

# RELIGION, STATE & SOCIETY

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Editorial	315
Notes on Contributors	317
Petre Țuțea (1902–1991): the Urban Hermit of Romanian Spirituality ALEXANDRU POPESCU	319
How Russians See Us: Jesuit–Russian Relations Then and Now CONSTANTIN SIMON	343
Polish Jesuits Facing Communism and its Consequences BOGUSŁAW STECZEK	359
Trapped Between Two Churches: Orthodox and Greek Catholics in Eastern Poland SERGE KELEHER	365
Christ, Pilgrim on Russian Soil OLEG NIKOLAYEV	373
In Search of Faith, Part 3: Religious and Secular Impulses Among Hungary's Ex-Marxist Intellectuals JONATHAN LUXMOORE & JOLANTA BABIUCH	383
Volume Contents and Author Index to Volume 23, 1995	

## Editorial

In the subsection 'The Consequences' of his article in this issue of *Religion, State & Society* the Polish Jesuit Bogusław Steczek offers a succinct description of the spiritual damage wrought in his country by the communist system. In the context of similar damage in Russia, Oleg Nikolayev relates how in the Soviet era it was the elderly, culturally excluded from modern life, who became the 'last custodians of the precepts of a Christianity under siege' which was no longer the yardstick of daily life and behaviour. These people felt impotent to influence the younger generation, and were pessimistic in the face of the apparent power of evil.

It is therefore inspiring to read in the article by Alexandru Popescu about a paradoxical but not uncommon effect of compulsorily-imposed Marxist materialism: it unconsciously prepared the younger generation for the rediscovery of traditional Christian values. 'As a modern extension of the paradox of early Christian monasticism,' writes Popescu, 'in Romania under the communist dictatorship many political dissidents who had spent years under house arrest in the cities of the proletariat would turn themselves into urban hesychasts.'

St John Climacus writes of 'hesychasm': 'stillness of soul is the accurate knowledge of one's thoughts and is an unassailable mind ... the cell of a hesychast is the body that surrounds him, and within him is the dwelling place of knowledge.' Popescu's article deals with the life and works of the Romanian Christian mystic Petre Țuțea. The author locates him

within the Orthodox tradition which sees monasticism as a way of self-motivated, inspirational and non-intrusive mission. 'The man blesses the place,' says a Romanian proverb, not vice versa. The monk does not come out into society, but individuals are encouraged to go to the monastery.

An organisation with a traditionally rather different style of mission is the Jesuit Order. In this article on 'how Russians see us' Constantin Simon surveys the history of the response from one particular Orthodox realm to what were all too often insensitive overtures on the part of the Jesuits. Simon hopes that a long legacy of ill-feeling and suspicion can now at last be superseded, and looks optimistically to future collaboration between Catholics and Orthodox. He quotes the strangely prophetic words of the French Jesuit Philippe de Régis, who died in 1954 but who even then was looking forward to the time when it would be possible for missionary work to begin again in Russia. De Régis was firmly opposed to all who would set out to 'conquer' Russia for Roman Catholicism. It is worth repeating his remarkable words here, in English translation.

When Russia opens up there will be a great temptation for us to rush into this vast mission field as though it were virgin land to be brought under cultivation. We will burn with the desire to 'convert' these people, and this will provoke a violently hostile reaction from Orthodox circles. The

clergy will feel themselves under threat and will start looking out for 'wolves in sheep's clothing'; and so a rift will open up between the two halves of Christendom, which ought to be brought into unity rather than set against each other. There will only be one way to achieve this unity: impartial fraternal collaboration with the Russian Orthodox Church in the task of education and spiritual formation among the people.

In an article which is to appear in the next issue of this journal the Russian Roman Catholic Yuli Shreider writes of the small but significant number of Russians over the centuries who have found their natural Christian home in the Catholic Church. The poet Vyacheslav Ivanov was converted to Catholicism in exile in 1929 and became the director of the Russian department of the Vatican library. According to Shreider it was Ivanov who first used the analogy later echoed by Pope John Paul II: 'Europe must breathe with two lungs: Catholicism and Orthodoxy.' 'In order for this to happen, however,' writes Shreider, 'these two lungs need to share a common blood supply. It may also happen as a consequence of the existence of Russian Catholics within a Russian culture based on Orthodox foundations, who are as it were a channel to the sources of western culture.' Shreider talks about traditional Russian suspicion of 'Westernisers', and notes that this suspicion is currently being exacerbated as all kinds of undesirable 'western' products flood into the formerly communist countries. In his view, however, Catholicism is ideally a vehicle whereby an understanding of the Christian foundations of Western European society may be conveyed to Russia without in any way standing in opposition to the spiritual traditions of the East. It is a healthy thing that the choice of Catholicism should be available for Russians.

I believe that Russian culture can only gain by this as it engenders diversity, which is always beneficial to a culture if it is diversity in what is good rather than in what is evil ... Evil is monotonous and boring, but good is varied and creates myriads of unforeseen possibilities. In choosing the path to Christ we find many ways of following that path.

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PHILIP WALTERS

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**Jonathan Luxmoore**, based in Warsaw, is the Eastern Europe correspondent of the *National Catholic Register*, and covers church affairs in the region for various European and American newspapers and news agencies.

**Oleg Nikolayev** works in the Pushkinsky Dom in St Petersburg, an important centre for the study of medieval Russian culture.

**Alexandru Popescu** was the 1994 Devorguilla Scholar in Arts at Balliol College, Oxford, and is now working for a DPhil in theology at Oxford University.

**Constantin Simon** was born in New Jersey and studied in Rome and Munich. He is a member of the Southern Belgian Province of the Society of Jesus and since 1986 has been professor of Russian and Slavonic Church History at the Pontifical Oriental Institute in Rome.

**Bogusław Steczek** was born in Poland in 1945. He joined the Society of Jesus in 1963. After studying philosophy and theology in Kraków, Warsaw, and Rome, he worked in a retreat house. In 1984 he was appointed provincial of the Southern Polish Province of the Society of Jesus and in 1990 assistant to the superior general of the order for the Eastern European Provinces.