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Editorial

Seventy years of official state atheism in the Soviet Union produced a predominantly secularised population; it remains so to this day. The revival of religion in the Russian Federation over the last ten years has started from a basis of minimal knowledge and tradition, and the course of the revival is heavily influenced by the demands and challenges of a rapidly-changing society. One of the salient features of the revival of religion is a tension between those who see it as an element in the restoration of the precommunist past and those who see it as a tool for helping to shape the postcommunist future.

Buddhism in the Russian Federation today has a dual origin. In three republics – Buryatia, Kalmykia and Tuva – it is the ancestral faith of the indigenous population, in the tradition of Tibet. In western Russia its origin is more recent, more intellectual, more eclectic. The dual origin of Russian Buddhism today is one of the factors fostering tensions between the 'restorationists', and the 'modernisers'.

From the 1930s, like all religion in the Soviet Union, Buddhism was persecuted, and had officially ceased to exist by 1940. With the postwar Stalinist modification of policy on religion, however, Buddhism was again allowed a limited institutional existence in Buryatia, where a central administration was set up and two temples (*datsan*) opened. Until *perestroika* Buryatia was the only part of the USSR where Buddhism was permitted to function.

The Buryat Agvan Lobsan Dorzhiyev (1853–1938) came to Russia in 1898, was presented to the emperor and in 1915 opened a datsan in Petrograd, the first in Europe. There were about 200 Buddhists in Petrograd at the time, including some Russians. The datsan was closed down by the Soviet authorities in 1938. Interest in Buddhism amongst the Russian intelligentsia never completely died out in the Soviet period, however, and in the late 1950s it began to develop again amongst certain academic Far Eastern specialists. One of these was Aleksandr Pyatigorsky, who became a Buddhist and eventually emigrated from the Soviet Union in 1974. In an interview published in *Religion in Communist Lands* (as *RSS* was then called) in 1978 he described how young members of the intelligentsia in Moscow, Leningrad, Lithuania and Estonia started taking an interest in Buddhism through reading books on the subject. (See also Lubos Belka, *Buddhism in Estonia, RSS*, vol. 27, no. 2, June 1999, pp. 245–48).

Then in 1957 Yuri Rerikh, eldest son of Nikolai, returned to Russia. (See Roman Lunkin and Sergei Filatov, *The Rerikh Movement: a homegrown Russian new religious movement, RSS*, vol. 28, no. 1, March 2000, pp. 135–48). Yuri Rerikh was an oriental scholar and became head of the School of Tibetan Studies at the Oriental Institute of the Russian Academy of Sciences. A group of young scholars, including Pyatigorsky, gathered around him; he widened their knowledge of Buddhism.

Some young intellectuals at that time also reestablished direct contact with native Buddhists in Buryatia, for the first time since the 1930s, and above all with the great

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Buddhist teacher Bidiya Dandaron (1914–74). Dandaron, whose father was a lama, studied in Tibet and subsequently gained considerable spiritual authority in Buryatia. He was first arrested and imprisoned in 1937, and then again in 1946; altogether he spent some 20 years in prison. Soon after contact was reestablished between Leningrad and Buryatia, Dandaron was arrested in 1972, and died in a labour camp. According to Pyatigorsky,

> The Buryat authorities feared the possibility of real religious life in Buryatia. They could tolerate a closely directed form of religious life, like that of the two Buddhist monasteries, but when Buddhism started going westwards, it became dangerous in their eyes. When some young intellectuals in Moscow and Leningrad were converted to Buddhism they visited Ulan-Ude and some Buryats visited Moscow and Leningrad. All these contacts seemed to be ideologically dangerous to the local authorities.

Dandaron's vision extended beyond the revival of traditional Buryatian Buddhism. He was interested in making Buddhism comprehensible and accessible to Europeans. A salient feature of the revival of interest in Buddhism in European Russia in the 1960s was the influence of varieties of Buddhism which were not of the Tibetan tradition. Americans who had adopted Buddhism were avidly read: in the 1970s the novels of J. D. Salinger were published in translation in Tvardovsky's journal *Novy mir*: Chinese and Japanese (Zen) Buddhism were eagerly welcomed. And with the start of *perestroika* representatives of all kinds of foreign Buddhist schools started coming to Russia; self-styled Buddhists in European Russia soon numbered several thousand.

There are thus two forms of Buddhist practice reviving today in the Russian Federation. In Buryatia, Kalmykia and (to a lesser extent so far) in Tuva it is of the traditional form, centred around the datsan and involving years of training of novices by their teachers in a framework of discipline and obedience. Meanwhile in the rest of Russia Buddhist societies or associations are appearing whose members are instructed by visiting teachers, mainly from abroad, who may or may not be lamas; little if any formal commitment is required. Traditional Buddhists frequently criticise such groups as superficial and dilettante.

In her article in this issue of *RSS* Geraldine Fagan describes current disputes besetting the St Petersburg datsan, in which the tensions between the two models of Buddhist revival in Russia evidently play an important part; and the articles by Fagan and Walters both give consideration to the question of the tension between 'restoration', and 'modernisation', as a ubiquitous feature of the religious revival in Russia today.

April 2001 PHILIP WALTERS

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