

RELIGION, STATE & SOCIETY

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Editorial

The remarkable testimony by Bishop Amvrosi von Sievers of the True Orthodox Church published in this issue of *RSS* is eloquent evidence of the indomitability of the human spirit. Sergei Filatov describes the True Orthodox as 'possibly the most persecuted religious group in Soviet times'. Like the Old Believers of the seventeenth century, who fled into the wilderness rather than compromise their principles, the True Orthodox rejected secular Soviet power and set about evading the persecution which followed. Amongst the unforgettable images summoned up by Bishop Amvrosi is that of a secret monastery inside mountain caves, accessible only in summer because in the winter the mountain paths were iced up, and only rarely heated in case smoke from fires attracted gunfire from Soviet helicopters.

One of the regions where True Orthodox have long been active, and where Old Believers have sought refuge, is Bashkiria. The latest report by Sergei Filatov, part of his systematic Keston-sponsored research project on religiosity throughout the Russian Federation, looks at the unique features of this multid denominational republic where the complex interplay of pagan, Muslim and Christian traditions has produced 'a seething vessel filled with mutinous factions disaffected for a variety of economic, political and religious reasons'. Both Filatov and Bishop Amvrosi von Sievers describe the reforming activity of Bishop Andrei (Prince Ukhtomsky), who as head of the Ufa (Bashkiria) diocese from 1914 was involved in establishing links between Orthodox and Old Believer churches. Now, in post-Soviet times, reports Filatov, 'the revival of the Old Believer faith and the True Orthodox Church seems to be going to happen very soon'.

For several years after the collapse of the Soviet system the True Orthodox were disorientated: the older generation of 'Fathers' had died out and they lacked leadership. Moreover, they continued to suffer discrimination. Bishop Amvrosi describes how he 'remained in hiding until 1990. Life became a bit more peaceful after the start of the so-called *perestroika*; but for True Orthodox Christians nothing really changed even then.' Then in 1993 the faithful discovered that their Bishop Amfilokhi, who they had thought was dead, was still alive. The True Orthodox hierarchy could maintain its continuity. Amfilokhi died in 1994, but not before he had ordained many priests to succeed him. What is clear, however, is that the revival of True Orthodoxy over the past two or three years has resulted in renewed active persecution. Keston has reported, and continues to report, on the tragic facts as they come to light.

The new illiberal Russian law on religion will make it easier for the secular authorities to persecute denominations they disapprove of. Behind the new law lie assumptions about relationships between religious faith, secular power and national identity. The complexity of these relationships is a theme common to many of the contributions in this issue of *RSS*.

Bishop Amvrosi recalls that when he was at school teachers made a distinction

between 'children from patriarchal church families and Baptist families' on the one hand and 'unacceptable ones, non-Soviet believers' on the other. Atheist lecturers would assert that 'there are now no contradictions between the Soviet state and the Russian Orthodox Church.' *Plus ça change ...*: analysing the role of religion in the 1996 presidential election, Edwin Bacon concludes that appeals to religion served mainly to signal patriotism rather than to justify particular policies; 'candidates tended to merge the concepts of religion and national identity ... identification with the Russian Orthodox Church signified patriotism.' Looking at the process of the reestablishment of the Russian Orthodox Church after the onset of *perestroika*. White and McAllister note that in the late communist and early postcommunist period it became clear that 'levels of identification with the Orthodox Church ... were considerably higher than the proportion of the population that reported a belief in God ...'

Filatov concentrates in the latter part of his article on the complex developments among the Muslims in Bashkortostan: the tension between moderates and more zealous reformers, and the changing attitudes of the secular authorities who on the one hand need support from the Islamic community and its leaders but who on the other hand are wary of anything which in the shape of religious fundamentalism might challenge their own authority.

Further afield in the postcommunist world, Byrnes examines the complex inter-relationship between the current nationalistic Slovak government, the Catholic Church in Slovakia and the Hungarian Catholic minority. It is clear that the leadership of the Catholic Church is ready to oppose many of the prime minister's more illiberal policies. At the same time, however, the bishops are opposed to the development of a distinctive Hungarian community within their own church. 'The fact that religious identity has not been able to subordinate national identity in Slovakia, where much of the majority and minority belongs to the same church, does not bode well for the potential influence of religious leaders in ... other cases where the religious and national cleavages reinforce each other', such as former Yugoslavia or Romania. Slovak Catholics may be rejecting the repressive policies of an ex-communist *nomenklatura* government, concludes Byrnes; but sadly 'renewed conflict between church and government ... does not necessarily imply new distance between church and nation.'

Relations between the nation, the state and religion will doubtless always be characterised by tension. At its best, this tension is creative. Filatov points out the paradox: faith forms the national character on which national identity depends; yet the spiritual search is by nature free. 'In all historical circumstances ... religious faith shows that it stands outside state, nation and society, and consistently betrays the plans and expectations of monarchs, presidents, secret police, collaborators and patriots.'

Notes on Contributors

Edwin Bacon is a lecturer in Russian politics at the Centre for Russian and East European Studies at the University of Birmingham. He was previously a senior research fellow in the Foreign and Commonwealth Office, and is the author of *The Gulag at War: Stalin's Forced Labour System in the Light of the Archives* as well as a number of articles on Russian security and politics.

Timothy A. Byrnes is an associate professor of political science at Colgate University, Hamilton, New York. He is the author of *Catholic Bishops in American Politics* (1991), and co-editor of *The Catholic Church and the Politics of Abortion* (1992) and *Abortion Politics in American States* (1995). His articles on religion and politics in the United States and Central Europe have appeared in a number of journals.

Sergei Filatov, born in 1951, graduated from the Departments of Psychology and History at Moscow University and then worked in the Institute of Sociology of the Academy of Sciences. He is now a scholar at the Institute of the USA and Canada and director of the Sociological Centre of the Russian Scientific Foundation. In 1990–92 he directed a Russia-wide sociological survey 'The Religiosity and World-View of the Russian People', and is currently head of the project 'Encyclopedia of Religious Life in Russia'.

Ian McAllister is director of the Research School of Social Sciences at the Australian National University, and was previously professor of government at Manchester University. His recent books include *How Russia Votes* (with Stephen White and Richard Rose).

Amvrosi von Sievers, Bishop Amvrosi of the Goths, is a bishop of the True Orthodox Church in Russia.

Stephen White is professor of politics at the University of Glasgow. His recent books include *How Russia Votes* (with Richard Rose and Ian McAllister) and *Russia Goes Dry: Alcohol, State and Society*.

CORRIGENDUM

In the section 'Notes on Contributors' in *RSS* vol. 25, no 2, 1997, the entry on Archbishop Aristarkh should read as follows:

Archbishop Aristarkh of Novozybkov, Moscow and All Russia is head of the Russian Old Orthodox Church, the smaller of the two Russian Old Believer Churches of the 'Popovtsy' branch.