

Reviews

Christianity and the World Order

by Edward Norman, Oxford University Press, 1979, 105 pp., £1.50.

It is high time to speak out against "the reinterpretation of religious values as political values" and the loss of eternal perspectives. So I looked forward to Dr Edward Norman's Reith Lectures, but in the result I was disappointed. He does not "deny that biblical teachings have social consequences – they obviously do" but when he examines the application of faith to the affairs of the world, he is entirely negative. The World Council of Churches is one of his favourite targets, but if he had examined the teaching of the early fathers of the ecumenical movement from 1910 to the Second Vatican Council, he would have found the necessary corrective to most of what he deplors. Worse than that, he does not always get his facts right, and it is sometimes difficult to see which of several moving targets he is shooting at. What ought the Church's attitude to be towards society, according to Dr Norman? I cannot understand at all clearly what he is trying to say about this, and I doubt whether he is clear himself. A masterly – and devastating – analysis of the social content of these lectures is given by Professor Michael Dummett, the Wykeham Professor of Logic elect, in an address to a meeting organized by the Catholic Institute for International Relations (and published by them under the title *Catholicism and the World Order*). Read it if you enjoy close reasoning, and do not be put off if you disagree with some of the history in Professor Dummett's prolegomena.

Readers of *RCL* will be specially interested in what Dr Norman says about the position of religion in the Soviet Union. What are his sources? In reply to enquiries from Keston College he writes that he has visited the Soviet Union "where I was looked after by the State Committee for Television and Radio – and well looked after" and that his opinions, which he is satisfied are "substantially correct", were "based upon interviews with senior clergy of the Orthodox Church and with staff members of the State Committee for Television and Radio". He does not seem to be aware

that in the Soviet Union the same people frequently give contradictory views when they are speaking privately to someone they trust, and when they are speaking in the presence of authority. Indeed, there are indications by which Soviet citizens sometimes convey to those who can take a hint that, though a particular statement must be made, it is not to be believed. But it takes time to learn how to get behind the mask.

Nonetheless, many valuable things are said in the course of these lectures. In particular Dr Norman tells his listeners that in the Orthodox Church "the Sacred Liturgy . . . unfolds the very essence of the unchanging mysteries of transcendence. It is the disclosure of celestial truth, the very nature of Christianity itself". But it is very naive to go on to say that "the Russian Orthodox Church is satisfied" with the right to celebrate the liturgy. Apparently Dr Norman assumes that this right is unrestricted. According to him the ban on the import of Bibles into the Soviet Union is imposed at the request of the Patriarch of Moscow. In Gogol's *Inspector General* the *gorodnichy* excused himself from the charge of having flogged a woman by saying that "she flogged herself". Dr Norman says that the All-Russian Social-Christian Union for the Liberation of the People (VSKhSON) "seems to have stood for white supremacy, anti-semitism, and the establishment by force of a neo-Fascist state structure". To say this is to echo Soviet official propaganda, but much is known about the All-Russian Social-Christian Union from unimpeachable sources, and the truth is almost the exact contrary. [See "New Russian Revolutionaries" by Philip Walters, *RCL* Vol. 5, No. 1, pp. 23-6. *Ed.*]

It would be taking a cart wheel to crush a butterfly to go through all that Dr Norman says about the Soviet Union but, if challenged, I will show page by page that he has got much of his facts about the religious situation in the Soviet Union wrong. The pity is that the true facts would illustrate his thesis better.

Throughout Eastern Europe Marxism as a substitute religion is in total disarray. And in spite of cruel and prolonged persecution – now greatly reduced from its Stalinist peak but not yet ended – the Christian faith in the Soviet Union has stood firm for "that which was from the beginning" without innovations in doctrine and worship. The number of believers cannot be precisely calculated but it is certainly higher than in any country of Western Europe. Month by month the Christian faith is making fresh advances, especially among the educated intelligentsia, who under Tsarism were markedly resistant to all religion. The number of believing Christians is now far higher than the number of believing Marxists, and many secret Christians are found in the ranks of the Communist Party. In Eastern Europe religious values are not "reinterpreted as political values". They are defeating political values. Dr Norman can take comfort from that.