

# Editorial

This year marks the Millennium of the conversion of Russia to Christianity in 988, and it was a privilege for this journal to have been able to celebrate the occasion with a special article in our last issue bringing readers up to date on the situation of Soviet believers today. A little background may be in order, before we comment on this great event. In 988, the Russian prince who accepted Christianity was based in Kiev, now the capital of the Ukraine. It was not until some centuries later that Moscow became the centre of the Church, and not until 1589 that its bishop was recognized as Patriarch. This means that some Ukrainian nationalists are claiming that the celebrations belong to them, not to the Russians, and there are suspicions that the Vatican may be encouraging this attitude for reasons of its own. There is a large number of Ukrainian Catholics in the Soviet Union who were forcibly converted to Orthodoxy in 1946, and the present Pope is trying to re-establish their right to exist.

The state is in a difficult position, because 988 has traditionally marked the beginning of Russian civilisation, which a bankrupt Communist regime is trying to harness in support of its own power. In a country where Russians make up only 52% of the population, but which they rule almost exclusively, in spite of apparently generous concessions to the various minority groups, the state cannot afford to attack Russian nationalism, from which it draws so much of its strength. On the other hand, it cannot afford to give too much to the Church, which so far has scarcely benefitted from the so-called policy of *glasnost* (frankness). The reason for this is simple. As the Polish experience has all too clearly shown, the Church is the only institution in a Communist state which can provide a focus for the opposition, and to give it special privileges is to open the door to an eventual loss of power.

Westerners may wonder how the Church can be the opposition in a country where it is expected that the hierarchy will loyally support the state, especially in its foreign relations. What we do not always realize though, is that in a totalitarian state, the very *existence* of such a body constitutes a challenge to the established order, and that when that order eventually collapses, the Church will re-emerge as an organization which will either have to be conciliated or controlled by the next regime. This is exactly what happened in 1917, when the Church, which had been deprived of its Patriarch since the 'reforms' of Peter the Great, used its moment of freedom to resurrect that office—a gain which even the Bolsheviks have been unable to reverse.

The Church is strong, in spite of outward compromise, because its spiritual heart has remained intact. We do not hear of liturgical

revision in Russia—new converts are expected to master the old liturgies, together with the spirituality they contain. Nor do we hear anything of liberal theology. A Russian Orthodox bishop may be forced to say, for the benefit of foreign journalists, that he fully supports the Soviet peace offensive in Afghanistan (for example), but he will never be obliged to deny the Virgin Birth, or the Resurrection of Christ, which some Anglican bishops have done without even being pressured into it by the state! Bold new initiatives in this or that, designed to unsettle the faithful, are never attempted; instead, there is a steady renewal of the inner heart, which does not need the outward structure to support or to reflect it.

What is more, Church unity is a reality in the Soviet Union to a degree which is still only imagined on paper here. The vast differences between Orthodox and Baptists pale into insignificance in detention camps, which are a far more effective spur to ecumenism than international conferences or doctrinal commissions. In the face of persecution, people have a way of getting their priorities right, and this has had a healthy effect on all the churches in Russia. This does not mean that if freedom ever does come, the old divisions will not break out again—they probably will—but it does remind us that a situation in which the Church enjoys middle-class privilege and affluence is not necessarily the best atmosphere for spiritual growth.

To honour the Millennium of Russian Christianity is more than just the tribute due from one great branch of Christendom to another. For Russians, it is an event of great symbolic importance, because it is a reminder that whatever the gates of Hell may have attempted against their Church, they have not prevailed. The present troubles are not the first—they must be seen against the backdrop of Mongol and Polish invasions (thirteenth and seventeenth centuries), the attacks of Enlightenment reformers and superficially Westernised intellectuals (eighteenth and nineteenth centuries), and godless atheism of a kind which Mr. Gorbachev would never dare attempt (1920s and 1930s). In this perspective, the reconversion of a significant proportion of the intelligentsia, which has been going on since about 1900, and which the Revolution interrupted but did not stop, is a sign of health which we in the West can only envy. How much more intelligent—and effective—the Bolsheviks would have been if they had allowed the Church to retain its institutions, to drown itself in paperwork and liberalism, and to become the buttress, rather than the scapegoat, of the new society!

As history has evolved, that fate has been ours, not theirs, and today we look to the East in admiration for the spirituality which the desert of Communism has managed to produce. The Russians, and all the oppressed nationalities of the Soviet Union, deserve our profoundest gratitude on this great anniversary for having kept alive the flame of faith, hope and love. We can only pray that that flame

will help light a fire in this land, which—like the fire which lit the funeral pyre of Latimer and Ridley—will not be put out by the faithlessness of the Church in this generation in England.

**GERALD BRAY**