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# RELIGION, STATE and SOCIETY

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## **Editorial**

In his article in this issue of *RSS* Patrick Michel argues that in resisting communism the Christian church in Eastern Europe was in fact doing something different from what it thought it was doing. 'In opposing its own conception of totality to that which the official system was attempting to impose, the church, whether it knew it or not, was in fact defending the relative' – an environment of pluralism and democracy. 'Everything seems to indicate that this will be a challenge much more difficult to meet than that which was posed by the Soviet system.'

What, then, is the appropriate role for the church in these circumstances? Gedeon Rossouw quotes Moltmann to the effect that while in a pluralistic society Christians do not have the right to speak on behalf of all citizens, all citizens nevertheless have the right to hear what Christians have to say; and he contends that 'the only meaningful way in which Christians can respond to a situation of moral dissensus' is to accept that situation and contribute vigorously to the debate.

The Polish theologian Fr Józef Tischner takes a rather different view. He argues that after its confrontation with communism, Christianity is now likely to have to enter into a confrontation with liberalism. It is not clear that it will win. Communism has left the field; but in the post-communist period Christianity (at least in its institutional form) is rapidly losing both popularity and credibility. 'Might it be', asks Tischner, 'that liberalism will prove to be the only idea that is victorious?'

Evidently, in order to decide whether Christianity still has something to fight for, as it were, in post-communist Europe, we need to ascertain more clearly what the primary challenge presented to the church by 'pluralism' in fact is. For some, the primary challenge to the church will be whether it can now rise to the opportunity of entering the debating chamber on equal terms with all other partners; but for others, the primary challenge to the church will be specifically to combat the obviously deplorable consequences of 'pluralism' such as unrestrained individualism and self-seeking, exacerbated in the context of the new free-market economy. For Fr Tischner, who takes the latter view, the real question is 'whose property is man?'

This same question lies at the heart of Alan Suggate's critical comparison of the views of Hayek and Havel. For Suggate, Friedrich Hayek's understanding of society as an aggregate of individuals freely willing their own best interests involves an 'exceedingly thin notion of the self'. Suggate shows how Václav Havel's insights into the insidious dangers posed by communist totalitarianism to human integrity can also be applied to the capitalist West: the 'secret manipulations' and 'omnipresent dictatorship' of the consumer culture. Far from remaining free in a liberal society, says Suggate, 'Hayekian man would have every incentive to fall victim to the authorities, who will be adept at dealing with a creature whose pursuit is the maximisation of his satisfactions, albeit enlightened.' He argues that it is only an understanding that there is such a thing as 'public truth' which is the common possession of all that can save a society from atomisation and oppression. He describes the struggle of ordinary people in Eastern Europe to live decent lives. He calls this a 'corporate struggle', carried on by 'small communities of dissidents (communities rather than organisations)'. He points out that Havel stresses the non-exclusive openness of such groups on the grounds that

... any genuinely meaningful point of departure in an individual's life usually has an element of universality about it... It must be potentially accessible to everyone; it must foreshadow a general solution, and thus it is not just the expression of an introverted, self-contained responsibility that individuals have to and for themselves alone, but responsibility with and for the world.

Both Rossouw and Suggate place their arguments in the context of the recurrent debate in political philosophy between 'liberals' and 'communitarians'. Friedrich Hayek is of course in the 'liberal' camp; one of the most eloquent contemporary exponents of the 'communitarian' position is Alasdair MacIntyre (notably in his 1981 book *After Virtue*). MacIntyre regrets the incoherence of modern discourse about morality and sees the reason for this in the fact that since the Enlightenment the mistaken idea has taken hold that morality is a matter for individual choice rather than a function of a community in which individual members realise their own '*telos*' as part of that community.

This debate, as I have noted, is recurrent, even cyclical; as Michael Walzer has pointed out (in his article 'The communitarian critique of liberalism'), this is because the liberal ideal is in fact unrealisable – a society of totally free individuals would have no coherence; people would not even be able to understand each other. Any 'liberal' society in fact contains a greater or lesser degree of association amongst its members. 'I should think it fairly obvious,' says Walzer.

that the philosophical controversies that MacIntyre laments are not in fact a mark of social incoherence. Where there are philosophers, there will be controversies, just as where there are knights, there will be tournaments. But these are highly ritualised activities, which bear witness to the connection, not the disconnection, of their protagonists.

Cyclical or not, however, the debate is likely now to take a new and intense form in the period after the collapse of communism when traditional patterns of political allegiance have been thrown into confusion. The political scientist Herbert Kitschelt has recently argued that the main axis of party allegiance currently crystallising in post-communist Eastern Europe is a mirror-image of that which is characteristic of the West in the late twentieth century. In the West, says Kitschelt, it is by and large individuals who are libertarian and cosmopolitan in their politics who also favour the redistribution of economic resources, whereas those of an authoritarian and isolationist political inclination have favoured the spontaneous allocation of the free market. In Eastern Europe, he says, the reverse is true: and thus we are faced with the phenomenon of politicians whose democratic credentials are impeccable espousing wholeheartedly the unrestrained free market, and of authoritarian former communists advocating gradualism in the freeing of prices and safety nets for the poor and disadvantaged. Whatever one thinks of this analysis, the fact that it needs to be made points to the fluid state of political patterns today. Meanwhile, it is certainly the case that as the rush to the market fails to provide instant solutions in Eastern Europe, former communists are starting to stage a comeback.

At a recent conference in London convened by Cardinal Hume on the theme 'Business and Moral Standards in Post-Communist Europe' the Hungarian Catholic priest Fr László Lukács said that one of the illusions that Eastern Europeans have rapidly been abandoning since 1989 is the assumption that freedom automatically equals riches and happiness. Another speaker, Professor Jack Mahoney, spoke of a

danger facing people brought up under a communist system which claimed to be able to solve not only economic but also moral problems: 'the danger that capitalism now in turn would be automatically looked to as providing guidance and directives in the social and ethical spheres of life as well as the economic.' This would be to expect something from capitalism 'which it is not able to deliver, far less designed to deliver'. As a third speaker, the Polish sociologist Jolanta Babiuch, put it pithily: 'We do not know which values, if any, the capitalist system really represents.'

'Havel', writes Suggate,

believes that the traditional parliamentary democracies can offer no fundamental opposition to the automatism of technology and the industrial-consumer society; for they, too, are being dragged helplessly along by it. If Havel is right in this then is there not also instantly some truth in MacIntyre – at least that we are afflicted with barbarism, and are scarcely aware of our predicament, indeed we even plunge further into it with vigour and zeal?

It seems to me that as we try to understand how the churches can contribute creatively in their societies, both East and West, in the post-communist era, when so many familiar landmarks have disappeared, useful light is shed by MacIntyre's concept of a 'practice' expounded in *After Virtue*. A 'practice' as he describes it clearly has affinities with the communities of citizens 'living in the truth' which Havel prizes so highly – 'communities rather than organisations', to repeat Suggate's description – and with the small communities of religious believers who came together within the Eastern European churches in the communist era in order to try to live by their ideals and to be an example to others in their societies.

MacIntyre defines a 'practice' as

... any coherent and complex form of socially established cooperative human activity through which goods internal to that form of activity are realised in the course of trying to achieve those standards of excellence which are appropriate to, and partially definitive of, that form of activity, with the result that human powers to achieve excellence, and human conceptions of the ends and goods involved, are systematically extended.

MacIntyre goes on to make it clear that 'practices' are not to be confused with 'institutions'. The latter 'are involved in acquiring money and other material goods; they are structures in terms of power and status...' A corporation or business enterprise in a free-market economy is clearly an 'institution' so defined. Despite having very different purposes from those of a 'practice', however, 'institutions' are required as a framework in which 'practices' can function.

Indeed so intimate is the relationship of practices to institutions... that institutions and practices characteristically form a single causal order in which the ideals and the creativity of the practice are always vulnerable to the acquisitiveness of the institution, in which the cooperative care for common goods of the practice is always vulnerable to the competitiveness of the institution. In this context the essential function of the virtues is clear.

Without them, without justice, courage and truthfulness, practices could not resist the corrupting power of institutions.

'Resistance to the corrupting power of institutions' is arguably the social task in

which the churches of Europe, East and West, must now most urgently involve themselves; and to do so effectively, they will need to show that they are qualitatively different from those political, economic or national structures within which they are carrying out their witness.

November 1992

PHILIP WALTERS

## ERRATUM

A printing error in the last issue of *Religion State and Society*, Vol. 20, No. 2, 1992, meant that the author's narrative was distorted and open to serious misunderstanding.

In the article by Roanne Thomas Edwards, 'Russian Christian Democracy from a regional perspective: the case of St Petersburg', the first half of the first paragraph on page 208 should have read as follows:

By summer 1991, *Demokraticeskaya Rossiya* had divided into two blocs with a strong regional orientation: *Svoboda i dostoinstvo* (Freedom and Dignity), whose most prominent member organisation is still the *Svobodnaya demokraticeskaya partiya Rossii* (Free Democratic Party of Russia) led by St Petersburg City Council deputy Marina Sal'ye; and the substantially larger *Narodnoye soglasiye* (People's Accord) bloc, which derived its strength chiefly from the *Demokraticeskaya partiya Rossii* (Democratic Party of Russia) led by Moscow deputy Nikolai Travkin. It was at this time that the St Petersburg CDU had begun to consider forming a tactical alliance with the party of Sal'ye.

We apologise to the author for this error.

## **Notes on contributors**

**John Anderson** is a lecturer in International Relations at the University of St Andrews. He is the author of a number of articles on religion in the former Soviet Union and is currently completing a book on the shaping of Soviet religious policy.

**William van den Bercken** is a member of the staff of the Interuniversity Institute for Missiological and Ecumenical Research in Utrecht and lecturer in Russian History at the University of Utrecht.

**Geert van Dartel** graduated from the Catholic Theological Faculty in Nijmegen, and from 1978 to 1983 studied ecumenical theology and economics in Zagreb. He is now the study secretary of the foundation 'Communicantes' and active in church contacts with Central and Eastern Europe.

**Arvan Gordon** was researcher on the GDR and China at Keston College for 11 years until his retirement in 1991. He visited China in 1982, 1985 and 1986.

**René Grémaux** has an MA in social and cultural anthropology from Nijmegen University. His research in Serbia and Montenegro has resulted in a number of journalistic and scholarly articles. In 1989 he completed a study for the Dutch government on the integration of newly-arrived Romanians in a Dutch municipality. He is now working for a PhD at the University of Amsterdam.

**Caroline Humphreys** is a lecturer in the Department of Social Anthropology in the University of Cambridge. She has worked in Mongolia, Buryatia, Tuva and Inner Mongolia.

**Serge Keleher**, a Greek-Catholic priest, graduated in political science from Michigan State University and has an MA in theology from the University of Toronto. A research fellow of the University of Toronto's Chair of Ukrainian Studies, he has been associated with Keston College since 1988.

**Anthony Lambert** works for the Overseas Missionary Fellowship and is based in Hong Kong. His recent book *The Resurrection of the Chinese Church* is reviewed in this issue of *RSS*.

**Patrick Michel**, of the Groupe de Sociologie des Religions at the Ecole des Hautes Etudes in Paris, is the author of the book *Politics and Religion in Eastern Europe* (1991).

**Gedeon Rossouw** is associate professor in Philosophy and Business Ethics at the Rand Afrikaans University in Johannesburg, and currently doing research at St John's University, Collegeville, Minnesota on the role of the church in enhancing moral business culture. His most recent book (August 1992) is *Christian, Communist and Socialist in the new South Africa*.

**Alan Suggate** is a lecturer in Theology at the University of Durham. His special interest is Christian social ethics. His doctoral thesis formed the basis for his book *William Temple and Christian Social Ethics Today* (1987).



**Józef Tischner** was ordained a priest in 1959. He studied at the Jagiellonian University in Kraków and the Theological Academy in Warsaw before becoming head of the Philosophy department and a professor of Christian Philosophy at the Papal Institute in Kraków.