

## **The 1994 Moscow Conference on Christian Faith and Human Enmity**

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In the light of President Yel'tsin's violent and clumsy assault on Chechen separatism, Mark Frankland, writing in *The Observer*, warned that we should not be surprised and shocked. He argued that we in the West have pitched our expectations of post-communist Russia too high and that we therefore need to change our estimate of how quickly Russia can move towards our idea of what is normal democratic behaviour.

The same criticisms could be made about some of our western expectations of interchurch relationships in the postcommunist period. I fear that we may have overlooked too readily the fact that 70 years of religious oppression may have done more to entrench rather than to eradicate the nineteenth-century tensions within the Russian Orthodox Church between the Slavophiles and the Westernisers. We should have expected a resurgence of such tensions once the Russian people were free again to discover their cultural past, and therefore refrained from pitching our ecumenical expectations too high. Yet, that being said, it is still deeply distressing to observe how interconfessional criticism and open hostility have seriously marred the life and witness of the Christian Church since the breakup of the Soviet Union.

It is against the background of such tensions and divisions that we must evaluate the importance of the conference on 'Christian Faith and Human Enmity' which was held in June 1994. The fact that the Russian Orthodox Church invited the Roman Catholic apostolic administrator in Moscow, Archbishop Tadeusz Kondrusiewicz, and the head of the Union of Evangelical Christians and Baptists, Petr Konval'chik, to co-chair this meeting is extremely significant. I believe that it would be wrong to take the cynical view, which has been expressed in some quarters in Rome and elsewhere, that the Russian Orthodox Church was pursuing its own hidden political agenda. In the present climate of uncertainty the Orthodox hierarchy in fact risks forfeiting popularity by publicly pursuing better ecumenical relationships. The conference, which brought together church leaders from the Commonwealth of Independent States, was, I believe, a genuine gesture to forge closer ties between the churches and to look for ways in which they can cooperate in addressing the problems of civil unrest, ethnic tension and economic hardship that beset the whole region.

In his opening address 'The Christian Attitude to Politics' Archbishop Kondrusiewicz observed that what united the conference participants was the belief that religion and politics do overlap in 'a concern for man and his welfare'. He also acknowledged, however, that the new political situation throughout the world is

challenging old models of church–state relations. Economic, political and religious pluralism, he claimed, are challenging the model of the religious state with one dominant religion. This crucial question needs to be continuously addressed if the churches in the former Soviet Union are to find a *modus vivendi* which will allow them to give effective witness in a divided society. The Moscow conference offered no instant solutions, but we have grounds for hope that in time it will bear fruit and come to be seen as an important step in a new era of ecumenical cooperation.