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RELIGION, STATE & SOCIETY

Volume 25 Number 4 December 1997

| | |
|--|-----|
| Editorial | 303 |
| Notes on Contributors | 305 |
| Christian Mission, Proselytism and Religious Liberty: A Protestant Appeal for Christian Tolerance and Unity KENT R. HILL | 307 |
| The Protestant Missionary Presence in the Former Soviet Union MARK ELLIOTT AND SHARYL CORRADO | 333 |
| Redeeming Russia? American Missionaries and Tsarist Russia, 1886–1917 DAVID S. FOGLESONG | 353 |
| Russian Orthodox Missions to the East VYACHESLAV MAIYER | 369 |
| Culture, Christianity and the Northern Peoples of Canada and Siberia DAVID N. COLLINS | 381 |
| In Search of Unity and Autocephaly: Ukraine's Orthodox Churches TARAS KUZIO | 393 |
| Volume Contents and Author Index to Volume 25, 1997 | |

Editorial

In 1996 and 1997 Keston organised two conferences in Oxford on the subject of proselytism and religious liberty in Russia today, bringing together experts on the subject from Russia, the UK and the USA. The conferences form part of a project under the auspices of Emory University, Atlanta, Georgia, which comprises a close study of proselytism in various regions of the world. Keston has been responsible for commissioning and editing a range of studies relating to the Russian Federation, and these are to be published in a volume which will provide not only a definitive and authoritative analysis but also very practical guidelines for those involved in missionary work in this part of the world. Readers of *RSS* will be informed as soon as we have publication details.

Two of the participants in the Keston conferences, Kent Hill and Mark Elliott, have articles in this issue of *RSS*. They were originally papers delivered at the 1997 conference where they were well received and stimulated much fruitful discussion. Here they are placed in a wider historical and geographical context by the articles by Foglesong, Maiyer and Collins.

Our authors highlight the issues arising in the mission/proselytism debate which are causing the greatest stress and misunderstanding.

The Orthodox are angered when those of other faiths infringe their traditional canonical territory. Hill analyses the assumptions behind this. For the Orthodox, infant baptism confers membership of the Orthodox Church, even if those so baptised may subsequently lapse from all observance. Evangelicals, meanwhile, view any with an inactive faith as in need of 'evangelisation'. 'Since Russia is historically Orthodox,' observes Hill, 'the Orthodox consider virtually anything Protestants do among the Russians to be "proselytism".' Elliott notes that behind this attitude lie contrasting Evangelical and Orthodox understandings of salvation: Evangelical justification by faith at *the outset* of a Christian life, which typically happens when an adult is baptised, versus Orthodox *theosis* (deification), the 'process of becoming acceptable to God – as I practise love, mercy and justice', *ending* in God's ultimate confirmation of eternal communion with him.

Other problems arise over the manner in which foreign missionaries conduct themselves. Too many have been crassly culturally insensitive. Collins looks at this issue over a wider geographical area: the question of Christian adaptation to the culture of the northern peoples of Canada, Siberia and Alaska. Foglesong makes a historical comparison with the activity and attitudes of American missionaries in Russia from the late nineteenth century to the Revolution, and finds that both then and now 'aggressive, confrontational and contemptuous approaches by American missionaries have exacerbated the friction inherent in the Protestant-Orthodox competition.'

A third area of grievous resentment arises out of Orthodox suspicions that many foreign missionaries have a hidden agenda of economic imperialism – 'as if McDonald's executives and Baptist preachers were all cogs in a single monolithic

organisation,' as one participant put it at the 1996 Keston conference – and even of political imperialism, in that at the same time as preaching the Gospel, missionaries tend also to extol the virtues of Western pluralism and democracy. Foglesong shows that the Orthodox harboured the same suspicions in the period before 1917 – and that to a great extent they were justified in doing so. Noting the interdependence of religious, political and economic elements both then and now, Foglesong regrets that 'missiologists, historians of American–Russian relations and experts on the post-communist transition have tended to focus narrowly on separate dimensions', and argues that 'missions, economic development and democratisation need to be examined as part of a broader process of international interaction and cultural transformation' – a point of view with which Keston Institute would wholeheartedly concur.

When they survey the predominantly secularised society that postcommunist Russia has become, Western missionaries often regret the fact that the Orthodox Church itself is not doing more to reevangelise its own nominal flock as well as those outside that it claims as its own. There is no need for competition, they point out: the harvest is ready, but the reapers are few. It is good to be reminded, in Maiyer's survey of the history of Russian Orthodox ministry to the East, that the Russian Orthodox Church has in the past undertaken splendid missionary, educational and enlightening initiatives. Maiyer lays stress on the translation of religious literature into native languages. At a time when progressive priests in Moscow and St Petersburg are being disciplined for attempting to use Russian rather than Church Slavonic in the liturgy it is worth remembering that 'at the turn of the century the divine liturgy was celebrated in 16 languages of the peoples of the Russian Empire ...'

'It is the obligation of each Christian to seek that church to worship and serve in which each of us believes best represents Christian truths,' observes Hill, '... and yet can we not be humble enough to recognise that all Christians, all churches, have particular strengths and weaknesses, particular gifts and blind spots?' Hill points out that in his book *Crossing the Threshold of Hope* Pope John Paul II sees positive virtues in Christian diversity: 'Could it not be that these divisions have also been a path continually leading the Church to discover the untold wealth contained in Christ's Gospel and in the redemption accomplished by Christ? Perhaps all this wealth would not have come to light otherwise ...'

The Orthodox point out that legitimate 'mission' is directed towards those outside the Christian fold, while unacceptable 'proselytising' involves members of one Christian denomination attempting to win over those of another. 'Many, perhaps most, of us within the Christian community would argue that we believe it to be a poor utilisation of our resources and time to focus on converting already committed fellow Christians from one branch of the Christian Church to another', agrees Hill; but he nevertheless points out that a consistent defence of religious liberty involves defending 'the right of others to proselytise if they feel compelled by conscience to do so.' What is essential, however, is 'mutual respect, fair play, and a rejection of all forms of coercion' in interdenominational contacts; and he calls on the Christian world 'to formulate understandings of engagement across Christian community lines to shape our dealings with each other'. It is interesting that this practical proposal, articulated at both the conferences organised by Keston, has now been taken up by the working groups investigating possible ways forward for the churches of Europe in the aftermath of the Graz Ecumenical Assembly, where the problem of proselytising loomed as one of the major issues currently dividing the denominations.

Notes on Contributors

David N. Collins is head of the Department of Russian and Slavonic Studies and a member of the Executive Committee of the Centre for Canadian Studies at the University of Leeds. He has published widely on Siberian history and is involved in an interdisciplinary research group on Canadian aboriginal affairs. He is joint convener of the annual international conference of the Study Group on the Russian Revolution. He is also an elder of a Pentecostal church in Leeds.

Sharyl Corrado is assistant editor of the *East-West Church and Ministry Report* published by the Institute for East-West Christian Studies at the Billy Graham Center, Wheaton College, Wheaton, Illinois.

Mark Elliott is a professor of history and director of the Institute for East-West Christian Studies at the Billy Graham Center, Wheaton College, Wheaton, Illinois. He is the author of *Pawns of Yalta: Soviet Refugees and America's Role in their Repatriation* (University of Illinois Press) and editor of the *East-West Church and Ministry Report*.

David S. Foglesong, a professor of history at Rutgers University, New Brunswick, New Jersey, is currently working on a book provisionally entitled *Americanizing Russia? A History of Dreams, Missions and Campaigns to Remake Russia in the Image of the United States*. His previous publications include *America's Secret War against Bolshevism: US Intervention in the Russian Civil War, 1917-1920* (University of North Carolina Press, 1995) and 'A Missouri democrat in revolutionary Russia: Ambassador David Francis and the American confrontation with Russian radicalism', *Gateway Heritage*, Winter 1992.

Kent R. Hill has been president of Eastern Nazarene College, Quincy, Massachusetts, since 1992. He has a PhD in Russian history from the University of Washington (Seattle) and has served as associate professor of history at Seattle Pacific University and as president of the Institute on Religion and Democracy in Washington DC. He is the author of *The Soviet Union on the Brink* (1991), was one of the drafters of *Evangelicals and Catholics Together* (1994), and is an active participant in discussions involving Orthodox, Catholic and Protestant relations.

Taras Kuzio is a research fellow at the Centre for Russian and East European Studies at the University of Birmingham, working on aspects of Ukraine's post-Soviet transition. He was formerly executive director of the Ukraine Business Agency and a research associate at the International Institute of Strategic Studies. He was formerly editor of *Ukrainian Reporter* and *Ukraine Business Review*. He is the author of *Ukraine: Perestroika to Independence* (with A. Wilson) (Macmillan,

London, 1994 and 1998), *Ukrainian Security Policy* (CSIS, Washington DC, 1995), *Ukraine under Kuchma: Political Reform, Economic Transformation and Security Policy in Independent Ukraine* (Macmillan, London, 1997) and *State and Nation Building in Ukraine* (Routledge, London, 1998), and editor of *Contemporary Ukraine: Dynamics of Post-Soviet Transformation* (M. E. Sharpe, Armonk, New York, 1998).

Vyacheslav Maiyer has conducted research in archives in Russia on the missionary activities of the Russian Orthodox Church, particularly in the field of translating and publishing in native languages. He wrote this article in 1995.