

# Comment

## *Nonconformity in Budapest*

In September the President of the Christian Peace Conference, Bishop Károly Tóth of the Hungarian Reformed Church, a complex and independent operator if ever there was one, effectively bypassed the official structure to organize—along with Stephen Tunncliffe of European Nuclear Disarmament Churches Committee—a theology seminar in Budapest which was quite different in style from anything which had happened before.

The reaction of most Western observers to a claim of this kind will be immediately dismissive—they know all about the CPC and all “peace conferences” held by permission of Eastern Governments: they are merely propaganda exercises in which Western Christians are manipulated to gain false impressions of Church freedom in the East. But such reactions are substitutes for real thought. In fact Christians from East and West Europe have self-evident reasons of their own for maintaining contacts. Fundamental belief in the universality of the Church, the common membership of the Body of Christ, makes it imperative for them not to accept the shot-gun divorce which the politicians of the new Cold War want to force upon them. Christian peace visits across the borders are not merely examples of naive political activism. On the contrary, they are the necessary outcome of the Church’s very existence, Christ’s presence in the world.

There are political interests on both sides which find this both incomprehensible and threatening. They will do their best to discredit it or to control it. The methods are very different but equally damaging. The tragedy is that interference in Christian life in the East is made a good deal worse by mischievous distortion in the Western secular and religious press.

The most harmful distortion is the implication that any active Christian in the East who is not a “dissident” must be a conformist or a collaborator. For instance, when a prominent Hungarian priest came to work in England last year, he found himself cold-shouldered by the Catholic Press here, who did not want to hear what he had to say. The fact that the Hungarian Government had let him out of the country proved to them that he was a conformist and therefore valueless as a representative of real Christian life in Hungary. This is a travesty and one which is insulting and damaging to the majority of Christians in Eastern Europe and Russia. While there clearly is an unknown number of Christians who are persecuted or seriously

obstructed in the practice of their faith, it is simply wrong to imply that there is a straightforward choice between outspoken resistance and craven conformity. It is a simplified picture of things which fits only too well with the current desire in the West to polarise everything and everyone as for or against the Free World, which has somehow been identified—with fine disregard for the demographic facts—as the Christian world.

Unfortunately, the visiting Western Christians who make a beeline for the handful of well-publicised dissidents as soon as they set foot off the plane at Prague or Budapest—as if these were the only real Christians in Eastern Europe—play their own part in this distorting process. And they make things more difficult for a number of other Christians who have not achieved the same dubious status, but who are nevertheless bearing witness to Christ in real but unspectacular ways. There is, for instance, a vigorous basic-community network in Hungary among Catholics in university life who are rebuilding social/religious life in places where the dead hand of Party patronage has effectively destroyed it. But they do not have a high political profile. There is also a considerable number of pastors—both Catholic and Reformed—who are working away quietly for similar ends. Contact can be made with these people with little difficulty. But whenever a Western delegation gives the slip to its official church hosts in order to visit a well-known Budapest dissident (whose name we shall not repeat) who is in trouble with the Ministry of Church Affairs, it gives a slap in the face to the others and often results in fresh interference in their affairs by the Ministry.

There is a tendency in the Western press to imply that anything that is allowed to happen in the East, anything that demonstrates that Christians there have some freedom, is simply a front, something put on for the benefit of government propaganda. So it is impossible for Western Christians to make contact with any non-dissidents without being accused of lending themselves to manipulation. There have certainly been plenty of grounds for suspicion in the past. The Christian Peace Conference, for instance, lost its credibility in 1968, after the Prague Spring, when the Czech delegation was removed by its government. Most Western delegations withdrew and the whole thing lost credibility with almost everyone, including, eventually, Eastern governments. It is still held in suspicion, probably with reason. But initiatives have been taken in the East to re-establish credible Christian peace activity which simply do not fit into the dissident/conformist mould. September's theology seminar in Budapest was without bureaucratic management, without pre-written communiqués and without Western visitors having to put into their speeches so-called "Aeroflot passages", i.e. the bits that would guarantee them a free air-ticket. There were no official delegations,

only theologians from thirty-one different countries, many of whom were new to Eastern Europe. Anything could be—and mostly was—said, and in an atmosphere of freedom and theological seriousness.

As for variety of theological and political positions, there was a bewildering amount of it. Denominational and linguistic differences alone were formidable obstacles to communication, but there were other, more profound, differences which were expressed quite openly. The Third World liberation theologians (from Brazil, Nicaragua, Sri Lanka and the Philippines) came already armed with the indignant claim that the entire East-West peace debate is a diversion from the killing that is already going on in the Southern countries of the world—courtesy of Northern economic and military interference: “You are afraid of dying; we are dying now”. Western pacifism—with its priority given to non-violence rather than to justice—made them particularly irritable. But they in turn were the object of much suspicion from some of the East Europeans for their supposed flirtation with discredited Marxism: are the Christians of the Third World about to plunge into the same terrible mistakes? Yet to some Third World Christians it seemed that East Europeans were giving up hope and retreating into world-denying religion. Only after five days did some beginnings of mutual understanding dawn.

It would be absurd and self-defeating to say that, because the Hungarian Government came up with the visas and the permission, it was therefore only for the benefit of Soviet propaganda that the meeting took place. East-West contact—an absolute necessity for European and Church life—is played at various levels (as the Vatican well knows). Certainly Eastern governments get some advantage from Christian activity of this kind. But there is a good deal more independence and initiative among Christians in those countries than Western propaganda wants us to believe. It is only if you believe that the Soviet Union is poised to take over every bit of the Western World it can lay its hands on, rather than being very worried indeed about its security and eager to re-establish détente, that you will fall for the caricature of Christian life in the East that is endlessly recycled in the Western press.

Roger Ruston OP