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# RELIGION, STATE & SOCIETY

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## **Editorial**

From 1996, for the first time ever, there are going to be regular international meetings at government level monitoring religious freedom in Europe today.

In April 1996 the first-ever international seminar on freedom of religion was convened by the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE). The OSCE (formerly CSCE) was set up as a forum to monitor the observance of the international agreements in the Helsinki Final Act of 1975, which has now been signed by all the countries of Europe as well as the USA and Canada. Helsinki was the first agreement to put human rights on the international agenda at government level. Now, as result of the April 1996 meeting in Warsaw, there are plans for regular seminars on the specific subject of religious freedom itself.

Two members of the staff of Keston Institute, our director Michael Bourdeaux and myself, were at the Warsaw meeting, as half of the four-person official British delegation – a demonstration of the high value the Foreign Office places on the work Keston is doing in 1996. An example of the regular monitoring of church-related developments in Central and Eastern Europe undertaken by Keston Institute is the latest update in this issue of *RSS* by Jonathan Luxmoore which covers 1995. We plan to include Luxmoore's 1996 survey in the first issue of *RSS* for 1997.

Delegates from some fifty countries to the OSCE seminar met in the former headquarters of the Warsaw Pact. There were several burning issues which they returned to again and again. A number of these were specific current points of conflict between particular governments and denominations or between particular denominations themselves, such as the bitter dispute which had just broken out over Orthodox jurisdiction in Estonia, and which had led to the most serious breach within the Orthodox community for half a millennium. Other issues were of more general concern. The most important to the majority of delegates from formerly communist countries was the whole subject of 'proselytising'. According to the Russian delegation, which included an Orthodox priest, foreign sects flooding into Russia are causing increasing social disturbance.

There is growing pressure in many formerly communist countries for new and more restrictive legislation on religion. In the immediate postcommunist euphoria complete religious freedom was introduced widely throughout the former bloc, but now powerful voices in church and state are being raised ever more loudly in protest at 'sheep-stealing' by foreign sects and missionary organisations, and there are calls for new legal barriers in a spirit of religious protectionism.

A serious danger here is that legislation designed to curb genuinely harmful cults might be used against any religious organisations said to be somehow 'untraditional' in a particular country. At a time of increasing nationalist sentiment, and increasing protectionism, targets could include local denominations which have been established for decades, even centuries, but which happen to be minorities with links abroad.

In this issue of *RSS* we are publishing the text of the keynote address delivered at the OSCE meeting by Professor Jörg Paul Müller. He argues that far from adopting a fearful or suspicious attitude towards differences, we should welcome them: 'Seeing differences can be a constructive recognition of the variety inherent in life itself. Plurality is the social expression of this diversity. Suppressing it goes along with contempt for life. The destiny of human existence ultimately seems to lie in differentiation and in maintaining heterogeneity.' Indeed, he goes further: 'Each conviction – in order to prevent it from becoming totalitarian – may need the friction caused by contact with opposing beliefs.' The positive celebration of differences may be essential in guaranteeing that in their natural search for safety, stability and social belonging human beings do not inadvertently collude with political agendas promoting intolerance.

Professor Müller enumerates the international agreements protecting religious freedom and argues that they reflect the experience 'that there is a permanent temptation for political power to intrude upon coercing people to give up their diverse beliefs in favour of a more uniform and homogeneous religion.'

In his article in this issue of *RSS* Wallace Daniel describes how three individual Russian Orthodox are formulating responses to the changing political and social realities in Russia today, and argues that the central issue is 'whether the Church will foster a creative and open community or an authoritative and closed one.' This question is increasingly relevant throughout the whole of the formerly communist world

December 1996

PHILIP WALTERS

## **Notes on Contributors**

**Felix Corley** is a writer and broadcaster on religious affairs in Eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union, with special interest in the Caucasus. His book *Religion in the Soviet Union: an Archival Reader* was published by Macmillan in 1996.

**Wallace Daniel** is dean of the College of Arts and Sciences at Baylor University, Waco, Texas.

**Jonathan Luxmoore**, based in Warsaw, is the Eastern Europe correspondent of the *National Catholic Register*, and covers church affairs in the region for various European and American newspapers and news agencies.

**Jörg Paul Müller** is professor of constitutional and administrative law, legal philosophy and international law in the Faculty for Law and Economics at the University of Bern.

**Sabrina P. Ramet** is professor of international studies at the University of Washington, Seattle. She is the author and editor of numerous articles and books on religion in Eastern Europe, including the three-volume *Christianity under Stress* (1988, 1990 and 1992), and on Yugoslavia, including most recently *Balkan Babel* (2nd edition, 1996).