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Biblical Truth for Today's Church

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LATIMER COMMENT 32

CHRISTIANITY IN EASTERN EUROPE AND THE USSR: AN UPDATE

Following the remarkable events of late 1989, many Christians in Britain have concluded that Eastern Europeans are now free, both politically and religiously, and have ceased to pay much attention to what is going on in those countries. Keston College, long noted for its work in keeping alive an awareness of persecution, has almost folded up, the majority of its support having rapidly disappeared. It has had to put its premises in Keston on the market, and will soon move to a much smaller site in Oxford,

In fact, of course, there has been a great increase in freedom in Eastern European countries, and we must all gratefully acknowledge that. At the same time, this does not mean that religious life is altogether normal, in the Western sense, and Christians must continue to monitor the situation in certain countries for some time to come.

Of special importance are the following:

Intolerant Catholicism. Having spearheaded the opposition to Communism for many years, the Roman Catholic Church is poised to reap the maximum advantage from its achievement. In Poland and to a lesser extent in Czechoslovakia, it has become involved in political matters to a degree unknown in the West, outside of Ireland. Poland's previously liberal abortion law has been abolished, and abortion is now a crime, which can cause an offending doctor to lose his right to practise. Religious education is also now compulsory in schools, but it must be given by a priest. There has also been a widespread rise in Anti-Semitism, which the Church has done little to counteract. Considering that the pre-war Jewish population of Poland was over three million, and is now only a few thousand, this movement has little grounding in fact, and is potentially very dangerous.

Cults and Sects. The new freedom has brought with it an invasion of cults, ranging from Jehovah's Witnesses to the Moonies and Hare Krishna. Protected from this kind of thing for so long, Eastern Europeans do not have the resources to combat them effectively. Many people are drawn to them out of curiosity, and although it is unlikely that they will make much impact in the long term, the short-term damage to individuals may be very great.

Lack of Resources. Bibles are now freely available, but other resources, like commentaries, study guides, children's literature and so on may be hard to come by, and is often very expensive. Western Churches are no longer subsidising their Eastern brethren, which means that in practice it is often more difficult to get material now than it was before! Economic chaos in the former eastern bloc hits the churches as much as anyone else, and in many cases it seems that pastors may have to take secular jobs in order to feed their families.

Reaction in the Soviet Union. It is hard to predict which way the USSR will go in 1991, but the signs are that there is to be some sort of crackdown. It would appear that the Russian Orthodox Church has been co-opted by the state as an ally in the defence of the integrity of the Soviet Union. It is true that the new Patriarch, Alexii II, who was elected in May 1990, condemned the shooting of innocent civilians in Vilnius (Lithuania), but it is not clear what this means or how long it will continue. What does seem certain is that the Orthodox Church will play an increasingly large political role, and that this may well compromise its ability to preach and teach the Gospel in a way which will win the respect of the masses.

In addition to this, there are many reactionary groups in the Soviet Union which want to use the Church for their own ends. The most prominent of these is Pamyat, originally a cultural society dedicated to the preservation of ancient monuments, but which has recently taken up the cause of Slavic racialism and anti-Semitism. Virtually all Soviet Jews seem to be on the verge of leaving the country altogether, if only because they are afraid of

what might happen to them. Christians are involved in opposition to Pamyat, but it is not yet clear how strong that opposition will prove to be.

Ethnic Minorities. Many of these are closely linked to particular Church groups. In the USSR this is true of the Baltic nationalities, as well as of the Georgians and Armenians. Elsewhere, most Hungarians in Romania are Protestant (Reformed), and there are large Catholic minorities (Slovenes and Croats) in Yugoslavia, who are trying to break away from the state. What will happen to them if and when central governments begin to launch attacks on separatist groups is unknown, but they can hardly be ignored. It must be concluded that religious freedom for ethnic minorities is far from guaranteed, and may well lessen in the next year or two.

Evangelical Groups. Established Protestant minorities (mainly in Czechoslovakia, Hungary, Romania and the USSR) are unlikely to suffer, but evangelisation may well be equated with sectarianism, political separatism and dubious cultic activity. At the moment there is considerable freedom, but this is still fragile, especially in the USSR, and may be curtailed in the interest of 'stability'.

For these and other reasons, our prayers and vigilance are still needed. Support Keston College, in particular, by buying Michael Bourdeaux's latest book, Gorbachev, Glasnost and the Gospel, (Hodder and Stoughton, £9.95), which gives a full picture of what has led to the recent changes, and outlines what may be in store for the longsuffering churches of the East in the next few years.

Gerald Bray

Also Comments on 'The Truth and Significance of the Resurrection', 'The Lima Report: Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry', 'The Tiller Report on the Ministry', 'The Guardians of the Faith', 'Sunday Trade: a Christian Perspective', 'The Nature of Christian Belief', 'The Priesthood of the Ordained Ministry', 'C.S. Lewis, Twenty Years On"', 'Salvation and the Church', 'Not Just for the Poor', 'We Believe in God', 'Indulgences Today', 'Any News of What's Good for Society?', 'A Discriminating Compassion', 'Baptismal Policy and Baptismal Doctrine', 'The Ordination of Women: an Evangelical View' and 'Mrs Thatcher's Moral Reformation'.