

Editorial

Addressing the September plenum of the CPSU Central Committee devoted to nationality issues, Mikhail Gorbachev noted that:

The position and role of the church in relations between nationalities is something that affects the question we are discussing today. It is well known that in the past hostility and conflict between different nationalities were in large part a consequence of religious intolerance. This factor also makes itself felt today. We appreciate the peace-making position of the Russian Orthodox Church, Islamic and other religious groups, and we hope that they will use their influence to help avert and resolve inter-ethnic conflicts.

Whilst one might dispute the 'in large part' it does indeed remain tragically true that the combination of religion and nationalism has not always been a happy one.

Religious and national groups do, of course, have some things in common. Both place an emphasis on non-material values and on loyalty to something beyond the self; less fortunately perhaps, both tend to exclusivity and wariness of the outside. Yet, though sharing certain characteristics, religion and nationalism are not coterminous. Religious belief systems have in some historical periods been granted allegiance by sizeable majorities of ethnic populations, but they do not in and of themselves define those communities. In Poland the Roman Catholic Church may have provided a focus for national aspirations in more recent times, but arguably defence of territory and language played an equally important part in the partition years. And even today to speak of 'Catholic Poland' has the effect of denationalising those Poles who are not Catholics. Hence the current Polish Protestant suspicion of the semi-institutionalised role of the Catholic Church in the new political dispensation.

What is clear, however, is that religion has played a central role in defence of the nation in much of the communist world during recent years. Both articles in this issue of *RCL* touch on the complex relationship between religion and nationalism. As Stephen Jones suggests, Georgian nationalist activists have seen the Georgian

Orthodox Church as playing a vital role in the preservation of national culture and the struggle for greater political autonomy, yet in the past those same nationalists have been extremely critical of what they viewed as the church's excessive subservience to the state (pp. 292-312). The church for its part may well see the maximalist demands of the nationalist groups as detrimental to the long-term well-being of the nation. And even though the Georgian Orthodox and Polish Catholic churches cannot be compared in terms of their dealing with the state, it seems likely that similar ideas shaped the views of some Polish hierarchs during the martial law years and earlier.

In some areas national and religious conflicts overlap. Students of Soviet religious policy are well aware that the Russian Orthodox Church is proving as much an obstacle to the legalisation of the Ukrainian Catholic Church as the Soviet state though, of course, without the power of the latter to effect a decision. Yet, as Myroslaw Tataryn points out, many Orthodox theologians and activists see no reason for their church to be involved in the persecution of another religious community whatever their doctrinal disagreements (pp. 313-31). From the state's point of view bringing religious arguments into the public domain may also serve to highlight potential conflicts between east and west Ukraine and thus weaken the impact of nationalism in this sensitive region of the USSR.

Even limiting ourselves to Christianity in its various forms shows the complexity of the relationship between religion and nationalism. Under pressure religious and nationalist groups can often work together, but their long term interests are by no means identical. And as the communist systems in the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe open up, strains between the two are likely to become more obvious. From a Christian perspective, this is not necessarily a regrettable development. Complete harmony between a church and the state or nation with which it coexists should excite suspicion; tension in the relationship bespeaks creative vitality.