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## Editorial

In the summer of 1998 Keston Institute and Leeds University cooperated in organising a conference on the theme 'Reflection on the Laity: a Focus for Christian Dialogue between East and West?'

The question of the role of laypeople in the Churches is a lively one in post-communist countries. In communist times the clergy were used to acting as lightning conductors and lay believers largely kept a low profile. As Aleksandr Filonenko notes in his article in this issue of *RSS*, the main feature of Orthodox life in the Soviet Union was 'closedness': 'the Church's ties with the social life beyond its walls were exceptionally weak', and this adversely affected understandings of the role of laypeople. Arthur Repp observes that as the Russian Orthodox Church emerges from decades of repression 'The past it must reclaim includes a period in which laypeople were among its most prominent scholars and teachers ...' Since the end of communism it is ordinary churchgoers who have once again frequently been making the running in areas like social work and education, and this has all too often led to ill-feeling and tension within the Churches.

The question of the role of laypeople is a lively one in the western Churches too. A few months before our conference, On 13 November 1997, the Vatican had released an *Instruction on Certain Questions Regarding the Collaboration of the Non-Ordained Faithful in the Sacred Ministry of the Priest* warning against abuses of lay ministry. Its contents came in for widespread criticism from Catholic clergy and laity alike. The 1998 conference was designed to be, and proved to be, a valuable forum for participants from many parts of Europe and the former Soviet Union to compare and contrast their experiences. Rowan Williams draws his arguments from Romanian, Greek and Russian Orthodox as well as Anglican theologians. One delegate observed of the particular case-study she was presenting that 'Analysis of this micro-study ... has a broader application and can illuminate the role of the Christian laity, actual and potential, in Eastern as well as Western Europe.'

In this issue of *RSS* we are publishing eight of the conference papers. The articles by Rowan Williams and Evert van der Zweerde seek theological and philosophical understandings. The other six papers arrange themselves into three pairs, each pair addressing from a British Christian and a Russian Christian perspective respectively aspects of the following: social action by laypeople; religious education; and the work of two remarkable laywomen.

Many of our contributors seek to give lay witness a proper ecclesiological placing. Rowan Williams argues that without a christological and trinitarian focus, 'all that is said theologically about the laity is likely to reduce itself to recommendations for good works'. Mother Mariya Skobtsova, the subject of the article by Grigori Benevich, regretted that many types of Christian social involvement were 'based on a certain rationalistic humanism' and did not 'seek spiritual and mystical foundations for their efforts'. Laypeople are called to imitate Christ in their 'willingness to stand with the victims', says Williams; the Church 'represents the calling of all human beings to belong together in justice'. Filonenko identifies *vulnerability* as an essential

element in lay witness, and suggests that the 'identification of the religious quest with *invulnerability* may be the most unhealthy manifestation of postsoviet religiosity.'

Williams says that 'Anyone may be befriended and *represented* by the Christians, by their freedom to stand with anyone and bear him or her to God in prayer.' There is no place, then, for exclusivism. Lay involvement necessarily entails openness to all, and should therefore involve ecumenical activity and interfaith understanding. Examining Christian lay involvement in Leeds, Stacey Burlet and Helen Reid find that in recent years there has indeed been 'an emphasis on developing ecumenical relationships. This has led to initiatives in which congregations of different backgrounds worship and/or work together in the area of social action.' Elizabeth Templeton argues that religious education which confines itself to the exposition of a single creed is theologically deficient: it produces 'a tribal attitude towards God and people of other faiths', whereas 'Christianity invites us to unconditional solidarity with the whole human race in the image of Christ'; she describes 'the corollary of loving, that one takes seriously what is precious to the other'.

Several of our contributors suggest that inasmuch as lay activists tend to have a clear vision of the future of the Church, lay involvement will frequently entail pressure either for changes in existing church structures or for a new theoretical view of the laity and its role. Some lay activists go so far as to ask that structures of *authority* be changed. 'This approach is more radical ... it may be perceived as an attempt to reduce the importance of the vocation of the ministry or priesthood, rather than as a simple request that Christian responsibilities be shared or social issues debated.' Williams shows that the priest is far from being the solitary representative of the people before God.

Williams comments that the 'people of God', the *laos*, is 'in important respects like a nation', and that an age like ours, with so much negative experience of nationalism, is not likely to be sympathetic to this idea. However, he argues, the purpose of the 'people of God' is to show what a nation *might* be: the knowledge that such a nation has been created relativises all other forms of belonging. 'All grounds of identity that rest upon natural kinship are put in question.' So the Church as a nation does not turn out to be collusive with exclusivism or tribalism. 'If the identifying mark of a citizen in the "nation" of the Church is ... a call to represent and to speak for any and every human person, then ... the purpose of that commitment is the giving, not the denying of a voice and a presence.' Benevich shows us how the sphere of active love on the part of Mother Mariya gradually widened:

It began as the love of a mother for her family, and developed into a spiritual motherly love for her own people by faith and blood – the Russian Orthodox émigrés. Her heart then opened to the truth of 'all-embracing motherhood', to love for those completely alien – to Jews persecuted by the world. In this way Mother Mariya was not closed to anyone in need of her love. This path seems to me to be the path of true openness to the world, to crucifixion for it and with it, a true model for the life of a 'layman'.

We hoped that our conference would form part of a cooperative research project involving Leeds and Keston. Lasting three years, the project would have involved field trips to urban Orthodox parishes in Russia, Romania and Bulgaria to discover to what extent lay believers were involved in social activity, the nature of that activity, and the theoretical framework within which it was conducted. Unfortunately we were

unable to secure funding; so the plan still remains on the drawing board.

Although we have so far been unable to start our research project we have set up the 'Keston-Leeds Laity Issues Monitoring Group'. This consists of ten people, most of whom were at the 1998 conference, who will monitor important developments affecting lay involvement in social activity in five geographical regions: the USA, the UK, Western Europe, Central Europe and the Russian Federation/Ukraine. In time the Group will decide whether another international conference on the subject will be helpful.

One particular concern of those involved in the research project would have been to enquire how far lay activities within the framework of the Church contribute to the evolution of structures for a 'civil society'. This specific issue was addressed at the conference by Evert van der Zweerde.

He notes that some observers have pointed to various lay developments in the milieu of the Russian Orthodox Church, such as Orthodox brotherhoods, as actors in an embryonic civil society, but he thinks that their credentials are questionable: *inter alia*, their 'inward orientation to church life itself' and their 'focus on tradition and conservation of traditional values' make these forms rather untypical. If the Orthodox tradition is to be part of the cultural and spiritual basis of civil society in Russia and Eastern Europe, he concludes, 'it will have to reform and modernise itself along lines similar to those of, for example, the Second Vatican Council in the Roman Catholic Church.'

Filonenko notes that in Russia 'people expend great efforts to preserve the spiritual experience of Orthodoxy, as it were behind a "fence", which the Church puts up to protect it from the world', but he argues that this is one of the phenomena in post-communist Russia which 'contradict [the] very essence' of Orthodoxy. Repp shows how in the late nineteenth century the lay Orthodox theologian Nikolai Glubokovsky held that alongside official church-run seminaries, theology should also be taught in university faculties, where it would be free to develop its own directions. To the objection that such theology would be prone to error, he countered with the example of the coexistence of Catholic and Protestant theological faculties in Germany, from which the Catholic Church 'had derived only benefit'. 'Why should we have such a low opinion of Orthodoxy', he asked, that we think it would necessarily be harmed by the same sort of exposure to independent thinking? In the same spirit, Metropolitan Anthony of Sourozh, head of the Russian Orthodox diocese in Britain, writes in a letter quoted by Filonenko:

We do not strive to make others just the same as us but, rather, we strive to share with them the transforming joy of the knowledge of God and of communication with him, so that others may become themselves, that is to say, as unlike us as they are unique in the eyes of God. It is not through uniformity that we wish to become one, but through the unity which is possible only through uniqueness.

## Notes on Contributors

**Grigori Benevich** teaches church history and Orthodox theology at the St Petersburg School of Religion and Philosophy. He spent a year studying in Oxford and is the author of several articles on Jewish–Christian relations and other modern theological themes. In 1997–98 he was writing a study of the religious philosophy of Mother Mariya Skobtsova in the context of Russian religious thought and modern feminist theology, with the help of a grant from the Research Support Scheme.

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

**Stacey Burlet** is a lecturer in South Asian studies at the University of Bradford.

**Sharyl Corrado** is assistant editor of the *East–West Church and Ministry Report*, published by the Institute for East–West Christian Studies at Wheaton College, Wheaton, Illinois.

**Mark Elliott** is a professor of history and director of the Institute for East–West Christian Studies at Wheaton College, Wheaton, Illinois. He is the author of *Pawns of Yalta: Soviet Refugees and America's Role in their Repatriation* (University of Illinois Press) and editor of the *East–West Church and Ministry Report*.

**Aleksandr Filonenko** graduated in nuclear physics at Khar'kiv State University in 1993, and subsequently moved in the direction of philosophy and theology. He is senior lecturer in the Department of History of Science and the Theory of Culture at Khar'kiv University. He was awarded a British Academy Visiting Fellowship which enabled him to come to Britain to do research on the Russian Orthodox community here in January and February 1998.

**Arvan Gordon** was researcher on East Germany at Keston College for 11 years until his retirement in 1991. He and his wife Elisabeth are active in church life in Herefordshire and he speaks from time to time on German affairs, past and present.

**Helen Reid** is the Faith to Faith worker for the Methodist Church in Bradford.

**Arthur C. Repp** has a degree in Russian language and literature on an MDiv from the Lutheran School of Theology in Chicago. He is currently completing a doctoral dissertation, *In Search of an Orthodox Way: the Development of Biblical Studies in Late Imperial Russia*, at the University of Illinois in Chicago. In September 1999 he will be taking up a teaching position in church history and historical theology at two Lutheran seminaries in St Petersburg.

**Jonathan Sutton** is lecturer in contemporary church–state relations and theology in Russia, Bulgaria, Romania and Ukraine in the Department of Russian and Slavonic Studies of the University of Leeds. He is the author of *The Religious Philosophy of Vladimir Solovyov: Towards a Reassessment* (Macmillan, 1988) and of *Traditions in New Freedom: Christianity and Higher Education in Russia and Ukraine Today* (Bramcote Press, Nottingham, 1996). He and Philip Walters of Keston Institute organised the conference ‘Reflection on the Laity: a Focus for Christian Dialogue between East and West?’ at Leeds University in 1998.

**Elizabeth Templeton** has worked for the last four years as development officer of the Christian Education Movement in Scotland, an ecumenical educational charity. She is a lay theologian within the Presbyterian tradition, and has written about Christian engagement within secularised Europe.

**Mitja Velikonja** is an assistant professor in the Faculty of Social Sciences of the University of Ljubljana, Slovenia. The main areas of his research are socio-cultural changes and religious-national mythologies in contemporary Central and Eastern European societies. He is the author of two books on contemporary mythologies and contributed a chapter to Paul Mojzes (ed.), *Religion and the War in Bosnia* (Scholars Press, 1998).

**Rowan Williams** has been Bishop of Monmouth since 1992. Before that he was Lady Margaret Professor of Divinity at Oxford University.

**Xuchu Xu**, currently teaching Chinese at two schools in Oxfordshire, is a freelance writer on current Chinese religious affairs for Keston Institute.

**Evert van der Zweerde** is a research professor in the Faculty of Theology of the University of Nijmegen, Netherlands, and affiliated to the Institute for Eastern Christian Studies at the same university. His PhD on the development of Soviet philosophy was published in 1997. His research interests are civil society (particularly in Eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union), the relationship between civil society and religion, and Russian philosophy. He is currently responsible for a research programme on the social and political philosophy of Vladimir Solov'yev.