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A table of contents for *Scottish Bulletin of Evangelical Theology* can be found here:

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The Defrocking of Fr Gleb Yakunin

PHILIP WALTERS

Born in 1934, Gleb Pavlovich Yakunin became a priest of the Russian Orthodox Church in 1962, at the height of the Khrushchev antireligious campaign. He has been at loggerheads with the leadership of the church since 1965 when with his fellow-priest Nikolai Eshliman he addressed an open letter to Patriarch Aleksii I begging him, for the sake of the church, to be less subservient to the Soviet authorities. As a result he was suspended from service as a priest.

In 1974 he began once again to speak out on behalf of freedom of conscience. In 1975 he sent an open letter to the 5th General Assembly of the World Council of Churches in Nairobi which caused considerable disturbance amongst the delegates and led to the first-ever debate by the WCC of the question of religious liberty in the Soviet Union. For various articles discussing this controversy and its implications see *Religion in Communist Lands* Vol. 4, No. 1 (Spring 1976); Vol. 4, No. 4 (Winter 1976); Vol. 13, No. 1 (Spring 1985); Vol. 13, No. 2 (Summer 1985).

In 1976 Fr Gleb was one of the founder-members of the Christian Committee for the Defence of Believers' Rights. Over the next few years this committee was to send thousands of pages of documentation out of the Soviet Union giving detailed information on infringements of the rights of religious believers by the Soviet authorities. The committee acted on behalf of Christians of all denominations as well as non-Christian believers. For more information on the committee and its work see Jane Ellis, 'The Christian Committee for the Defence of Believers' Rights in the USSR', *Religion in Communist Lands* Vol. 8, No. 4 (Winter 1980), pp. 279–98.

Fr Gleb was arrested in 1979 as the Soviet authorities stepped up their repression of religious activists. He was sentenced to five years' labour camp and five years' internal exile for 'antisoviet agitation and propaganda'. Still in exile when Mikhail Gorbachev came to power, he was amnestied along with other prisoners of conscience in 1987.

In March 1990 Fr Gleb was elected to the Russian parliament, and later that year played a key role in parliament's adoption of a new Law on Freedom of Conscience to replace the highly restrictive Stalinist Law on Religious Associations of 1929.

In April 1990 he was one of the founder-members of the Russian Christian Democratic Movement (RCDM). He left the RCDM after the abortive coup of August 1991 in protest against the increasing conservatism and nationalism of the movement. In January 1992 he was one of the founder-members of the new Russian Christian Democratic Union. For detailed discussion of Russian Christian Democracy see the two articles by Richard Sakwa in *Religion State and Society* Vol. 20, No. 2, 1992 and in the current issue.

In 1991 Fr Gleb was a member of the Russian government's Committee on Freedom of Conscience. After the August coup the Committee was granted access to

a section of the archives of the KGB and Fr Gleb published documents revealing that several members of the Orthodox hierarchy had collaborated with the state security organs. The archives were subsequently closed down again and Fr Gleb was threatened with a private prosecution on the grounds that he had betrayed state secrets to the USA.

In October 1993 the Holy Synod took the decision that Orthodox clergy would not be allowed to stand as candidates for political office: those whose candidature had been proposed for the forthcoming elections in December were given the option of withdrawing their candidature or ceasing to be priests. Fr Gleb was only priest to persist with his candidature and was eventually elected. He was then defrocked. Here we are publishing four documents connected with the case.