

Editorial

In the year 987, Prince Vladimir of Kiev, a shrewd and ruthless ruler, accepted Christian baptism. For good political, economic and diplomatic reasons, he chose "the Greek faith" — that is, Byzantine Christianity.

Before long, early in 988, there was a mass baptism of many of his subjects in the river Dnieper, and it is this event which is taken to mark the "Baptism of Rus' ", whose millennium is to be celebrated next year by the Christians of the Eastern Slav lands — the Ukraine, Belorussia and Russia — who trace the origin of their churches back to 988. This special "thematic issue" of *RCL* forms part of Keston College's contribution to those celebrations. The articles in this issue have been commissioned by Jane Ellis, who is also jointly co-ordinating a conference on the same theme, to be held in July 1988.

What happened back in the 10th century is, inevitably, somewhat obscure — although Muriel Heppell's introductory article (which, exceptionally, deals with a period outside *RCL's* domain) does much to clarify, and to provide the historical and geographical context. The events of the centuries which followed, during which Rus' fell, and new Eastern Slavic nations and political powers emerged from the ensuing succession of invasions and alliances, are also subject to conflicting interpretations. But "the obscurest epoch is today", and the present-day situation of those peoples and their churches — the subject of our other articles — is no less a matter of controversy. We must frankly admit that, in their different ways, these articles might cause offence to one or more of the national, religious or political groups under discussion.

Coelestin Patock, for instance, in his article on "The Bishops of the Moscow Patriarchate Today" (pp. 278-90), besides attributing the bishops' loyalty even to an atheist state to the Byzantine origin of their church, also considers it to be a consequence of certain character traits of the Russian people — which traits many Russians might hold to be

no more than a caricature. William van den Bercken (pp. 264-77) takes the Russian Orthodox hierarchy to task for allowing themselves to use "spiritual" or Biblical language in support of the state's propaganda requirements. He does concede that other national and religious groups (the Ukrainian Catholics — another group who claim the inheritance of Vladimir's baptism — are specifically mentioned) are also guilty of too easily identifying religious with national interests — as are many Western Christians. Ample scope for causing offence there!

Dimitry Pospelovsky's article, "Russian Nationalism and the Orthodox Revival" (pp. 291-309), very clearly identifies Orthodoxy with Russianness — despite the author's concession that a *non* Russian also can feel spiritually at home in the Orthodox Church. Instances are cited of people for whom Russian nationalism, consciousness of their national identity, was the starting-point of their journey towards Orthodox Christianity; and examples of the converse process — a turning to the church resulting in a discovery of national consciousness — are also given. This is one reason why the Soviet state has never really succeeded in harnessing the force of nationalism for its own benefit: it could not do so without opening the door to the church as well.

But Pospelovsky also draws our attention (pp. 296-97) to small indications that the Gorbachev regime might be prepared to acknowledge a possible positive role for the church in reversing the moral decline and in dealing with the chronic corruption in Soviet society. The social problems are enormous, but Gorbachev has demonstrated great determination in tackling them, and in some areas — the fight against alcoholism, for instance — is beginning to enjoy a measure of success (see John Anderson's *Chronicle* article, pp. 320-23).

Could Gorbachev ever dare to harness the moral strength of Christianity? Christianity cannot be confined within geographical or ethnic boundaries, and its message far transcends any disputations about which church, or which people, has the best claim to celebrate an event of 1,000 years ago. Its message cannot be corrupted by any state's attempt to exploit its celebrations and festivals for political advantage. The Christian gospel has the power to transform lives; and from transformed lives a transformed society can be built. That would be a *perestroika* worth achieving.

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