

Editorial

In her article in this issue of *Religion, State & Society* Janice Broun focuses on a church which has been disabled by its close identification with the secular power. Bulgaria achieved its independence in 1878. The church was granted state subsidies, on which it has in fact remained dependent throughout modern Bulgarian history, and Orthodoxy was declared the official religion of the state. The whole period between independence and the communist takeover was marked by bitter antagonisms, with church leaders defending church autonomy as well as involving themselves in national politics. However, the result was a victory for the secular state. The politicisation of the church hierarchy is widely seen as a factor causing a decline in religious faith and observance among the population.

The communists brought church–state relations in Bulgaria to a logical conclusion. The church was named as the ‘traditional church of the Bulgarian people’ in the 1949 law on confessions, and the patriarchate was restored in 1953. Communist leaders regularly paid tribute to the key role of the church in preserving Bulgarian identity through centuries of tribulation. At the same time the church was transformed into an obedient and useful tool in the hands of the government, which consolidated its hold with persecution and the use of divide-and-rule tactics. This state of affairs manifested its harmful consequences as soon as communism came to an end. The Bulgarian Orthodox Church suffered a major schism in 1992; the original issue was the validity of the election of the patriarch in the communist period. The schism, which produced two rival patriarchal structures, has hampered the witness of the church and seriously lowered its public reputation.

In her article, Ina Merdjanova looks at the complex question of the relationship between religion and nationalism in Eastern Europe. This is an issue which affects churches of all denominations, as Anton Stres shows in his analysis of current antagonisms between the state and the Catholic Church in Slovenia. However, it is the Orthodox Churches in Eastern Europe for which the relationship between the church and the nation–state presents the most serious problems.

Autocephaly – independence and self-government – is an attribute of the major Orthodox Churches. Theoretically it offers no scope for isolationism or exclusivism. In early Christian times neighbouring communities of believers would form a local church. It was necessary however for all local churches to remain part of the Universal Church, and this contact and communion was facilitated by the bishops, who were in this sense the servants of the local church rather than representatives of some central authority. Autocephaly, then, affirms the integrity of each ‘local’ church community while asserting that each such community achieves its validation only within the Universal Church. Such continues to be the teaching of those with the profoundest insight into Orthodox ecclesiology.

The Orthodox Churches in Europe have spent much of their history under authoritarian or totalitarian control. This has had its effect on the nature of Orthodox auto-

cephaly; churches have emerged which are identified for better or worse with particular nation-states.

In the Ottoman Empire Christian subjects were allowed to maintain their churches and monasteries, and their religious leaders had a defined role to play. It was the local churches which did most to preserve the cultural heritage and separate identities of the various Balkan peoples.

Geographically closest to Constantinople, Bulgaria was to be the last of the Balkan Orthodox nations to gain independence. During the Ottoman period all Orthodox Christians in the Empire were placed under the authority of the Ecumenical Patriarch in Constantinople, who was a Greek. In Bulgaria it was soon customary to appoint not only Greek-speaking bishops but even Greek-speaking priests to purely Bulgarian parishes. By the 1840s the Bulgarians were demanding that they be given bishops who could at least understand their language. Growing unrest at last led the sultan in 1870 to recognise the Bulgarian Church as a separate religious community headed by an exarch, despite the resistance of the Ecumenical Patriarch.

The Patriarch's response to the so-called 'Bulgarian Schism' was to excommunicate the new church in 1872 for the heresy of 'phyletism', or maintaining that ecclesiastical jurisdiction is determined ethnically rather than territorially. The condemnation describes phyletism as 'the establishment of particular churches, accepting members of the same nationality and refusing the members of other nationalities, being administered by pastors of the same nationality'.

The new Bulgarian exarchate became the focus for the continuing Bulgarian national revival. Such was the extent to which the church was identified with the nation that it was the territories which comprised the exarchate which became the ideal of Bulgarian nationalists for a Greater Bulgaria.

The other Orthodox Churches in the Ottoman Balkans expressed support for the newly independent Bulgarian Church. Resistance to nationalism was by now hardly an option for the churches: it would have amounted by implication to acquiescence in continuing Ottoman control, which by the late nineteenth century was increasingly capricious and repressive.

The identification of Orthodox Churches with particular nation-states in Eastern Europe has had two major harmful consequences. First, most obviously in the case of the Serbian Orthodox Church, it has made it difficult for the churches to criticise the government, even when the latter resorts to aggressive chauvinism. Second, most obviously in the case of the Bulgarian Orthodox Church, it has meant that the churches run the risk of becoming mere tools in the hands of the secular politicians.

Since 1872 the Ecumenical Patriarchate has continued to condemn nationalism within Orthodoxy. In September 1995 the Patriarch hosted a meeting of Orthodox primates. They responded to western criticism that the close link between church and people in the Balkan countries had contributed to the Balkan war, and condemned any national fanaticism which might lead to hatred between peoples and to the extinction of the cultural and religious characteristics of other peoples. On 29 March 1999, in the midst of the NATO assault on Serbia, Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomaios sounded a stern warning against nationalism: 'even when nationalism invokes Christianity as a means to justify its end, this does not make it any less a heresy'.

Notes on Contributors

Branko Bjelalac is an author and freelance journalist based in Belgrade, and a regular contributor to the *Keston News Service*. He has a master's degree in theology and is chairman of IKONOS, an association for the promotion of Christianity in the Serbian media.

Janice Broun, an Oxford graduate, is a specialist writer on religion in communist and postcommunist societies. She has had several articles published on Bulgarian religious affairs since the early 1980s, and is the author of *Conscience and Captivity: Religion in Eastern Europe* (1988).

Ina Merdjanova received a doctorate in the philosophy of religion from Sofia University in 1995. She has been a visiting scholar at Oxford University (1992–93 and 1998–99) and at the Institute for Theology and Society in Munich (1997). In May–June 2000 she was based at Keston Institute as a British Academy Visiting Fellow and is now a Visiting Fellow at the Institute for Advanced Studies in the Humanities at Edinburgh University. She has published a book in Bulgarian on the human person and history in contemporary Orthodox thought and is now working on a book on nationalism, religion and civil society in Eastern Europe.

Anton Stres was born in Slovenia in 1942 and studied philosophy and theology in Ljubljana and Paris. In 1968 he became a Catholic priest and in 1972 began teaching philosophy at the Catholic Faculty of Theology in Ljubljana. In 1985 he was appointed president of the Justice and Peace Commission of the Slovenian Bishops' Conference. In 1999 he was elected dean of the Faculty of Theology at the University of Maribor and in 2000 he was appointed auxiliary bishop of Maribor.