

# From the G.C. President

June 30, 1997

Robert S. Folkenberg

**Religious Liberty--Threatened, Celebrated and Abused** -- is prominent in this edition, simply because of several recent events. Permit me to highlight a few:

**! Threatened #1:** Pastor Vladimir Damko's meetings in Russia were closed last week and the microphone snatched from his hands (allegedly under pressure from the Orthodox Church) is an example of what the future may hold if the law passed by the Russian Duma last Monday (June 23) becomes law. The bill, "On Freedom of Conscience and Religious Associations," must yet pass the "Federation Council," and President Yeltsin has yet to reveal whether he will veto the bill or not. Critics say the bill is a gross violation of the constitutional guarantee of freedom of conscience and is harsher than the 1993 measure which was vetoed by Yeltsin.

Among a myriad of restrictions, the bill would prohibit religious organizations from involving children without the consent of both parents and forbid foreigners from engaging in religious activity unless invited from a registered Russian religious organization. And the qualifications to register are designed to exclude most religious bodies (including possibly our own church) and the "free" (from the Moscow Patriarch) Russian Orthodox Churches.

**! Threatened #2:** "In a 6-3 vote the U.S. Supreme Court struck down the Religious Freedom Restoration Act (RFRA) as unconstitutional because it intruded on the rights of the states," said Mitchell Tyner, GC Associate General Counsel. "The effect is to take away the single greatest weapon available to advocates of religious liberty in the U.S. It stripped away the last remaining protection for religious people and leaves them at the mercy of the political majority."

RFRA was passed in 1993 to reverse the Supreme Court's "Smith" decision in 1990 which removed the requirement for the government to justify any unintentional burden on religious practice. The removal of this test was a major dilution of the Free Exercise clause of the Constitution, according to Tyner. General Conference Religious Liberty Department Associate Secretary Wintley Phipps added, "This may be the beginning of a showdown between Congress and the Supreme Court and has the possibility to be the most serious constitutional crisis in U.S. history."

**! Celebrated:** The International Religious Liberty Association sponsored its Fourth World Congress on Religious Liberty in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil from June 23 to 26. In his welcoming message to the 400 delegates gathered from over 30 countries, Brazil's president, Fernando Henrique Cardoso, strongly endorsed the vital importance of religious freedom in today's world. He noted that the "most tragic" abuses of modern religious intolerance stem from "the attempt to impose restrictions on freedom of religion and worship."

Carlos Saul Menem, Argentina's president, said the congress was "a valuable contribution leading people and governments to accept with renewed force the defense and promotion of religious liberty as essential for the dignity of the human person and for the peace of the world on the verge of a new millennium." United Nations Special Rapporteur on Religious Intolerance, Abdelfattah Amor, warned of the dangers of abusing religious liberty. Amor joined an IRLA committee to hear seven cases of religious liberty violations, including religious motivated killings in Dagestan, Russia, civil conflicts in Chiapas, Mexico, and the case of the Church of Scientology in Germany.

The congress' concluding statement is found on the Adventist On-Line Forum or may be requested from the GC Communication Department (301-680-6312).

**! Abused:** Last Friday a full-page advertisement (sponsored by a West Palm Beach, FL "SDA Church") appeared in a Washington newspaper attacking the Pope and the Roman

Catholic Church. It is tragic when a group of individuals (the purity of whose motives only God can judge) speak out loudly and critically of the Roman Catholic Church, yet ignore the counsel of Ellen G. White and the warnings of Jesus.

"It will be impossible for us to avoid difficulties and suffering. Jesus said, 'Woe unto the world because of offenses for it must needs be that offenses come; **but woe to that man by whom the offense cometh!**," Matt. 18:7. But because offense will come, **we should be careful not to stir up the natural temperament of those who love not the truth, by unwise words, and by the manifestation of an unkind spirit. . . . We should not go out of our way to make hard thrusts at the Catholics.** Among the Catholics there are many who are most conscientious Christians. . ." (CW 62, 63 - *emphasis supplied*).

How long will it be until congregations protect the global church family by denying membership to those who make it more difficult to share the gospel in the context of our end-time message and also witness to the loving character of our Redeemer?

## Off the Back Burner

**Segment #70:** An interesting development regarding the abuse of inspired writings began 1884 when, the president of the General Conference, George I. Butler, authored 10 articles on the subject of "differences in degrees" of inspiration (RH: Jan. 8-June 3, 1884).

Ellen G. White kindly waited five years to respond, hoping he would recognize and correct his mistake. But when others began to teach Butler's point of view in Battle Creek College, Mrs. White saw the need for clarification. She wrote: "Both in the [Battle Creek] Tabernacle and in the college the subject of inspiration has been taught, and finite men have taken it upon themselves to say that some things in the Scriptures were inspired and some were not. I was shown that the Lord did not inspire the articles on inspiration published in the Review, neither did He approve their endorsement before our youth in the college. When men venture to criticize the Word of God, they venture on sacred, holy ground, and had better fear and tremble and hide their wisdom as foolishness. God sets no man to pronounce judgment on His Word, selecting some things as inspired and discrediting others as uninspired. The testimonies have been treated in the same way, but God is not in this" (1SM:23).

Writings are inspired or they are not. Prophets are genuine or they are impostors. Other than the difference between the common and the sacred, which should be obvious, no one is able to divide a prophet's writings into the inspired portions and the uninspired. As soon as one tries, the final arbiter is a person's own opinion.

Ellen G. White had counsel for those who reject the unity and authority of the Bible: "Men should let God take care of His own Book, His living oracles, as He has done for ages. They begin to question some parts of revelation, and pick flaws in the apparent inconsistencies of this statement and that statement. Beginning at Genesis, they give up that which they deem questionable. . . for Satan will lead to any length [that] they may follow in their criticism, and they see something to doubt in the whole Scriptures. Their faculties of criticism become sharpened by exercise, and they can rest on nothing with a certainty. You try to reason with these men, but your time is lost. They will exercise their power of ridicule even upon the Bible. . . Brethren, cling to your Bible, as it reads, and stop your criticisms in regard to its validity, and obey the Word, and not one of you will be lost. . . . We thank God that the Bible is prepared for the poor man as well as for the learned man. It is fitted for all ages and all classes"

(1SM:17, 18).