

# Religion Heart of U.S. Rights Stance

Under instructions of President Jimmy Carter, the United States delegation to the Belgrade, Yugoslavia, conference on East-West cooperation will hit hard on the human rights issue.

And a major focus of the U. S. concern is expected to fall on the status of religious freedom in East Europe and the Soviet Union since the signing of the Helsinki Declaration in August 1975.

The Belgrade conference, scheduled for September, following preliminary meetings in June, is a sequel to the 1975 Helsinki, Finland, summit meeting on European Security and Cooperation of 35 countries, including all European states except Albania, plus the U. S. and Canada.

The Soviet Union had long pressed for the summit meeting seeing it principally as a means of winning endorsement of the status quo in Europe and of the post-World War II frontiers.

At the insistence of Western countries, however, the Helsinki Declaration which all 35 nations signed, included a so-called "basket three" section, aimed at attaining greater movement of people and ideas across East-West frontiers.

Among the section's provisions was the formal pledge to "recognize and respect the freedom of the individual to profess and practice, alone or in community with others, religion or belief in accordance with the dictates of his conscience."

The Belgrade meetings are designed to review how each of the signatory nations has lived up to its pledges.

From expert testimony here and abroad, however, it already appears that the Soviet Union and other European Communist nations have failed to honor their signed pledge on freedom of religion.

In recent testimony before the U. S. Commission on Security and Cooperation in Europe, set up to monitor compliance with the Helsinki accords, a veteran observer of the East European scene declared that the status of religious freedom in East Europe, since Helsinki, "fails to demonstrate any significant improvement," adding, "on the whole, there is an increase of violations."

The Rev. Blahoslav Hruby, executive director of the New York-based Research Center for Religion and Human Rights in Closed Societies, noted in his testimony that "although conditions in Czechoslovakia, East Germany, Hungary, Poland, Romania, Bulgaria, and Yugoslavia vary to a certain degree, depending on particular historical, ecclesiastical, socio-political and national aspects, certain common elements of Communist attitudes and policies toward churches and religion apply to all Communist countries in Eastern Europe."

Among the common elements, said the Czech-born editor of "Religion in Communist Dominated Areas," are "manipulation and infiltration of churches, curtailment and censorship of religious press, discrimination against believers and limitation of enrollment in theological schools."

A barrage of informed criticism has been let loose on the Soviet Union, the prime mover of the Helsinki summit.

At a meeting in March on religious liberty in the USSR, sponsored by the National Interreligious Task Force on Soviet Jewry, Thomas Bird, professor of Slavic Languages at Queens College of the City University of New York, described Soviet religious legislation policy as a concerted effort to "undermine the spiritual and temporal power" of religious institutions.

Ilya Levkov, researcher-translator with the National Conference on Soviet Jewry, decried Moscow's "restrictions" on Jewish emigration, its "refusal" to grant Jews "cultural rights," and its "continuing" anti-Semitism.

The Rev. Alexander Veinbergs, pastor of the Latvian Lutherans of Washington, D.C. said the situation is "quite gloomy" and while the "old generation is taking the religious life very seriously, the young generation is being deprived of any religious education" and subject to heavy anti-religious propaganda.

Earlier, Father Alexis U. Floridi, SJ, a Byzantine Rite priest associated with the (Pope) John XXIII Ecumenical Center at Fordham University in New York, charged in a statement that since Helsinki, "repression of religious and civil rights in the Soviet Union" had "sharply risen."

The Jesuit pointed out that the Ukrainian Catholic Church "is still outlawed," and accused the Kremlin of subjecting the Roman Catholics in the Soviet



Any changes in the religious policies of the Soviet Government would probably have an effect on the personal lives of Russians of all faiths, including citizens shown in these photographs, who live in such far flung places as Bukhara, Samarkand, Toilisi and Moscow. (RNS)

Republic of Lithuania "to many forms of harassment, especially where young people are involved"

An appeal addressed to the Supreme Soviet by a group of Soviet Christian leaders, and given wide publicity over Vatican Radio, complained that the "difficulties of professing the Christian faith" were "particularly arduous in the USSR," and were "becoming more and more oppressive."

Among the signatories of the 15-page appeal were clergy and laity of the officially recognized Russian Orthodox and Lithuanian Roman Catholic Churches, and the "unregistered" Baptists, Pentecostals, Adventists, and the Church of Christ.

Declaring that "the facts are in front of everyone's eyes" and that "it is impossible to deny them," the appeal listed a "bill of particulars":

- Christians are authorized to attend specific worship services conducted by officially "registered" denominations, but are not allowed to voice their opinions on matters of church policy.

- Anti-religious publications are printed and widely circulated with state funds, part of which comes from the "pockets of believers," but "believers are denied the right to explain their thinking in publications or to respond to the accusations."

- No religious community may begin its rightful activity without prior (government) authorization and "without submitting to particularly humiliating conditions of control."

- Religious organizations do not have the right to carry out welfare activities, "in spite of the fact that the state, in all good will is not in a position to meet all concrete family needs."

- Religious organizations have no right to own property. All objects used in worship are the property of the state.

- Religious teaching is completely forbidden. "Many parents have suffered serious consequences for having gone against this prohibition."

- Places of worship are on the decrease. Some 10,000 Russian Orthodox churches have been closed down by government decree in recent years. Other Christian bodies have been similarly affected.

Organized religion in the USSR is entangled in a web of state controls clearly aimed at rendering it irrelevant and preventing its spread, analyses of Soviet legislation on religion show.

According to one such analysis prepared by the Zurich-based religious research institute, Glaube in Der 2 Welt (Faith in the Second World), "discrimination against the Church, against any form of religious practice, is woven into the very fabric of the structure of the Soviet state.

"Religious organizations are considered anti-social and any status granted them is in the nature of a concession, not a right."

Article 125 of the Soviet Constitution says: "In conformity with the interests of the workers and in order to strengthen the socialist system, citizens of the USSR are guaranteed by law — (a) freedom of speech; (b) freedom of the press; (c) freedom of assembly and of holding meetings; (d) freedom of street processions and demonstrations."

Notes the Zurich institute: "The key phrase here is 'In conformity with the interests of the workers. . . . In other words, any freedom of speech or of the press used for goals other than the workers' interest — in the interpretation of the state-controlled judicial authority — is not guaranteed, which, in the Soviet system, means forbidden."

According to current Soviet law, a "religious organization" — if it is to have the right to exist legally — must be "registered," have a special prayer building, conclude an agreement with (local) authorities, and "hire" for itself a priest or minister.

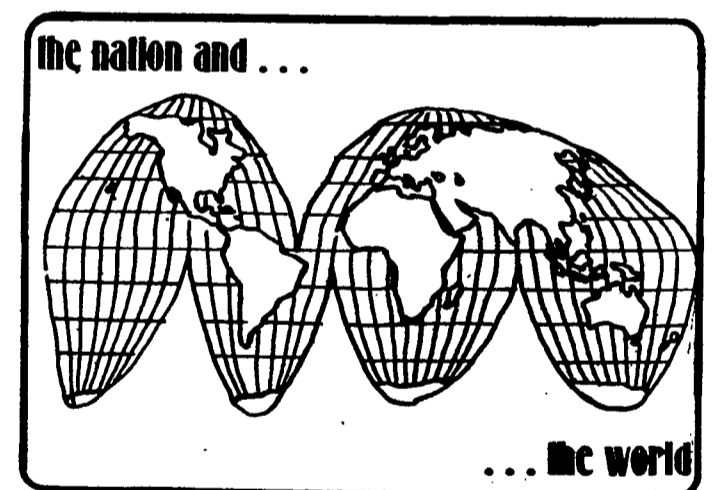
"Thus," comments Glaube in Der 2 Welt, "a group of believers, even three people, do not have the right systematically to pray together, to read the Bible, or to discuss religious topics with out special written permission from Moscow."

Even when registered, a religious association may not hold general meetings other than for prayer without permission of local authorities, acting through the Council of Religious Affairs.

Furthermore, the law forbids "teaching of any kind of religious dogma," even in church, because this is permitted "only in institutions of higher religious learning."

Nor are churches permitted to "give material support to their members," or to arrange special prayer or other meetings for children or young people, or to organize children's playgrounds or open libraries or reading rooms.

"The unmistakable conclusion to be drawn from analyses of Soviet legislation on religion," says Keston College — Centre for the Study of Religion and Communism, in Kent, England, "is that the fundamental laws of the USSR must be drastically changed before Christians and other believers will be raised from second to first class citizens."



The Rev. Sun Myung Moon's Unification Church in New York has been denied property tax exemption on two more properties valued at some \$10.2 million. The former New Yorker Hotel, World Mission Center for the Unification Church where some 600 members live, has been denied tax exemption along with the Manhattan Center nearby. In rejecting the Church's application for exemption, the New York City Tax Commission repeated its findings for three other church properties which were denied tax exemptions in April.

Dissident French Archbishop Marcel Lefebvre, C.S.Sp., has received front-page attention in the Italian press in recent days because of his plan to hold a "press conference-discussion" at the residence of one of Rome's noble families. According to Milan's Corriere della Sera, a leading Italian newspaper, the Italian nobility has begun "taking sides," as it has done from time immemorial, when the nobility was either "for Pope or Emperor" — today's "emperor" it implies, being represented by Archbishop Lefebvre, who opposes Pope Paul and the reforms of Vatican II.

Cardinal Terence Cooke has received the John LaFarge Memorial Award for Interracial Justice for 1977 from the Catholic Interracial Council of New York, which praised him for "commitment to human dignity" and lifelong support of human justice. In presenting the award to Cardinal Cooke, Mario Cuomo, the council's president and New York's Secretary of State, said the prelate had helped secure for minorities "the same rights and privileges enjoyed by others."