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# RELIGION, STATE & SOCIETY

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## Editorial

Several articles in this issue of *Religion State and Society* deal directly or indirectly with the question of relations between the state authorities and the major 'traditional' or 'dominant' religious bodies in particular countries.

John Anderson points out that

Contrary to the claims of American separationists the formal recognition of a national or established church need not entail the restriction of religious freedom ... Nonetheless, it is often the case that attempts to promote the position of one religious community do have the symbolic effect of defining others as second-class and that this in turn may lead to restriction of their rights.

He refers to acts passed in Greece in the 1930s under the Metaxas dictatorship and which are still in force: these give local Orthodox bishops the right to be consulted and to object to the opening of non-Orthodox places of worship in their dioceses, and are still sometimes invoked.

There can be advantages to both parties in a state-church symbiosis if they can operate in differentiated ways within an overall strategy. Andrew Evans finds that the relationship between the Russian state and the Russian Orthodox Church (ROC) in the field of international relations is one of 'opportunistic mutual assistance: the two bodies can use one another to act outside their respective organisational constraints'. In the geographical area of the former Soviet Union and in Orthodox countries in Eastern Europe 'the ROC legitimises Russian political aspirations while pursuing its own aim of ecclesiastical leadership'.

An additional complexity is introduced when a state seeks to define its relations with the Roman Catholic Church, with its headquarters located abroad. Alex Bellamy argues that despite the efforts of the Tadjman regime in Croatia to recruit Catholicism to the Croat national cause the church, principally through its episcopate, was able to distance itself from his aspirations and play a positive role in Croatia's political transitions.

However, it is not necessarily the case that the secular authority will want to enter into a close mutual relationship with a major religious institution. Sometimes there is a distancing. Anderson looks at the poor public reputation of the Bulgarian Orthodox Church, a consequence of its compromised position in communist times and of the debilitating schism which beset it throughout the 1990s. As a result, 'the search for a formal recognition of a special status by or for the Orthodox Church [has been] less evident in Bulgaria than in Greece and other transitional societies'.

In some cases the wish to maintain a distance between a religion and the state is inspired, on the part of either, by more positive motives. There may be a perceived need for the religious establishment to maintain an autonomous moral authority. Nadezhda Bektimirova finds this to be the case in Cambodia. 'The establishment of a union

between the monarchy and Buddhism has been the most important feature of the political process in Cambodia in the 1990s,' she writes. At the same time, however, the Buddhist Sangha is discouraged from involving itself directly in politics. Bektimirova believes that this is a deliberate policy on the part of the royal government in order to strengthen the spiritual authority of the Sangha in society.

This may not be so easy a task, however. Bektimirova adds that Cambodian politicians 'understand completely that there are limits to the process of transforming Buddhism, and that the religious consciousness of the Khmer is not able to adapt to all the consequences of modernisation'. It seems that President Putin in Russia has come to a similar conclusion about the potential role of the Russian Orthodox Church. Evans comments on the desire of the ROC to become '*a value* in Russian society', and notes that in December 1999 Putin endorsed this aspiration, 'stating that religion, alongside patriotism and history, should be one of the basic values of Russia'. Since Putin became president, however, relations between his government and the ROC appear to have become increasingly strained: the former is apparently concerned that the claims of the ROC to look after the spiritual welfare of the population of the Russian Federation are not matched by its ability to do so; and also that the ROC may end up alienating non-Orthodox citizens by its claims to spiritual primacy within its 'canonical territory'.

The latest evidence of a lack of 'symphony' between Putin's government and the ROC concerns a possible visit of the pope to Russia. The ROC has long been adamantly opposed to this, even though the pope has recently visited other key Orthodox countries such as Romania, Greece and Ukraine. While government representatives have recently been making their warmest overtures yet on this subject, the Moscow Patriarchate is raising ever stronger objections.

'We won't have to wait much longer before that visit takes place,' said Vitali Litvin, Russian ambassador to the Holy See, in December, and he stressed that he was not responsible for finding a solution to those disagreements between the two churches which the Moscow Patriarchate insists must be eliminated as an essential prerequisite for such a visit. And in an interview with a Polish newspaper in January Putin himself spoke about the roots shared by Russians and Polish Pope John Paul II rather than the centuries of mistrust between the two nations: 'We [Russians] also have a feeling of pride that a representative of the Slavic peoples became pope.' He noted that a current precondition for such a visit was the resumption of full relations between the Catholic and Russian Orthodox Churches, but commented that 'unfortunately' this did not depend on him.

The response of the ROC was not conciliatory. Metropolitan Kirill of Smolensk spoke of the necessity for the Catholic Church in Russia 'to move from proselytism to bilateral and multilateral cooperation': 'We are convinced that a Russian Catholic Church is something with no future or prospects. There is no need to profess the Catholic faith here, but to work with the Orthodox Church to reinforce Christian values.'

One Catholic source in Moscow recently commented to a Keston representative that the Russian government and Orthodox Church could be sending conflicting messages intentionally: 'This is consistent with both Russian government and Russian Orthodox policy'. It would also be consistent with the analysis offered in the article by Evans. According to Ambassador Litvin, the events of 11 September have reminded Russians of the importance of unity, and a papal visit to Russia 'would be an important signal' in this respect. The Moscow Patriarchate's increasing intransigence towards a papal visit might be designed to provide a useful backdrop against which the Russian government stands out in relief as conciliatory and prowestern.

## Notes on Contributors

**John Anderson** is senior lecturer and chairman of the Department of International Relations at the University of St Andrews. His interests lie in the fields of postsoviet studies and of religion and politics. He is the author of *Religion, State and Politics in the Soviet Union and the Successor States* (1994), *The International Politics of Central Asia* (1997), *Kyrgyzstan: Central Asia's Island of Democracy?* (1999) and *The Politics of Religious Liberty: Defining the Place of Religion in Transitional Societies* (forthcoming).

**Nadezhda Bektimirova** graduated from Moscow University in 1974, and obtained a PhD in 1979 and an ScD in 1994. Since 1994 she had been a professor at the Department of Political Sciences at the Institute of Asia-Africa Studies at Moscow University. She is the author of *Buddiiskaya sangkha v nezavisimoi Kampuchii* (Moscow, 1985), *Krizis i padeniye monarkhicheskogo rezhima v Kambodzhe* (Moscow, 1987), *Noveishaya istoriya Kampuchii* (Moscow, 1989) and over 50 articles on Cambodian history, religion and political culture.

**Alex Bellamy** is lecturer in peace and conflict studies at the University of Queensland. His publications include *Kosovo and International Society* (forthcoming in 2002).

**Branko Bjelajac** graduated in communications at the Arts University in Belgrade (1993) and in theology at Tyndale Theological Seminary in the Netherlands (2000). He is a Balkans correspondent for the *Keston News Service* and a chairman of IKONOS, an association for the promotion of Christianity in the Serbian media. His published works include *Sveto pismo u Srba* (1996) and *Protestantism and Evangelicalism in Serbia until 1944* (2001).

**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 book reviews on a wide variety of aspects of religious life in Central and Eastern Europe. She is the author of *Conscience and Captivity: Religion in Eastern Europe* (1988) and of six contributions to *Censorship: a World Encyclopedia* (forthcoming).

**Andrew Evans** is a doctoral student at Christ Church, Oxford. His research is inspired by his experience both as a former Latter Day Saints missionary in Ukraine and as an analyst for NATO.

**Bob Whyte** was responsible for the British and Irish Churches' China Study Project (now the China Department of Churches Together in Britain and Ireland) from 1975

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to 1986, and subsequently adviser on Chinese affairs to the archbishop of Canterbury. He is the author of *China and Christianity: Unfinished Encounter* (Collins, 1988). He has made many visits to China since 1972. He is vicar of St Paul's Rusthall and an honorary canon of Rochester Cathedral.