

Preface

Coping with the past

It is, of course, preposterous to talk today of 'Christendom', and yet a number of the momentous changes in Europe of the past year—both good ones and not quite so good—have some religious roots, and many of these religious roots go deep into the past.

Here we are not offering yet another overview of what has lately been happening in Europe. In this issue four very different authors consider seemingly very different issues.

Allan White, of the London Dominican community, whose April article 'Magna est Veritas et praevalabit' examined the similarities in the thinking of the present Pope and of President Havel, writes here on the place of Christian social thinking in the long thrust towards an integrated Europe.

Next, Nicholas Boyle, Fellow of Magdalene College, Cambridge, whose much-discussed article 'Understanding Thatcherism' we published two years ago, attacks the notion (particularly popular in Britain) that the reason why a re-united Germany will not once again be a threat to the rest of Europe is because there has been 'some putative change in national character'. We all agree that what kind of country Germany is going to be will affect the life of every European, and Dr Boyle's long new article, 'Understanding Germany', puts into their social context the ideas dominant in Europe's heartland over the past 500 years.

Thirdly, Mark Almond of Oriel College, Oxford, one of the most prominent authors on modern Romania in the West, writes on religion in Romania since the Revolution; lastly, Roger Ruston, a Dominican moral theologian now best-known for his careful critique of the theory of deterrence, faces the difficulties involved in remembering those two World Wars that destroyed most of the old Europe.

What reason have we got for bringing these four articles together, beyond the fact that they are all concerned with some aspect or other of 20th-century Europe?

A theme common to them all is that, not only in the past Europe but also (often in some sort of disguise) in the secularized Europe of our own lifetimes, religion has a socially formative role, sometimes helping to strengthen the divisions between peoples or the domination of them, sometimes aiding movements towards reconciliation.

Saying this, however, is not telling our readers anything very astonishing, although some of the remarks on the subject found here could surprise them. What, we think, is particularly interesting is what is

also said in this issue about the importance of corporate memory in modern European societies.

Europe has been the main arena of two wars in which altogether an estimated 60 million people died—three-fifths of them civilians—and Europe was reduced to bankruptcy. Hardly any adult Europeans have been utterly untouched by those wars or the Cold War. It is tempting to think that the past is better buried, and forty years ago, when it looked as if the world was going to be indefinitely divided into two power blocks hitherto unknown to history and Europe was sliced in half, it certainly seemed as if Europeans could bury their common past without much difficulty because 'Europe' had become rather an anomaly. But, now that it is the two superpowers which are bankrupt and Europe has again found its voice, it is obvious that it is impossible for Europeans to live for long as if they had no past: their past is much too strong.

Two of the articles here, those by Allan White and Roger Ruston, focus on the place that memory has in the lives of nations; Nicholas Boyle writes about the place that recovery of almost-forgotten elements of German life has had in the post-war restitution of Germany; Mark Almond writes on the persistence of religious loyalties (and, alas, conflicts) through 40 years of Communist rule.

Religion not only has a remarkable survival capacity; it also plays an important part in the preservation of a group's or a people's memory, and, providing that along with memory comes forgiveness, memory can help to heal and restore a society or a group.

But what, today, between different peoples, can this special kind of giving be which we call 'forgiveness'? Handshakes are not enough. Now, surely, this forgiving must most often take the form of acknowledgement that we have become dependent for our survival not only on being members of a nation but of a wider community as well. Or must it? Political commentators have done most of the writing in this area, but some issues arise which go beyond politics. It is high time that a little more was done in this area by theologians.

J.O.M.