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Editorial

The appearance in this issue of *RSS* of a number of articles on religious minorities prompts some reflection on attitudes to religious pluralism in the former communist world today. The current situation in Russia shows some paradoxical features, which are the product both of the postcommunist decade and of the altered international climate since 11 September 2001.

As is well known, the experience of pluralisation for the established religious organisations in the immediate postcommunist period was traumatic and largely negative. As a writer in the Moscow newspaper *NG-Religii* in October 2000 puts it, 'In principle Orthodoxy cannot consent to play the role of just one component in a global postmodern system and submit to its ideology: this is against the spirit of the Church ...'

It is interesting to see how the concept 'freedom of conscience' is dealt with in the document *Foundations for a Social Concept for the Russian Orthodox Church* (*FSC*) of August 2000. 'Freedom of conscience' is seen as a symptom of 'the collapse of a system of spiritual values' in society at large, of 'mass apostacy and effective indifference to the task of the Church and the triumph over sin'. In the view of the critical Orthodox priest Fr Veniamin Novik, the document sees 'the only positive feature of the principle of freedom of conscience in the fact that it allows the [Russian Orthodox] Church to have legal status in the unwelcoming social conditions of an irreligious world. So freedom of conscience is recognised in a utilitarian way as valid for oneself but not for others.' Some confirmation for this view comes from Metropolitan Kirill of Smolensk of the Russian Orthodox Church (ROC), who at a meeting in the Duma on 5 April 2001 is reported to have said that 'The concept of "freedom of conscience" is a falling away by religious standards (*upadok po religioznym merkam*)', but that 'In the conditions of today's secularised society "freedom of conscience" is the only thing which allows the Church to live.'

On the face of it, then, what the ROC fears is competition in an ideological marketplace. However, the problem seems to be growing more complex.

The ROC (like many other churches and religious organisations in Eastern Europe) is afraid of 'globalisation', which it takes to mean the undifferentiated triumph of Americanism with its secularised market-orientated ideology. This is especially so in the climate since 11 September 2001 as the USA assumes a more active role on the world stage. There is an irony here: the 'American' system thinks of itself as nothing if not pluralistic; but the ROC perceives it as imposing a new uniformity, based on materialist consumerism. In a spirit apparently quite different from that of its own assessment of 'freedom of conscience', the *FSC* says that

> Spiritual and cultural expansion aimed at the total unification of humanity should be opposed by the joint efforts of church, state, civil society, and international organisations with a view to promoting a truly equitable and mutually enriching exchange of information and cultural values, combined with efforts to protect the identity of nations and other human communities.

The events of 11 September 2001 seem to have led to more detailed articulation of this

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vision. A few days after the destruction of the World Trade Centre, and in the midst of talk about a new international war on terrorism, Metropolitan Kirill spoke about what he saw as the desirable outcome of the current developments:

> ... a transition to the peaceful coexistence of various value systems – religious, philosophical, cultural. There are many such systems in the world, and behind each stand tens or hundreds of millions, in some cases more than a billion, people. It cannot be permitted that only one of them should dominate and be considered 'pan-human', while the others – be it Islam or be it consistent Christianity – are humiliated. Each value system must have its proper degree of influence upon the development of international law, and be taken into account when decisions are taken at the world level. If this happens, we shall knock the ground from under the terrorists' feet. No longer will they be able to appeal to public opinion by decrying an unjust world order.

Thus the ROC seems to be developing its traditional vision of 'canonical territory' in terms of 'pluralism'. However, this is a pluralism defined not in terms of individual choice but in terms of global differentiation at the level of the community. How large such communities should ideally be, and whether within them the preservation of a coherent 'value system' must or should entail the suppression or exclusion of alternatives, are still very lively questions.

In the climate since 11 September 2001 many governments have taken the opportunity to initiate measures against religious 'extremism'. In Russia a bill proposed by President Putin banning religious organisations found to have engaged in 'extremist activity' was approved by parliament this summer. Article 1 includes in its definition of extremist activity 'the propaganda of exclusivity, superiority or inferiority of citizens on account of their attitude towards religion, social status, race, nationality, religion, or language'.

The bill has rung alarm bells with a wide spectrum of religious and social groups. At a round table in Moscow on 8 July representatives of a variety of public organisations as remote from one another as the Orthodox 'patriotic' movement and the radical underground press declared the law to be 'antidemocratic and anticonstitutional'.

'Any religious organisation considers its doctrine to be the true one,' says Professor Lev Simkin, a lawyer who represents the Mormons in Russia, 'and a state official might find incitement to religious discord in that. Sadly there are a good many officials working in the regional departments of the Ministry of Justice who lack tolerance. They could easily apply these norms to "undesirable" religious organisations.' In Simkin's view, Protestant religious organisations could suffer under the law in many provincial areas, where local authorities 'conduct either an open or covert policy of fighting against religious minorities'.

Meanwhile a professor at the Russian Academy of State Sciences, Mikhail Kuznetsov, has a rather different problem with the law's concern with 'religious extremism'. In his view the law is 'an attempt to create a uniform person tolerant of every belief'. 'We Orthodox are against ecumenism', he declares; and he foresees the danger of measures against Orthodox believers simply as a consequence of their belief that 'Orthodoxy is the only right faith'. According to the new law, he says, any criticism of 'the United States' export of destructive sects to Russia or of Protestant and Catholic expansion' will be regarded as extremism: 'This is secularised totalitarianism, and we will have to be tolerant of all scoundrels.'

It seems that the prospects for religious pluralism in Russia have become if anything more problematical in the year since the attack on the World Trade Centre.

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Michael Bourdeaux, the founder of Keston College (as Keston Institute was originally known), remained its director until his semi-retirement in 1999. He is the author of many books on religion in the Soviet Union and most recently co-editor (with John Witte) of *Proselytism and Orthodoxy in Russia: the New War for Souls* (Orbis, Maryknoll, 1999).

Janice Broun, an Oxford graduate, is a specialist writer on religion in communist and postcommunist societies. She has had several articles published on Bulgarian religious affairs since the early 1980s, and book reviews on a wide variety of aspects of religious life in Central and Eastern Europe. She is the author of *Conscience and Captivity: Religion in Eastern Europe* (1988) and of six contributions to *Censorship: a World Encyclopedia.*

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