RELIGION, STATE & SOCIETY

Volume 29 Number 4 December 2001

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Editorial

In his survey of church life in Eastern Europe over the four years 1997–2000 in this issue of *Religion, State & Society*, Jonathan Luxmoore notes that in 1999 an International Helsinki Federation report drew attention to increasing restrictions being placed on New Religious Movements (NRMs) in some EU countries including Austria, France, Germany and Greece. The report commented that religious rights should no longer be seen as an issue affecting only postcommunist countries. This is undoubtedly true; but it is also true that attitudes and policies towards NRMs in post-communist countries are shaped in part at least by factors which are specific to those countries.

In her article in this issue of *RSS* Ina Merdjanova seeks to identify the most important of these factors. She believes that NRMs in Eastern Europe are not an isolated phenomenon to be investigated in isolation from the overall state of affairs in society, but 'are to be seen as a focus for a wide range of problems, currents and controversies of very various backgrounds'. In her view they are '... indicators of societal difficulties and tensions which already exist or are in the process of emerging'.

One area of tension on which she focuses concerns the status of 'traditional religions' in postcommunist societies. She notes that throughout postcommunist Europe new legislation on religion in fact gives a preference in one way or another to one or more specific religions deemed to be 'traditional'. 'In other words, the constitutionally promulgated state neutrality towards religion does not mean indifference', as it does for example in the USA.

At the same time, it is evident that there is widespread fear of alternative 'organised religions'. 'On the whole,' observes Merdjanova, 'postcommunist laws on religion are more favourable towards individual than towards corporate religious freedom. The reason for this is to be seen primarily in politicians' fear of institutional opposition. An "organised religion" is deemed to be much more "dangerous" than nonorchestrated searching for transcendence by individual persons.'

A further phenomenon, peculiar to postcommunist countries, is the fact that 'the "old" churches "entered" the suddenly pluralised religious market after 1989 simultaneously with the new religions. Therefore ... they turned out to be "new" for many newly converted people, or people who for the first time in their life could take a closer look at religion.'

Complexities such as this in Eastern Europe lead Merdjanova to observe that 'pluralism ... does not always designate a peaceful coexistence and dialogue between old and new cultural-religious forms', and to raise the question as to whether 'universal concepts of western political theory such as democracy, liberty and human rights' can necessarily be directly applied to 'the considerably different socio-cultural context of Eastern Europe'.

ISSN 0963-7494 print/ISSN 1465-3974 online/01/040261-02 © 2001 Keston Institute
DOI: 10.1080/09637490120112447

Her conclusion is nevertheless that the long-term solution to the problems of religious freedom and religious tolerance in Eastern Europe lies in the construction of 'civil society' on the lines of that to be found in western democracies. She recognises that this will be a much harder task than was envisaged 'in the euphoria of the first years after the fall of the Berlin Wall'. She recognises the major impediments to the project: lack of basic political culture among both the governing and the governed; poorly-developed legislative structures; social and individual unfamiliarity with tolerant modes of behaviour. However, she sees the presence of NRMs in Eastern Europe, within the context of a genuine civil society, as eventually conducing to the health of all the players in the religious field, 'traditional' as well as 'nontraditional'. The appearance of NRMs 'is, in fact, a challenge which may be assessed in positive terms'.

> It gives the traditional churches the chance to prove the relevance of their response to the new socio-political environment and to show in practice the advantages they claim for their message. A multicultural and multi-religious environment gives people an opportunity to overcome the dogmatic visions and stereotypes inherited from communism and to acquire new perspectives for understanding themselves and the other.

Merdjanova indeed casts doubt on the ability of NRMs in Eastern Europe to provide 'a comprehensive and long-term response to societal anomie and the destruction of the "meaning-system"'. She criticises their '*ad hoc* pragmatically oriented approach to postcommunist reality' as 'mostly piecemeal and highly uncontextualised'. In her view, therefore, the 'traditional' Christian churches, despite their deficiencies, potentially have an important regenerative role to play. However, she argues, in order to be able to do this

> they have to accept that 'freedom of religion' means rights for all faiths, not only for their own, and that their place and role in postcommunist society are not to be taken for granted and/or constitutionally safeguarded, but have to be fought for day by day. The competition presupposed by the new situation of religious liberty and pluralism is a challenge which could bring them to a genuine revival, if taken in positive terms and met with responsibility, dignity and honour, rather than with hostility, fear and a search for new alliances with the state.

November 2001 PHILIP WALTERS

Religion, State & Society, Vol. 29, No. 4, 2001

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Jonathan Luxmoore is a freelance journalist covering church affairs in Eastern Europe for various newspapers and news agencies in Britain and the USA. He was based in Warsaw from 1988 to 2001, and currently divides his time between England and Poland. He is co-author with Jolanta Babiuch of the book *The Vatican and the Red Flag* (Geoffrey Chapman, 1999).

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), at the Institute for Theology and Society in Munich (1997) and at Edinburgh University (2000). In May–June 2000 she was based at Keston Institute as a British Academy Visiting Fellow. 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.

ISSN 0963-7494 print/ISSN 1465-3974 online/01/040263-01 © 2001 Keston Institute