

Editorial

According to Mikhail Gorbachev a major element of the *perestroika* programme is 'changing the moral and psychological situation in our country'. Less clear is what he understands by 'morality'. Traditionally, Soviet ideologists have stressed 'class morality' in preference to any idea of 'universal human values'. Yet, as William van den Bercken demonstrates (pp. 4-18), recent years have seen increasing discussion of morality in the official media. Whilst some writers have been concerned with immediate political implications — was the dominant subjective morality responsible for the 'negative phenomena' associated with the Brezhnev years — others have raised more fundamental questions. What is the relationship of morality and religion? Was the young Soviet state perhaps too hasty in its assault on religion, a policy which led to the destruction of old values without providing any adequate replacement. Needless to say, this linkage of religion and ethics has been rejected by many official spokesmen. On the 'right', conservative ideologues have rejected any 'flirting with god'; on the 'left', even radical proponents of *glasnost* and new thinking about morality, such as Politburo member Alexander Yakovlev, have denied that ethical norms require a religious base. Moreover, it would be wrong to assume that this discussion of moral issues presages any wholesale return of the intelligentsia to religious faith. Rather, they are calling for a more nuanced approach to religious ideas, perhaps sharing the attitude of one of Iris Murdoch's characters: 'I think it matters what happens to religion. I don't mean supernatural belief of course. We must have some idea of deep moral structure.' (Iris Murdoch, *The Book and the Brotherhood*, London, 1987, p. 243.)

Though this discussion of morality is a fairly recent phenomenon, Soviet writers and scholars have for some time been aware of the need for a more sophisticated analysis of religion. Since the 1960s a minority of specialists have tried to explore the reasons underlying religious beliefs and have suggested that some of the needs met by religion have an 'objective' character, i.e. that they are needs which must also be met in a socialist society. Thus it was that the ideological establishment increasingly came to accept the necessity of developing new, non-religious rites that would be capable of both meeting people's ritual needs and acting as instruments of socialisation. Some of these issues are discussed in Igor Golomstock's review of a book

entitled *Symbols of Power* (pp. 88-93).

This awareness of the broader implications of religion is also clear in some Soviet and East European writing on Christian-Marxist dialogue and liberation theology. These subjects have rarely been touched upon in the pages of *RCL*, but this issue includes what we hope will be the first of a series on such themes (pp. 45-58).

The more open discussion of the religious question in some parts of the Soviet bloc has brought new practical opportunities for the churches. In the Soviet Union churchmen have been presented in the press as 'normal' people and some have been able to express their views in the media (pp. 82-86). New opportunities are presenting themselves to the churches in Hungary where last year Prime Minister Grósz bypassed the State Office for Church Affairs and personally met with church leaders. In a later letter he promised cooperation in resolving 'problem' areas in church-state relations (pp. 70-81).

Yet new opportunities and challenges have not removed all the problems facing the churches of the USSR and Eastern Europe. In Czechoslovakia there have been few signs of change, with those involved in both religious and human rights activity continuing to be subject to harsh treatment (pp. 59-62). What is more, even in those countries where there are signs of relaxation the new atmosphere is generating new problems, as the state seeks the support of the churches in pursuit of its own goals. Hence when Gorbachev met the Russian Orthodox hierarchs at the end of April last year it was made quite clear that the new deal being offered the church was a conditional one: you support *perestroika* and we'll extend the parameters within which you operate. It is also a 'deal' which involves the church following the lead given by the state, an approach which is already familiar to some old-style hierarchs and with which they feel more comfortable. But it is this temptation to a new *symphonia* against which Academician Likhachev warns the church (p. 9). For him the church is something which exists beyond any state structure or ideological perspective; it is an institution which should offer society an ethical lead. What is far from clear is the extent to which that church is prepared to give such a lead and to what extent the state would allow it to do so. Indeed, one suspects that, like most political leaders — of right or left, of democracies or authoritarian regimes — Gorbachev will have little time for turbulent priests.