

Editorial

It is a curious fact of modern life that whereas traditional ties between church and state appear to be weakening in countries like Britain, the involvement of religious people in politics seems to be growing, not least in countries where such involvement has traditionally been rare or impossible. Whatever one may think of Archbishop Desmond Tutu or the Revd. Allan Boesak in South Africa, there is no doubt that they have played an important rôle in the scrapping of apartheid in that country. Some will remember the strangely-named Cardinal Sin of Manila, who participated in the downfall of the Marcos régime in the Philippines, and who is still a voice to be reckoned with in that country's politics. Less spectacularly, but perhaps no less effectively, the Church is emerging as an opposition force in one-party states like Kenya, calling for true democracy and an end to corruption and inefficiency in high places.

But all of this activity, noble though it may be, pales beside the rôle which the churches have played in the upheavals in Eastern Europe. It all began with the election of John Paul II as Pope in 1978. Few people really wanted a Polish Pope, and the Roman church in the West has not always found it easy to digest his innate conservatism on social and doctrinal issues. But in the East, his election sparked off a wave of democratic protest in Poland which was closely tied to the church, and which ten years later has managed to form the country's government.

East Germany has also seen a remarkable politicization of the clergy. The Lutheran church, which by nature is unlikely to contest the authority of the state, took it upon itself to provide the forum for debate about the country's future. It was in a church in Leipzig that the demonstrations were organized, which eventually toppled the Communist régime. The new government is controlled by an expressly Christian political party, and many clergy and laypeople have been elected to government office.

Christians are relatively less prominent in Czechoslovakia and Hungary, but they are by no means absent from political life there either. This is particularly remarkable in Czechoslovakia, where the Czech part of the country has traditionally been anti-clerical and largely secular in outlook. Hungary has a strong Protestant minority, but so far this seems to be co-operating with the Catholic majority to establish Christian principles in society and government. In Romania, the revolution of December 1989 was sparked off by the arrest of a Protestant pastor, Laszlo Tökes, who was then made a member of the National Salvation Front. Fortunately, he had the courage to resign from this as soon as he realized that the Front was

the old Communist Party in disguise, and it seems quite possible that he may one day reappear as a member of the next dissident revolt.

In the Soviet Union, the changes have been equally astonishing. Bishops, priests and Christian laypeople sit quite happily in the Congress of People's Deputies, where they can lobby for the rights of the churches and help to create an atmosphere in which the Christian voice will be heard with respect.

All of this is very encouraging, and quite a change from what we have grown used to over the past generation. But where will it lead the church in the end? In Poland, there is a real danger that Catholicism will become a political ideology, far stronger than communism because it is believed in by the majority of the population. It is by no means impossible that the country will develop the kind of genteel repression of dissenting voices which we have grown used to seeing in the Republic of Ireland. A 'free' country, but one in which an authoritarian church has a voice out of all proportion to what is needed in a democratic society.

In other countries, there is a real danger that current enthusiasm for the church will soon vanish. Some who took shelter there to escape oppression have already left, knowing that now they can voice their concerns elsewhere without hindrance. Certainly, they are most unlikely to turn against their former protectors, but the kind of support they offer the church may not be such as to further the work of the Gospel. There is no point having an honoured and respected place in society if the challenge of the Gospel is muted as a result—the sad state of the Church of England ought to be sufficient warning of that!

More insidious still is the challenge which will soon be presented by burgeoning materialism. It is a fact attested in the Bible, and experienced by our own generation in the West, that in times of prosperity men forget God. We must remember that material deprivation played a large rôle in the spiritual revival of Eastern Europe, and that the non-availability of the opportunities and distractions that we have here gave people time to reflect on the state of their own souls. Open hostility to the Gospel also had its cathartic effect, demonstrating once more the ancient truth that the blood of martyrs is the seed of the church.

We in the West are in no position to criticize our brethren in Eastern Europe as they confront these dangers, but we can offer them the benefit of our experience and warn them what they must be prepared to face. The West which so attracts them is not Christian Europe, but a materialist society bent on affluence and pleasure in this life. Once that takes hold, spiritual vitality will soon weaken, or else be transfigured into the kind of 'prosperity Gospel' doing the rounds of middle-class America. It is no accident that books advocating that idea have already been translated into the languages of

Eastern Europe, and are being widely distributed to unprepared and ignorant Christians. The churches of the East must turn from politics to questions of personal lifestyle, and above all of personal commitment to Jesus Christ as Saviour and Lord. In the new Europe we shall be together with our Eastern brethren in making this affirmation, and in combatting what in future will be a common foe. Let us realize this now, and get ready to face the battles which lie ahead.

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