

# RELIGION, STATE and SOCIETY

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## Editorial

Material in this issue of *RSS* once again demonstrates how in the postcommunist world religion may be working either in favour of pluralism or against it.

In his article on the role of religion in the war in former Yugoslavia, Srdjan Vrcan argues that there are two very different understandings of the phenomenon of communism. The first understanding, 'common in the Catholic Church', is that the Soviet system was 'the ultimate bastard offspring of the Enlightenment', 'the last caricature by those who would construct a world without God', and that 'consequently the fall of communism represents the victory of the church over modernity.' The other understanding, by contrast, sees communism as a failed attempt to create a surrogate religious faith in a secular age, to 'sacralise' politics; according to this interpretation, the primary function of religion in the transition from communism has been to compel politics once again to desacralise itself and to limit itself to its proper sphere.

In Vrcan's view there are now two distinct processes in operation, arising out of these two divergent understandings. The first process is one of 'inducing the political reinstrumentalisation of religion, which thus becomes one of the reference points for politics and regularly questions the categories of pluralism and therefore of democracy.' The second process, by contrast, is one which in the long term will induce the loss of relevance of religion in the social and political sphere. 'In the final analysis,' says Vrcan.

Those who appeal to ultimate and absolute references are facing the champions of democratic politics which, because it operates in conditions of pluralism, has by definition to be located in the relative. After the failure of communism with its ultimate references, sacralised and absolutised, the choice seems to be between politics with ultimate religious references, excluding pluralism (at least at the highest level), and politics with no ultimate references at all, no sacred absolutes, and hence coherently pluralist.

Vrcan's conclusion is that the war in former Yugoslavia is one with a profound religious element, but that it is not a classical religious war of the type well known to history. In formulating this conclusion he seems to be setting the war firmly in the postcommunist context, referring to the 'mixture of confessional and worldly components' in the faiths involved, and to the fact that these have undergone the 'absolutisations, sacralisations and reenchantments' which he has identified as the current consequences of the first of the two understandings of communism analysed earlier in his article.

For recommendations for Christians which arise out of the second type of understanding of communism as analysed by Vrcan we can turn to one of the speakers at a recent conference on the theme 'Hungarian Reformed believers in public life', quoted in his article by Joseph Pungur. 'Faith prevents a Christian from becoming *'homo absolutus'*, replacing *'deus absolutus'*. 'Christians must not accept any political organisation with a programme based on an ultimate claim.' 'While standing firm in their truth, Christians must be ready to listen to the opinions of others ...' because 'human values cannot be reduced to individual values, for these are merely

particular aspects of the full human life, and they are valid only if they are held in mutual relation with other people's values.'

Vorontsova and Filatov are able to distinguish two tendencies on the Russian religious and political scene today, which arise respectively out of these same two divergent attitudes.

The first leads to faith in God and Orthodoxy ... The political view which correlates with this movement is the desire to restore authoritarianism. The second tendency, which is obscuring the first and preventing it from going too far, is the move towards an amorphous, eclectic consciousness which is not denominational ... and moreover includes followers of untraditional beliefs ... This undefined and unstructured religious consciousness has grown perceptibly in recent years while our political consciousness has been making the swift transition to democratic values. The growth of a 'free', eclectic type of religious consciousness, a kind of philosophical 'entropy', and the growth of an aspiration towards democracy are phenomena which are parallel and mutually connected.

Vorontsova and Filatov report that sociological surveys in Russia show an increase in the number of 'just Christians' — that is, of people unwilling to describe themselves as belonging to any particular denomination. It is these Christians, they argue, who are naturally inclined towards pluralism. It is also within this sphere of religious 'amorphousness and anarchy' that the two sociologists see evidence of 'spontaneous ecumenism' — pluralism within Christianity itself. In his article on the 'Ekumena' movement, Sandr Riga too gives evidence for the link between 'anarchy' and 'ecumenism' as he describes the origins of the movement amongst bohemians and hippies — those who wanted 'to break through into the world beyond'.

Given the two divergent tendencies described above, it is clear that a potentially very important role in promoting reconciliation and mutual understanding in the postcommunist world devolves on those clergy and laypeople who while identifying themselves with their particular denomination are open to creative encounter with others of different convictions. Sandra Riga tells us that Father Aleksandr Men' was once asked 'aren't you afraid that your spiritual children will cool towards Orthodoxy if they take part in ecumenical meetings?' On the contrary, he answered, 'they will become better Orthodox if they are enriched with the knowledge of unity.'

## **Notes on contributors**

**Janice Broun**, a graduate of Oxford University, is a freelance journalist specialising in religion in communist and former communist countries. She is the author of *Conscience and Captivity: Religion in Eastern Europe* (1988).

**Felix Corley** is a writer and broadcaster on religious affairs in Eastern Europe, specialising in the Catholic Church. He is currently completing a book for Macmillan entitled *Soviet Archive Documents on Religion*.

**Sergei Filatov** graduated from the History Faculty of Moscow University. He has worked at the Centre for the Study of the USA and Canada in Moscow, and since 1989 at the Analytical Centre of the Russian Academy of Sciences. His book on Catholicism in the USA appeared in 1993, and he has also collaborated with Fr Gleb Yakunin on a book on religion and democracy.

**Serge Keleher**, a Greek-Catholic priest, graduated in political science from Michigan State University and has an MA in theology from the University of Toronto. A research fellow of the University of Toronto's Chair of Ukrainian Studies, he has been associated with Keston Institute since 1988.

**Yakov Krotov**, a deacon in the Russian Orthodox Church, is a journalist on religious affairs and also dean of the Philosophy and Theology Faculty of the St John the Theologian Russian Orthodox University.

**Joseph Pungur** was born in Hungary. He is a minister of the Hungarian Reformed Church and was formerly secretary of the Ecumenical Council of Hungarian Churches. For a time he was a member of the Theological Education Fund of the World Council of Churches. He is now adjunct professor of religious studies at the University of Alberta, Edmonton, Canada.

**Sandr Riga** was born in Riga, Latvia, and trained as an artist. He moved to Moscow in 1964 where he was involved in the hippy movement. He became a Christian in the early 1970s and went on to found the Society of Ecumenical Christians. He was arrested in 1984 and spent time in prison and psychiatric hospital before being released in 1987. In September 1992 he founded an ecumenical centre in Moscow.

**Lyudmila Vorontsova** graduated from the History Faculty of Moscow University. She is the author of a series of books on religion in medieval Russia and has organised exhibitions of medieval Russian art. Since 1989 she has worked at the Analytical Centre of the Russian Academy of Sciences.

**Srdjan Vrcan** received his doctorate from the Philosophy Faculty at the University of Zagreb. His particular interest is the sociology of religion, and he is the author of many

books and articles. He was formerly co-director of the Seminar on the Future of Religion at the Interuniversity Centre for Graduate Studies in Dubrovnik. His position before retirement was professor of sociology in the Law Faculty at the University of Split, Croatia.

**Aleksandr Yagodovsky** was born in Moscow in 1969 and works as a guide, interpreter and translator. He is a student of theology and the history of religion at the Open Orthodox University and a member of the Orthodox Peace Fellowship in Amsterdam. In 1993 he spent a term in Birmingham at Woodbrooke Study Centre, a Quaker foundation.