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Obituary

Jane Elizabeth Ellis (1951–98)

Readers of *Religion State and Society* are among those who have been contacting Keston Institute with tributes to Jane Ellis, who died suddenly at the end of June. Jane's life was one of outstanding work and witness in the cause of freedom of conscience. She worked at Keston for almost 20 years. For most of that time she was a member of the Editorial Board of Keston's scholarly journal *Religion in Communist Lands* (founded in 1973; it changed its name to *Religion State and Society* in 1992), and from 1981 to 1986 she was its Editor.

Jane's contribution was felt in all areas of Keston's activity. She had a keen intellect and applied her formidable powers of research and analysis to the study of religion in the Soviet Union. She started her work at Keston at a time when the role of religion in communist countries was misunderstood and its importance underestimated. She developed techniques to overcome the difficulties involved in gathering accurate information and interpreting it correctly. By her mid-30s she had already established her reputation as one of the world's leading authorities on the Russian Orthodox Church in the twentieth century. Jane's calling was not just an academic one, however. She had a personal commitment to individual Christians in Russia; on her many visits to the Soviet Union she talked in depth to believers of all denominations, learning at first hand about their joys and sorrows. She campaigned for their rights and with great practical acumen organised material aid for those suffering for their faith.

Jane was born in Liverpool on 3 August 1951. When she was a teenager she became a Christian, describing herself as a member of the evangelical branch of the Church of England. Her lifelong involvement with Russia began when she attended an evangelistic rally led by Brother Andrew urging people to take Bibles to Christians in the Soviet Union. She taught herself Russian at school, and graduated in Russian language and literature from Birmingham University in 1973.

Many of Keston's supporters will know of the work of the organisation Aid to Russian Christians (ARC), which this year celebrates its silver jubilee. It was Jane who founded ARC as the first organisation with the aim of systematically supplying material aid and spiritual support to Orthodox Christians suffering for their faith in Russia. She remained its director until 1986. For the first four years of its existence ARC was, in Jane's words, 'virtually a one-woman organisation', operating from a tiny bedsit in London. On a typewriter given by a university friend Jane wrote hundreds of letters asking for support. Those who took books, food and clothing to Christians in Russia would find the password 'from Jane' would open many an anxiously guarded door.

Immediately after graduating in 1973 Jane joined the staff of Keston, turning her professional skills to assessing and summarising documentation from the Soviet

Union and distributing it to those who would make practical use of it. She translated many key documents. She was a prolific author of articles in scholarly journals, the secular and religious press and the Keston News Service. She contributed chapters to scholarly volumes. She was an excellent public speaker and gave many fine lectures around the world. She broadcast for the BBC in both English and Russian. She travelled widely in the USSR (including the Trans-Siberian railway), Yugoslavia, Czechoslovakia, the USA, Israel, Australia, China and Japan.

The major achievement of her career was the authoritative study *The Russian Orthodox Church: a Contemporary History* (published by Croom Helm in 1986), covering the institutional life of the Church and also the activity of the religious dissidents, or, as Jane preferred to call them, 'alternative thinkers', many of whom she knew personally. The book is a valuable model of proportion and perspective; and yet it is inspired by a deep respect and understanding for the Orthodox faith remarkable in one from such a different Christian background. It was widely acclaimed in Russia and the second half was published in Russian translation in 1990. A second volume, *The Russian Orthodox Church: Triumphalism and Defensiveness* (Macmillan, 1996), covered the history of the Church from the start of Gorbachev's *perestroika* into the era of freedom. This second volume is reviewed in this issue of *Religion, State and Society*.

Jane was always stimulated by the challenge of the new, always happiest when pioneering some new project. In the late 1980s she set up Keston's first office in Moscow and spent a good deal of her time there. She played a key role in helping to reconcile Christians of different denominations, promoting discussions and stimulating practical cooperative projects. She was a deeply-committed ecumenist and wrote with authority not only on the Orthodox but also on the Baptists and those of other faiths.

In the early 1990s, when Keston moved from Kent to Oxford, Jane became a member of St Antony's College, where she was registered as a DPhil. student.

In her work Jane was never satisfied with second-best. Although a realist and capable of taking a lighthearted look at serious matters when it was necessary to do so – she had a sophisticated sense of humour – Jane was disappointed that after the end of communism so many new problems moved in to beset Russia. In her last years she also suffered from increasing ill-health. She leaves friends and admirers throughout the world, not least in her beloved Russia, where many Christians of all denominations still express their great personal debt to her.

DR PHILIP WALTERS

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