

Comment

True Glory

Prejudice is good in its place. It makes people happy. It takes nations back to whatever is crucial to them; it ties them fairly and squarely to their roots; it enables them to flourish in their own proper manner. They become more passionate and therefore happier in whatever purposes or inclinations they may have.

Herder

A comparison of a photograph of the Russian industrial town of Ivanovo at the outset of the nineteenth century with one taken this year reveals some interesting changes. Of some thirty or forty churches in the town in 1917 only about eight remain. Most of the rest were demolished or blown-up in the anti-religious campaigns in the former Soviet Union. The site of the main cathedral, dedicated to the Resurrection, was specially ear-marked for a monument to the heroes of the Revolution. Gradually the remaining churches are being purged of their secular associations and are being reopened for worship. One, formerly the city archive, is a hive of activity. It is home for a community of sixty Orthodox nuns who are rebuilding the church and the monastic buildings with their own hands. This remarkable community is one further example of the revival of religious life amongst the Russian people. The reappearance of the cross gleaming above the roofs of the town has been a great cause of satisfaction to the citizens of Ivanovo, who have seen it as a sign of a break with the immediate past. However, the unfreezing of Russian church life has provoked the reappearance of certain older conflicts which had been allowed to subside in the face of a common godless enemy. The problem revolves around the identification between faith and culture, ethnicity and nationalism.

During the 250 year Mongol-Tartar domination of Russia, the Orthodox Church came to occupy a unique place in the life of the nation. Its importance was such that it almost became synonymous with Russia itself. During the time of the feudal princes, from the thirteenth to the fifteenth centuries, only the Church stood as the visible symbol of national unity providing the rallying point for ethnic feeling. As a result, Russian is the only language in which the same word stands for 'Christian' and 'peasant'. Until the title comrade appeared at the Revolution, Russians addressed each other not as 'Russians' or 'fellow-citizens' but as 'Christians' or 'Orthodox'. In Slavonic, Orthodoxy is translated as *Pravoslavie* meaning 'true glory'. Orthodox Slavs see themselves as members of a community which praises and glorifies God in the right spirit. In medieval times Russian Christianity was understood as the only true faith, the bounds of the Church marched with the bounds

of the Russian people of God. The Orthodox people were the guardians of the faith. They were, in the words of the nineteenth century Slavophile theologian Alexie Khomiakov, the 'bearer of God'.

On 14 July 1993, the Russian parliament passed a law which severely restricted the activities of what were regarded as 'foreign missionaries' and 'heterodox Christians'. Should President Yeltsin sign this bill and it pass into law, all religious-missionary, publishing and educational 'propaganda' activities by religious organisations with headquarters abroad, unless formally attached to a Russian association, will be prohibited. All personnel, including those holding Russian citizenship, will be required to be accredited by the state. The obligation to disclose religious affiliation on official documents will also be reimposed. All religious groups, including the Latin Catholics, will be obliged to conform to these regulations, apart from the Russian Orthodox Church and the Moslem community. Spokesmen for the Russian Orthodox Church have applauded this new code claiming that it will help to quell the rising tide of popular anger against this 'religious invasion'.

Ecumenical dialogue has been seriously affected in recent years by international politics. The fragmentation of Yugoslavia has pointed up the dangers of this development. A few years before the collapse of Yugoslavia the Moslems of Bosnia, most of whom did not practise Islam, won the right to describe themselves as Moslem in the space for 'nationality' on the state census form. Their interest was not so much to identify themselves with Moslems in other parts of Yugoslavia or abroad as to distinguish themselves from their neighbours. The Moslems are Slav speakers of Serbo-Croat, but cannot describe themselves as Serb or Croat because that would imply they are Orthodox or Catholic. Hence, Moslem became synonymous with Bosnian, as did Orthodoxy with Serb and Catholic with Croat.

Historically a new nation was born or recognised as comprising the totality of all of the members of a particular faith in a defined territory. Effectively, the peace negotiators in the former Yugoslavia have accepted this paradigm. Nationalism and religion have once more become dangerously united. The political manifestos strike remarkable echoes of that nineteenth-century alliance between Romantics and Theocrats which had the destruction of the Enlightenment polity well in its sights. Christianity has traditionally proclaimed that there are more than regional values and contingent principles. The gospel message and the promise of redeemed humanity belong to all times and places. The Enlightenment is out of vogue these days, but maybe it has something to teach those Orthodox and Catholics who are in danger of being imprisoned by the *Volksgeist*.

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