matter. It is known from unofficial sources that the heads of the various state authorities for religious affairs meet at fairly regular intervals to inform one another about the religious situation in their countries and to exchange news about their experiences in dealing with religious communities. These meetings do not however serve to produce coordinated church-state policies. As far as the political leadership is concerned, it is known that Central Committee secretaries responsible for ideological matters do concern themselves at their periodic meetings with current problems of "scientific atheism" and the strategy of disseminating it. But the very fact that the planning, content and intensity of atheistic propaganda vary from country to country, as does official policy towards religion and the situation of the churches, drives the observer to conclude that no common line is prescribed in this matter.

As regards relationships with the Vatican, however, there may well be something of a common policy. The fact that the Vatican has been able to negotiate successfully only with Hungary, and even here only in a single (though significant) area, may well point to a centrally coordinated resistance to such negotiation.

The Schizophrenic Nature of the Authorities for Religious Affairs

It has already been pointed out that the concentration of state power over church affairs in a single authority represents a considerable danger for religious communities. It should not be concluded, however, that the full range of potential negative consequences must of necessity follow. The most important factor here is not the attitude of the authorities for religious affairs themselves, but the religious policy pursued by the party and state leadership. Thus, for example, Article 1 of the Organisational Statutes of the Council for Religious Affairs in the USSR states that this body "is an organ of the Union set up for the purpose of strictly carrying out the policy of the Soviet State towards religion"; a policy, that is to say, which is laid down by the Politburo and the Central Committee of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union. Certainly the law says nothing about this — and with good reason, for the party has never made any secret of its enmity towards religion, and thus of necessity towards religious communities. Camouflaged as an authority for religious affairs, the party hides behind the façade of the "state" to preserve a certain outward appearance of neutrality, legality and justice. At best a mere fig-leaf veils the fundamentally self-contradictory situation in which the state authorities for religious affairs in atheist countries find themselves.

On the one hand, even a communist state sets itself the task of maintaining peace under the law, that is to say of protecting all non-criminal citizens and their organisations, including the churches, in the interests of a peaceful communal life, and of guaranteeing them the appropriate conditions of their legitimate existence. On the other hand, this protective

function is in direct opposition to its policy of discrimination against religious citizens in numerous ways and of restricting, oppressing and indeed even destroying religious communities. In view of this unresolved and unresolvable contradiction the communist authorities for religious affairs find themselves in a schizophrenic state of tension, which certainly varies from country to country, but remains common to them all.

No Genuine Relationship of Trust

The responsibilities of the state authorities for religious affairs, therefore, extend even to the *support* of the religious communities and the maintenance of correct contacts, which in some cases may indeed serve the interests of the churches. Such is demonstrably the case in *all* countries, though the extent of support varies very greatly. The state authority's degree of positive commitment increases when the pragmatic element in the state's religious policy becomes more important. Accordingly, the lowest degree of support for religion is found in the USSR and Czechoslovakia; the highest in Poland and the GDR. Yet however much the oppressive aspect is moderated in practice, as in the GDR, it never disappears entirely. The churches know that in the last analysis they are confronted by an adversary whose single-minded devotion to ideology allows no secure foundation for a genuine relationship of trust, and whose activities are always conditioned by purely political considerations which are applied with more or less rigour according to the needs of the hour.

Officially, all these countries recognise the principle of *separation of church and state*; generally, indeed, this principle is enshrined in their Constitutions. With this old liberal slogan, the communist parties now in power attacked the more or less close association of church and state which obtained before their seizure of power. Yet all historical forms of relationship between church and state have been based on the assumption that the attitude of the state to the various manifestations of religion¹ was basically positive, or at least neutral. This assumption is not valid in any state characterised by communist ideology; and in such countries there can normally be no question of a real "separation" between church and state. Undoubtedly, as has already been shown, pragmatic considerations modify to a considerable extent the repressive policy which is the inevitable result of the system's hostility to religion in general; but that policy can never be completely altered without substantial changes being made in the fundamental nature of the system itself. Such changes cannot be expected in the foreseeable future.

¹See *Herder Korrespondenz*, May 1982, pp. 232-37.

²See *Südosteuropa-Handbuch*, Vol. II (Romania), published by K.-D. Grothusen, Göttingen, 1977, pp. 471-72.