

RELIGION, STATE and SOCIETY

Volume 22 Number 2 1994

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Editorial

This issue of *RSS* looks at the question of religious education in postcommunist conditions, and specifically in Russia and Ukraine; and even more specifically in the context of Russian Orthodoxy as represented by hierarchy, clergy and laity.

The article by Yevgeni Polyakov was written at the end of 1991, in the very month when the Soviet Union and the Soviet system were officially terminated. Polyakov's article is a reaction, by one personally closely involved, to the perceived passivity of the church leadership in that year, and hence it is at times indignant, even passionate in tone. His basic contention is that the leadership of the church was fatally hampered by decades of subordination to the secular authorities. 'Throughout the years of Gorbachev's *perestroika* the Moscow Patriarchate was trying neither to fall behind nor to overtake the rate at which timid democratic changes were developing.'

William van den Bercken's article takes the story up to May 1993. It is primarily a survey of events and the author says that it is complementary to some of his more analytical articles, two of which form the final chapters in his recent book *Christian Thinking and the End of Communism in Russia* (IIMO, Utrecht-Leiden, 1993). He recommends that it be read in conjunction with these. He points out certain developments in areas where Polyakov perceived or predicted only continuing inertia. To take just one example, the *Journal of the Moscow Patriarchate*, of which Polyakov is very critical, was restructured in January 1993. Developments continue to overtake the situations described in our articles on religious education – witness the update to the story of Fr Georgi Kochetkov's activity appended to his article.

Fr Veniamin Novik writes that 'If one had to describe the spiritual condition of Russia in one word, that word would be "schism". . . .' In his article he attempts to discern ways in which Orthodox theology might be able finally to tackle this problem, which he sees as a salient feature of Russian spiritual history. All our contributors are regretfully in agreement that schism certainly is a salient feature of Russian society in the postcommunist period: mutual suspicion and mistrust are hampering effective cooperation in the task of reconstruction. Moreover, it is a feature of the church itself just as much as of the secular world. 'During 1992', writes Bercken, 'the political polarisation in postcommunist Russia had its effect on the Orthodox Church.' 'At present,' agrees Bodrov, 'the church is strongly politicised and divided, as is all society.' Polyakov tells us that from 1989 there were voices within the Russian Orthodox Church calling for the convening of an All-Russian Church Council which would involve the whole church community, clergy and laity, as well as representatives of the Church in Exile and the catacomb church. In the middle of 1994, this aim seems as far away as ever: Bercken describes continuing problems between the Moscow Patriarchate and the Russian Orthodox Church Abroad over jurisdiction within Russia, and the continuing even more complex problems in Ukraine, where there are at least three rival Orthodox jurisdictions.

The political and social climate encourages schism; unfortunately the same tendency is being reinforced in the spiritual life of the church in the postcommunist

period. During communism, both Fr Gleb Yakunin and Bishop Ioann (now Metropolitan Ioann of St Petersburg) were a thorn in the side of the secular authorities. At the time of the procommunist coup in August 1991, as Polyakov reminds us, both of them were explicit in their condemnation of the plotters. Fr Gleb continues his democratic political activity to this day, and has been defrocked for his pains; since 1991, however, as Bercken points out, Metropolitan Ioann has been speaking out about the Jewish ‘conspiracy’ against Russia and has called on the mayor of St Petersburg to ban the activities of the ‘false prophets’ of ‘pseudo-Christian’ western sects in the city. We thus see that a basic question needs to be asked about anyone who resisted the Soviet system: did he or she do so because it was totalitarian, or because it was atheist? An individual in the former category will very likely still be found in the camp promoting democratisation, pluralism and freedom of conscience. An individual in the latter category, by contrast, will now tend to be defensive of the ‘truth’, conservative, triumphalist, intolerant of innovations in the spiritual sphere.

In these circumstances, any incipient religious revival in society will face problems. There is of course a spiritual search of vast dimensions going on in postcommunist Russia; but newcomers to the church will tend to be put off by the strife and confusion they encounter. ‘The religious boom has been gathering strength,’ writes Polyakov; ‘but it would be a great mistake to confuse this with a national revival of Russian spirituality.’ Bercken agrees: ‘One should not idealise the “religious renaissance”. . . . It is incorrect to speak of an enormous growth of Christianity.’ As Bodrov notes: ‘It appears that we are witnessing a rapid religious revival in Russia. . . . But the majority of the newly baptised, having initially followed the fashion, now no longer go to church.’

Hence the vital and urgent need, as our contributors see it, for the regeneration of religious education in Russia. In Polyakov’s opinion, ‘At the beginning of *perestroika*, the educational work of the ROC had reached a complete dead end.’ The new religious education must not be confined to those already inside the church, however. Fr Georgi Kochetkov stresses the need to overcome divisions in society. His church was, he says, the first in the country to declare itself a missionary parish – and its mission was to the ordinary people of Russia who constitute a spiritual desert. He introduced the practice of celebrating the liturgy in Russian rather than Old Church Slavonic; his desire was that the sanctuary should no longer be cut off from the main body of the church, or the clergy from the laity. ‘There is an obvious need for a broad dialogue between the church and the various sections of society,’ says Bodrov.

But what language should this dialogue be conducted in? This language has yet to be created. . . . Again and again we come up against the problem of Christian education: an education that is open and accessible to wide sections of the population, an education that is rooted in the Orthodox tradition and which also takes into account the development of modern society and science.

Starting from the same Orthodox tradition, Nataliya Pecherskaya would wish to open up the perspective just as widely in a different direction. In order that Russian citizens should experience genuine freedom of conscience, she argues, they need to be able to gain a real knowledge not just of Russian Orthodoxy but of all alternative Christian denominations and also of non-Christian faiths. She says that St Petersburg is better placed than Moscow for this effort because the scholarly community and libraries there have been less eroded and the teaching traditions have more continuity. (As

Anas Khalidov reminds us, there has always been a Muslim community in St Petersburg which has consistently contributed to the cultural life of that city.)

Bercken reports that a conference in Russia on the future of religious education in June 1992 found that there was a contradiction between the great spiritual resources for religious education and the inadequate economic resources. It is therefore a good thing that efforts to revive Orthodox education are receiving support from the secular academic establishment. Bercken quotes the Russian vice-minister of education as hoping that with the help of the spiritual values of Orthodoxy the church will succeed in training the new generation of children to become responsible free personalities. Sadly, as the tribulations of Fr Georgi Kochetkov attest, it is from within the *church* establishment that those attempting experimental outreach into society are encountering difficulties.

Peter Kuzmić argues not only that pluralistic tolerance of belief and freedom of conscience have failed to materialise in postcommunist Europe, but that developments in many countries are moving in the opposite direction. He calls on religious educators to work to overcome denominational exclusiveness and the assertion of national superiority. All denominations, he argues, need to rediscover the evangelical purity of apostolic Christianity. This pure Christianity, however, must be applied in very practical ways. 'The salt of the Evangelical Gospel in Russia or Ukraine needs to enter the Russian or Ukrainian soup.' The Gospel message, once rediscovered, needs to be firmly recontextualised, to be made relevant to the specific circumstances and specific contemporary needs in each country.

July 1994

PHILIP WALTERS

Notes on contributors

William van den Bercken is a member of the staff of the Interuniversity Institute for Missiological and Ecumenical Research in Utrecht and lecturer in Russian History at the University of Utrecht. He was recently appointed extraordinary professor of Eastern Christianity at the Catholic University of Nijmegen.

Aleksei Bodrov has a doctorate in physics from the Moscow Physico-Technical Institute and is now executive director of the Open Orthodox University founded by Fr Aleksandr Men'.

Evgeni Dainov is a political scientist and was a lecturer at Sofia University until 1990 when he resigned his post to involve himself in practical activity for political change in Bulgaria.

Anas B. Khalidov, who has a doctorate in philology, is a professor at the St Petersburg branch of the Institute of Oriental Studies of the Russian Academy of Sciences, where he is head of the department of Middle Eastern Studies.

Fr Georgi Kochetkov is rector of the Moscow School for the Advanced Study of Orthodox Christianity. He was formerly priest-in-charge of the church of the Vladimir Mother of God; early in 1994 he was transferred to another Moscow church, that of the Dormition in Pechatniki.

Peter Kuzmić, a Pentecostal, is director of the Evangelical Theological Seminary in Osijek, Croatia.

Fr Veniamin Novik graduated as an engineer before becoming a student at St Petersburg Theological Academy where he is now a monk and dean with responsibility for the students.

Nataliya A. Pecherskaya has a doctorate in mathematics and works at the Institute of Socio-Economic Problems of the Academy of Sciences in St Petersburg. She is also director of the St Petersburg School of Religion and Philosophy.

Yevgeni Polyakov is a historian and archivist by training. Based in Moscow, he is a writer and reporter on current religious developments, with a particular concern for Christian involvement in democratic politics in Russia.

Michael Rowe, previously head of Soviet research at Keston College, is now a freelance writer, researcher and editor on religion in the former Soviet Union. His book *Religious Resurrection: Strength in Suffering – A History of Russia's Evangelical Church* was published in 1994.

Jonathan Rowland is a lecturer in Bible and Doctrine for the School of Theology at Westminster College, Oxford.

Jonathan Sutton is a specialist in Russian religious philosophy and the author of a book on Vladimir Solov'yev. In 1991 and 1994 he organised international seminars on aspects of Russian social and political thought. He is the representative in the UK of the St Petersburg School of Religion and Philosophy. He is currently conducting a research project on religious education in Eastern Europe at the University of Leeds.