

## **Blessed are the Persecuted**

What must we make of the Christian-Marxist dialogue? In 1978 Christians Associated for Relationships with Eastern Europe (CAREE), an ecumenical association for international peace and justice and for relationships with the Christian Peace Conference, held a major conference in Philadelphia. The theme was "U.S. Socio-Economic Order in the Next Decade: Christian and Marxist Perspectives." Six prominent Marxists and Christians were invited to give an address on that theme.

Dr. Eric Kellner, founder and president of the Paulus-Gesellschaft reported that his organization sponsored a symposium with the American Society for the Philosophical Study of Marxism at the 18th World Congress of Philosophy. The topic was "Marxist Philosophy and Christian Values Today." About 350 people attended the symposium. At the end of the symposium, the Vice-President of the Soviet Academy of Sciences, Prof. Pyotr Fedoseev stated that the Soviet philosophers are going to participate intensively in the dialogue with Christians and other religions.

The Fifth All-Christian Peace Assembly was held in Prague. Its main theme was "God's Call to Solidarity - Christians for Peace, Justice and Liberation." The official document produced at the conference stated: "We are grateful to God that the work for peace is no longer the concern of a few. All over the world there is a growing peace movement. Christians are not alone or always ahead in the search for peace, justice and liberation. In humility we work with those who lead in the struggle, everywhere in the world. We rejoice with the people where success attends their efforts - with the heroic peoples of Vietnam, Angola and Mozambique, for example.

"But success does not mean the end of our efforts. Vietnam still needs social and economic reconstruction; Angola still needs to consolidate her independence in the face of persistent efforts to destabilize her national sovereignty; Guinea-Bissay, Mozambique and almost all politically liberated ex-colonies still need economic liberation. The struggle goes on.

"World peace means more than the absence of war. There can be no peace without justice. Liberation from the neocolonialist yoke is yet to be realized for hundreds of millions of the world's people. The military-industrial complex is seeking to reinforce its domination and exploitation of the world through transnational corporations, intensifying the arms race and expanding the arms trade, through stirring up war hysteria, through newer and more subtle forms of anti-Communist propaganda, through misuse of the struggle for fundamental human rights." This document says nothing about the harsh persecution so many Christians endure in so many parts of the world.

Should Christians not call for freedom of worship wherever this freedom is suppressed? Who speaks for human rights of our persecuted fellow Christians?

I will name a few countries where Christians suffer for their faith.

## **Rumania**

A Rumanian Protestant evangelist, the Rev. Ion Samu, was sentenced to six years in prison for involvement in "ideological propoganda." The London-based human rights organization, Amnesty-International says Rumanian Communist officials have taken an increasingly restrictive attitude toward evangelicals.

## **U. S. S. R.**

The, All Union Council of Evangelical Christians and Baptists in Moscow received a donation of 25,000 Bibles and 5,000 Concordances. The books were passed on to the churches. Every 200 church members received 15 Bibles. Yet Christians who stand for greater freedom to preach the Gospel in and outside church precincts suffer the most from the hostility of communism towards religion. In March 1979, there were 34 evangelical Christians and Baptists in prison in the Soviet Union. The number has increased dramatically within the past year with the advent of the Olympics in Moscow. Many children of evangelical Christians have to suffer when they accept the faith of their parents and refuse to join the communist youth organization. Sometimes the State takes children from their parents who then lose their parental rights.

## **Rhodesia**

The Rhodesian internal settlement is a subject of fierce political debate. Western nations are careful not to offend African states and to safeguard the rights of the guerillas. But who speaks for the suffering Christians in Rhodesia? In the Newsletter of the CCAP, the Rev. M.S. Daneel, liaison officer of the Dutch Reformed Mission, writes that in the areas ruled by Marxist inspired terrorists, Bibles are burned, church services are forbidden (or if permitted, the name of Jesus Christ may not be used), and other forms of persecution are suffered. Rev. Reg. Glenn, a missionary in Rhodesia with the African Evangelical Fellowship, writes that he had a call from a man whose uncle was brutally beaten and shot by terrorists after they cut off all the fingers of his left hand and made him eat them because he had reported their presence to the Security Forces. Rev. Glenn comments, "Only God knows how many have been martyred in Rhodesia in these past few years."

## **Equatorial Guinea**

The dictator of Equatorial Guinea, President Macras Nguema, has an iron grip on the party and the government. The whole of Guinea is totally regimented and oppressed. There is no room for differences of opinion.

Nguema has now outlawed the church completely. It is reported that all clergymen have either been murdered, jailed or banished. Some estimates put the Christian part of the population as high as 95 percent. Amnesty International claims that since 1972,. about one-quarter of the population of 400,000 has fled the country.

## **Mozambique**

According to reports from Roman Catholic sources, there are indications of increased restrictions. In the northern regions of Pemba and Lichinga, the persecution is the most severe. In Pemba, Roman Catholic missionaries have been concentrated in the major villages and are forbidden to visit the Christian communities. "And the people, in turn, cannot move from place to place without a safe conduct." In Lichinga, the Bishop and two missionaries were arrested while they made a pastoral visit. They were detained briefly in the prison of Cuamba, and then allowed to return home, but kept under house arrest.

## **Vietnam**

The refugee crisis is well known. Thousands are still fleeing. Southeast Asian countries are worried about the flood of refugees streaming out of "liberated" Vietnam. However, little is said about the plight of the Vietnamese Christians since the 1975 take-over of the south. According to a Mennonite official, who visited Vietnam the activities of Evangelical and Catholic churches in southern Vietnam have been greatly reduced. "Church leaders reported that they now have to get governmental permission to conduct regular services," said James K. Stauffer, who was with the five-member Mennonite Central Committee (MCC) delegates which visited Vietnam.

## **Ethiopia**

The communist revolution in Ethiopia is bringing arrest, torture and even death to Christians. I have talked with missionaries who had to leave Ethiopia. They could no longer function as missionaries. They told about the hardships the believers had to endure for Christ's sake.

In the Bale Province, the local peasant organizations were ordered to register all evangelical Christians and give them 15 days to renounce their faith or be executed. Provincial Governor, All Mossa, a member of the ruling Dergue (military officer's committee) and responsible for the execution of several thousands of people in various parts of the country, declared specifically that all Christians must be 'annihilated' before the revolution in Ethiopia can be completed.

Much more could be written about persecution. Oppression in communist nations is well known. Few Third World countries are real democracies. In one nation after another, the light of religious freedom has been extinguished. What can we do? Who speaks for the suffering brothers and sisters in Christ?

The most effective and lasting help is the prayer of intercession. Our God is neither limited by a nation's borders nor by political circumstances. In some cases it is possible to financially help families of ministers and others imprisoned for Christ. Scripture says: "Remember those who are in prison, as though you were in prison with them."

Remember those who are suffering, as though you were suffering as they are"  
(Hebrews 13:3)

Christians in the West must boldly speak out on behalf of their suffering fellow-Christians around the world. The struggle for human rights also includes the right to worship the Lord without any hindrance.

When Georgi Vins, the uncompromising Russian Baptist leader, was unexpectedly released from his filthy Siberian prison cell and exiled to the U.S., he pleaded for help from the West. He said that the Baptist World Alliance and other international church bodies have thought that public protest can be counterproductive. He mentioned that the All-Union Council of Evangelical Christians-Baptists in Russia holds the same position. Vins dismissed this view. He said, "if everyone had remained silent, we might very well be dead." He also added that his own prison treatment improved markedly after U.S. congressmen began calling for his release.

Vins is right. We must speak out in places where it counts. To protest the persecution of Christians is the aim of a newly founded religious freedom committee. A number of U.S. Christians formed a group called "Freedom of Faith: A Christian Committee for Religious Rights."

*Christianity Today*, which wrote about this committee, said: "The group's announced goals are the protection and promotion of religious freedom throughout the world and the dramatization of violations of religious freedom wherever found." The article also said: "The group plans to document and publicize specific cases of religious persecution. Then it hopes to mobilize public opposition to an offending country through letter writing and other methods." The Committee's acting executive director, lawyer Robert R. Andrews Jr., mentioned in an interview that Freedom of Faith will focus its attention on countries where effective action can be brought and where accurate information is available.

Should Christians be surprised when persecution comes their way? Not so! Our Lord not only warned us, but assured us that persecution will come when we live for Him. "If they have persecuted me," He said, "they will also persecute you." However, the Lord also told us to be faithful unto death, and that He would give us the crown of life.

When persecution comes, Christians are tempted to think that God must be angry with them. In our success-oriented society, even Christians are promised by some leaders, perpetual success. "Christ meets all your needs." "He is the Great Problem Solver." But the Lord has different standards for success. Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego literally stood up for their Lord when they refused to bow down to Nebuchanezzar's image. These three men were condemned to death, but the Lord was with them in the fiery furnace, and delivered them from it. In other words, the Lord doesn't exempt us from persecution but promises us help and His presence.

The blood of the martyrs is still the seed of the church. The twentieth century has witnessed more Christian martyrdoms than in any other century. Perhaps this explains the phenomenal growth of the church in our times. The Church of Christ is now in every continent. When the early Christians started to preach the Gospel, they remained in Jerusalem. Persecution scattered them throughout Judea and Samaria and the regions beyond. During the Japanese occupation of the Philippines, an evangelical pastor fled into the mountains of his island. After the war, he came out with a large group of believers who had come to know Christ through his faithful preaching.

When a young man who had become a Christian in another country was returning home, where the punishment for conversion to Christ was death, he was asked whether he was not afraid to go back. He replied, "I have already died with Christ." This absolute dedication remains a vital witness in the face of the oppressor. Jesus' words are still true today: "Blessed are they which are persecuted for righteousness' sake: for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Blessed are ye, when men shall revile you, and persecute you, and shall say all manner of evil against you falsely, for my sake. Rejoice, and be exceedingly glad: for great is your reward in heaven: for so persecuted they the prophets which were before you" (Matthew 5: 10-13).

### **Blessed at the Persecuted - postscript**

The series of articles "Blessed are the persecuted" were written more than one year ago, when I was still in the Philippines. Much has happened since in our volatile times. President Macras Nguema, the dictator of Equatorial Guinea and relentless persecutor of the Church, has been overthrown and executed. Rhodesia has become independent Zimbabwe with the former guerilla leader Robert Mugabe as prime minister.. Life goes on. The Gospel is proclaimed via radio, printed page, through the faithful and persistent work of missionaries in many lands. Totalitarian regimes continue to consider the church of Jesus Christ important enough - to be worthy of persecution.

Many North American fundamentalists and evangelicals are waiting for the rapture. They believe that the Church will not have to suffer throughout the prophesied period of great tribulation. Hal Lindsey writes in his *There's A New World Coming* that the avalanche of God's judgment to come during the period of great tribulation is "so terrible that God isn't going to let His Church go through it. This tribulation isn't for God's people, but for those who have rejected His salvation." Christians in Russia, China and in many other oppressed nations, believe the opposite. Their great tribulation is now. They are travelling through the fiery valleys of trial for Jesus' sake at this very moment.

Ever since the 1920's, Christians in Russia have been hunted down. The crimes committed against them have been vividly and dramatically described by Solzhenitsyn in his novel *One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich*. He tells about the daily routine of a Russian labour camp and mentions the behaviour of the Baptist Alyoshka: "What reason could he have to be happy? His cheeks were hollow, he lived strictly from his rations, he did not earn anything extra. Each Sunday, he sat mumbling, together with

the other Baptists. They shook off the afflictions of the camp life as a duck shakes water off its back."

While the world's attention has been diverted to the Iranian crisis and the debates about Olympic games, all but a few leaders of the Christian Seminar on Problems of Religious Renaissance have been imprisoned by the Russian secret police, the KGB. This seminar was begun five years ago by young activist Russian Orthodox intellectuals.

The resurgence of Islam continues to make headlines. Newspapers discuss the spending of the petro billions and the political implications of Muslim fundamentalism. Little is said about the oppression of Christians in Islamic nations. In January, three Coptic churches were fire bombed in Alexandria, Egypt. Shawky F. Karas, president of the American Coptic Association, said that members of a fundamentalist segment of the Muslim Brotherhood were responsible. The German news service IDEA reports that a literature centre in Khartoum, Sudan, has been closed for having distributed "anti-Islamic" literature. The manager of the centre, a Swiss doctor, has been expelled from the country, 20,000 copies of Christian publications were confiscated and Sudanese members of the staff were held for questioning.

Persecution is intensifying in these apocalyptic times. Totalitarian regimes, whether Muslim or communist, right or left wing governments, continue with their ruthless persecution of the Church of Christ. In many nations the Church is under the shadow of the cross. Yet we also see revival. The Church continues to grow, especially in countries where it takes courage to be a Christian. Where it costs little to be a follower of Christ, it seems that the Church is on the decline. Isn't it true, that the Lord often uses tribulation to refine His Church?

We are living in exciting times. We see God at work in the midst of the political uproar and tensions in the nations of the world. I believe that we see today before us the enactment of the words of the book of Revelation given to John, the persecuted saint of God on the island of Patmos: "He (the beast) opened his mouth to blaspheme God, and to slander His name and His dwelling place and those who live in heaven. He was given power to make war against the saints and to conquer them. And he was given authority over every tribe, people, language and nation" (Rev.13:6,7 NIV).

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