

Keston Newsletter

No. 43, 2026

Fr Alexander Men and the Traditions of Russian Religious Thought

by Randall A. Poole



Before he was murdered with an axe on 9 September, 1990, Fr Alexander Men had become the most popular and admired religious figure in Russia. Michael Bourdeaux, the founder of Keston College, today the Keston Institute, called him the unofficial patriarch.¹ David Remnick wrote that he was a spiritual Sakharov.² Mikhail Epstein regarded him as the most prominent Russian Christian

Orthodox thinker of the 1970s and 1980s.³ His historical importance rested on his ability to convey to large groups of people, through his ministry, lecturing, and writings, an alternative worldview to Soviet materialism and atheism, and even in some respects to that of the Russian Orthodox Church, at least as represented by the Moscow Patriarchate. Men's worldview certainly was religious and specifically Orthodox Christian, but it was highly ecumenical, based on reason, and philosophically informed. Men held that theism is the most compelling and realistic worldview that we have, realistic in the sense that it best accounts for the full range of human experience and for all that we know about reality, including what science tells us about it. For him the first ground of theism was human nature. He argued that the fundamental capacities that make us human, that make us persons, capacities such as reason, free will, and morality, cannot be explained by materialistic or naturalistic approaches – that they defeat naturalism, to use one of today's philosophical expressions, and entail a higher ontological reality, a divine reality. In short, Men's theism was a resolute philosophical personalism.

From the Editor

Fr Alexander Men continues to inspire and fascinate many of us who have followed the “decline and fall” of Russia since the hopeful years of the 1990s, after the collapse of Communism. He is the subject of a talk, delivered at Keston Institute’s 2025 AGM by Professor Randall Poole, which is now published in this issue of the *Keston Newsletter* (pp.1-18).

Michael Bourdeaux called Fr Alexander “the unofficial Patriarch”, and the Russian medievalist and ancient historian, Sergei Averintsev, described him as “the man sent by God to be missionary to the wild tribe of the Soviet intelligentsia”. Fr Alexander was a central figure in the cultural, moral and spiritual awakening during the years leading up to the fall of Communism, with a remarkable ability to communicate with people whose spiritual and intellectual lives had been stunted by the stifling Soviet system. I remember talking to a Russian Orthodox priest in Moscow, before my regular visits to Russia had to end with the war against Ukraine, who told me that Fr Gleb Yakunin, a leader of the human rights movement and Soviet dissident, had gone about with “his visor up”, whereas Fr Alexander went about with “his visor down”. Fr Alexander did not get directly involved in the human rights movement, but nevertheless constantly affirmed, in his teaching and pastoral ministry, the sacredness of the individual which is fundamental to the convictions of those who campaigned for an end to the autocratic Soviet system.

Keston’s Council was delighted to be able to fund a new 3-year Research Associate

post at Cardiff University. From a large number of applicants, Dr Iona Ramsay was selected, and contributes to this issue of the *Keston Newsletter* some thought-provoking ideas (pp.19-24) which undergird her research on religion under Communism.

Keston’s Encyclopaedia project continues, and the Council hopes that another volume will be published this year. If the publishing situation in Moscow continues to be problematic, this new volume will at least be published on Keston’s website, where all volumes are available. The second part of Sergei Filatov’s report on his field trip to the Orenburg oblast is published on pp.25-33 (the first part was published in *Keston Newsletter* No.42) and includes information about Lutherans, Mennonites, Baptists, Pentecostals and Muslims. Since this field trip, Sergei has visited Yakutia, Rostov-on-Don and Kazan, so further field trip reports will follow this one.

The Director of the Keston Center, Kathy Hillman, provides an up-to-date report (pp.34-44) on the Center with a particular focus on Alyona Kozhevnikova, one-time head of Keston’s news service and a member of Keston’s Council, who sadly died last November. As Kathy writes, “Alyona was not only an eyewitness to the Cold War and the politics of East and West, she lived that history”.

Xenia Dennen

Also in this issue:

<i>Religion under Communism</i>	<i>p.19</i>
<i>Orenburg Field Trip, Part 2</i>	<i>p.25</i>
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His worldview was decisively shaped by Russia's religious philosophers of the late 19th and early 20th centuries – Vladimir Solovyov and his followers. Their creativity was at the centre of what has become known as the Russian Religious Renaissance, typically dated from 1900 to 1922, when Lenin deported most of its luminaries. Solovyov died in 1900 at the age of 47 but was undoubtedly Russia's greatest religious philosopher and the most important inspiration behind the Russian Religious Renaissance. No thinker influenced Men more. My thesis is that Men was the best representative of the traditions of Russian religious thought, of the Russian Religious Renaissance, in the post-Stalinist period.⁴ True, there was one living representative of the tradition, Alexei Losev, who died in 1988, just two years before Men.⁵ But his work was very difficult and read mainly by specialists, while Men had a much wider audience. At the end of his life he had become a “stadium figure,” as one of his admirers put it.⁶ Though his religious worldview was philosophically complex, Men had a remarkable ability to convey it in terms that ordinary educated people could understand. Beginning in the 1960s, more and more people in the Soviet Union wanted to understand, and Men wrote for and spoke to them.

Life and Works

Alexander Men was born on 22 January, 1935, as the darkest period of the Stalinist night descended on Russia. Both his parents were Jewish. Men valued his Jewish heritage, which no doubt contributed to his ecumenism.⁷ His mother,

Elena Semenovna Tsuperfein, was attracted to Christianity even as a child, with her reading of the Gospels. She and her infant son Alik were baptised together in September 1935 by a catacomb priest. From an early age it was clear that Alexander was exceptionally intelligent and very gifted. He could read before the age of five. Early on he developed his lifelong interests in the natural sciences, especially biology and zoology. At the same time he began to read voraciously in the works of world literature, history, philosophy, and religion. By the age of 13 he was reading Kant. Next came the Russian religious philosophers Vladimir Solovyov, Sergei Bulgakov, and Nikolai Berdyaev. Alexander found old copies of their books at a local flea market and read them, he said, with trembling hands.⁸ He was about 15. He already had decided to become a priest and tried, unsuccessfully, to gain admission to the Moscow Theological Seminary. He began writing his first book, *Son of Man*, published abroad two decades later.

Stalin's anti-cosmopolitan (i.e., anti-Jewish) campaign meant that Alexander could not enter Moscow University. Instead, in 1953, he enrolled at a Moscow zoological institute to pursue his lifelong interest in biology. In 1955 the institute was relocated to Irkutsk in Siberia. Alexander continued his studies there, while also independently reading theology. He read more of Solovyov and also Pavel Florensky, whose large and difficult work, *The Pillar and Ground of Truth* (1909), helped to convince him that truth is intuitively known, and not only based on inductive reasoning from

empirical data.⁹ Despite his academic success, he did not graduate. Alexander's religious contacts in Irkutsk and his criticisms of a new required course on "scientific atheism" resulted in him being denied permission to take his final exams. His expulsion coincided with the launch of Nikita Khrushchev's anti-religious campaign.

He returned to Moscow in 1958, was ordained a deacon on 1 July, and assigned to his first parish (Akulovo), on the outskirts of Moscow. Two years later, after graduating by correspondence courses from the Leningrad Theological Seminary, he was ordained a priest on 1 September 1960 and assigned to his second parish, Alabino, also to the southwest of Moscow. Four years later he moved to his third parish, Tarasovka, located near Sergiev Posad. His fourth and final parish was Novaya Derevnnya, where he served the last 20 years of his life.

Fr Alexander ministered not only to traditional parishioners but increasingly to Moscow intellectuals. In the mid-1960s Tarasovka experienced what he called a "demographic explosion," referring mainly to the growing numbers of intellectuals who came, including many Jewish intellectuals.¹⁰ One of them was Michael Aksionov-Meerson, who converted to Orthodoxy in 1965. He was very close to Fr Alexander, who, however, could not dissuade him from emigrating in 1972. He went to New York City, was ordained in the Orthodox Church of America, and wrote a classic text on Russian religious philosophy (see below). Reflecting on the difficulties intellectuals faced in Soviet society, he said the main issue was: "How

not to be absorbed... To stay a spiritual personality... In this sense, the Church helped to support the human personality, the personality of the intelligentsia, for whom personhood is extremely important."¹¹ Judith Deutsch Kornblatt, who interviewed Fr Meerson, added astutely: "The meaning of 'personality' [or personhood] preoccupied many of the religious philosophers of the so-called Russian Religious Renaissance that took place in the two decades before the Bolshevik Revolution, and that was rediscovered by the 1960s generation after the collapse of Stalinism."¹² No one was more important in that process of rediscovery than Alexander Men, as we will see.

The cultural, moral, and spiritual awakening of the 1960s, which began with the "thaw" after Khrushchev's 1956 secret speech, formed the worldview of the "*shestidesyatniki*," readers of *Novyi mir*, and others who valued personal freedom, dignity, and creativity. Alexander Men knew how to speak to these people, whether they were religious or not. In the words of his biographer Wallace Daniel, he was "highly attractive to the intelligentsia, who began to seek him out. They rarely, if ever, encountered an Orthodox priest of such capacity and learning."¹³ Or as the philologist and philosopher Sergei Averintsev put it more colourfully, Fr Alexander was "the man sent from God to be missionary to the wild tribe of the Soviet intelligentsia."¹⁴

The most dramatic expressions of the new hopes for a freer, more open, and lawful society were the dissident and human rights movements. In 1953 Alexander met Gleb Yakunin, who later

became one of the great champions of human rights in the Soviet Union. Their friendship brought about Gleb's conversion to Orthodoxy, and he was ordained in 1962. In December 1965 he and another Orthodox priest (also one of Fr Alexander's close friends), Nikolai Eshliman, wrote two letters, one addressed to Patriarch Alexii I, the other to Nikolai Podgornyi, chairman of the Presidium of the Supreme Soviet of the USSR. The letters were highly critical of Soviet church-state relations and especially of the Moscow Patriarchate for accommodating to state power. Predictably, both priests were suspended. This marked the beginning of Yakunin's dissident activity.¹⁵

Fr Alexander, unlike his long-time friend, did not become directly involved in the human rights movement, but he did advance, as we will see, a remarkable personalist defense of human rights. He believed that his ministry was the best way for him to contribute to the struggle for freedom and human dignity. His charism reached beyond the intelligentsia and embraced anyone interested in learning more about the creative and spiritual aspects of human nature and about the perennial questions to which they give rise. Large numbers of people were attracted by his deep learning, his broad cultural and religious horizons, and especially by his simple respect for them as persons, his respect for their human dignity. He radiated the image and likeness of God and in his presence people could better recognise the divine spark in themselves.¹⁶

In addition to his pastoral work, there was another aspect of Fr Alexander's "heroic

ministry," as Meerson characterised it: his voluminous writings.¹⁷ His main works were published abroad, in Brussels, by a small Catholic publishing house. His first book was *The Son of Man*, on which he had begun working in his early teens. Beginning in the late 1960s, it was distributed through samizdat. After it was published in Brussels in 1968, copies of the book made their way back into Russia and were widely circulated. There soon followed his major, six-volume work, *History of Religion: in Search of the Way, the Truth, and the Life*.¹⁸ The first five volumes were published between 1970 and 1972. The sixth followed a decade later. The first volume, *The Sources of Religion*, explores the philosophical grounds of theism. It stands on its own and I will turn to it later. The second through sixth volumes trace the religious history of humanity from the dawn of civilization to the threshold of Christianity. In a certain sense his first book, *The Son of Man*, completes the series, and recent editions have added it as the last volume. The whole series is dedicated to Vladimir Solovyov, whom Men considered to be his most important teacher.¹⁹ In Russia the volumes circulated in samizdat and in published form. According to Meerson, "The impact of this series was enormous."²⁰ Even regional Communist Party secretaries read them.²¹

Alexander Men was a popular and charismatic priest whose vast learning and ability to convey it convinced more and more people of the truth of theism. Such a figure was bound to face harassment from an officially atheistic regime and from others who felt threatened by him, including other priests and conservative

hierarchs within the Russian Orthodox Church. The KGB kept him under surveillance and frequently interrogated him. What is surprising is that he was never arrested, though he had every reason to fear it. The harassment increased from 1980 to 1987. Then with glasnost and perestroika everything changed. In 1988 the millennial celebrations of Russian Christianity were an indication of much greater freedom and respect for the church. Fr Alexander had all along been a “pillar of freedom,”²² and he now became, if not quite a “stadium figure,” one of Russia’s most visible public religious figures, often giving several talks a week at various events. In 1990 he was asked to define his creed. He responded:

“the Christianity I profess is a religion of freedom... It rejects authoritarianism and paternalism [and]... is open to everything valuable in other Christian denominations. It does not reject the good which comes from unbelievers, but it rejects violence, dictatorship, and hatred even if they use Christ’s name as a cover. [Surely he meant to say, ‘especially if they do’.] It takes public life as a domain for the Gospel’s principles to be applied, it measures a political system by its humaneness, by what it gives to a human being. It considers separation of church and state [to be] the most favourable condition for the church and sees a danger in the very idea of ‘state religion’.”²³

Together with separation of church and state, in his last two years Fr Alexander was increasingly occupied with the themes of the freedom of the human

person, freedom of conscience, and human dignity.²⁴ His criticisms of the Russian Orthodox Church and its relationship to the state aroused hostility from those who benefited from the authoritarian structures of church and state. Three days before his death he warned of the “unification of Russian fascism with Russian clericalism.”²⁵ Whether it was such forces or ordinary hooligans who killed him remains an open question.

Church and State in Russian History

Fr Alexander had good historical reasons for insisting on the separation of church and state. In his last interview, he said that “it is precisely because the pre-revolutionary church was the way it was, that the catastrophe happened.”²⁶ The catastrophe was Communist totalitarianism in Russia, which he saw as a direct consequence of the long subordination of church to state in Russian history, beginning with Peter the Great’s abolition of the patriarchate and creation of the Holy Synod, a collegiate board of bishops headed by a lay official, the chief procurator. In his article, “Religion, the ‘Cult of Personality’ and the Secular State,” Men wrote that the church’s alliance with the autocratic state undermined any trust which educated society, hoping desperately for a more liberal order, might have put in the church as a partner.²⁷ In fact, the consequences were much worse than lack of trust. Because the imperial regime relied on the Russian Orthodox Church as a major ideological source of its legitimacy, many educated Russians came to regard the church and religion more generally as mere instruments of autocratic government. For some of them, atheism

became a heroic means to attain freedom from the twin oppressors of church and state. By the 1860s, atheism formed the ideology of the radical Russian intelligentsia. After they took power in 1917, the Bolsheviks brutally imposed this ideology on society. In the spiritually-barren landscape of Soviet Russia, Stalinism became a pseudo-religion. In the cult of personality, Men wrote, “state power came to total self-deification, and established itself as the only absolute value.”²⁸ The history of church-state relations in Russia and its terrible consequences had convinced Men of the importance of the principle of the secular state, that is, “the state which serves the interests of its citizens regardless of their religious affiliation,” and guards “the holy of holies within man – his convictions and his freedom of conscience.”²⁹

Men noted that the synodal system “could not entirely paralyse the inner life of the church,” which had “its great saints, ascetics, clergy and theologians.”³⁰ In fact, Russia experienced a long religious revival in the imperial period, growing out from under the Holy Synod. It began early in the 19th century at the Optina Pustyn monastery, which cultivated hesychasm (a mystical tradition of contemplative prayer, revived in the late 18th century by the *Philokalia*, a collection of patristic and medieval texts) and spiritual eldership (*starchestvo*). As a boy Alexander experienced Optina spirituality through Mother Mariya, a nun who was very close to him.³¹ Other facets of the religious revival included Slavophilism, monasticism, pilgrimage, icon veneration, scholarship and learning in the theological academies, the publication in 1880 of Dostoevsky’s

The Brothers Karamazov (which revealed to his readership the depths of Russian Orthodox spirituality), Tolstoy’s religious conversion in the late 1870s, Vladimir Solovyov’s *Lectures on Godmanhood* (delivered in 1878 to audiences of nearly a thousand), and the pastoral movement among Russian Orthodox clergy.³²

One of the main figures in the pastoral movement was Fr Grigorii Petrov (1867-1925). Very much like Vladimir Solovyov, he declared the full realisation of the Kingdom of God to be the “universal ideal of all humanity” and the purpose of history. God would fulfill that purpose once human beings learned to live in the spirit of truth, love, and justice and once they internalised “the Gospel as the foundation of life” (the title of his first book). Petrov deplored the tsarist autocracy’s subordination of the Russian Orthodox Church to its own interests. By the time of the 1905 revolution he came to support the disestablishment of the church.³³ In all this Men can be seen as Petrov’s faithful successor, though I do not know if Men was familiar to him. He was much inspired by two very similar figures, the priests Alexei and Sergei Mechev, father and son, who served in one of the most successful parishes in Moscow before the Bolsheviks shut it down in 1931.³⁴

By 1900, the century-long religious revival culminated in the more intense Russian Religious Renaissance. In 1988–1989, Fr Alexander gave a series of 12 lectures (amounting to a book) on its main philosophers. Three of them, Nikolai Berdyaev, Sergei Bulgakov, and Semyon Frank, together with Peter Struve, had passed “from Marxism to idealism,” as Bulgakov

put it in 1903 in the title of one of his books. The three went on to become religious philosophers of global importance. Their conversion from Marxism was a significant moment in the history of Russian thought, because they memorialised and analysed it in their contributions to the 1902 volume, *Problems of Idealism*. Men refers to this collection at least once and discusses in more detail its successor volume, *Vekhi* (1909), to which all three also contributed. In lecturing on them when he did, in the late 1980s, Men wanted to convey their spiritual experience and learning to a society that was itself abandoning Marxism for a new worldview. He called them and the other Russian religious philosophers on whom he lectured “immense figures... figures as though chiseled out of stone, figures that any civilization in any age would be proud of.”³⁵

It is true that in its time the Russian Religious Renaissance, with its defense of the human person, its sacred dignity and rights, did not fundamentally alter Russia’s historical trajectory, but it came close. Struve, Berdyaev, Bulgakov and Frank were leaders of the Russian liberation movement, the public opinion campaign against autocracy that culminated in the Revolution of 1905. Struve conceived the *Problems of Idealism* project as a defense of freedom of conscience and its importance in constitutional government. It played its part in mobilising Russian civil society against the autocracy and in forcing it to grant a constitution – a remarkable demonstration of the power of philosophical ideas. By 1917,

Russia’s idealist and religious philosophers had subjected the materialism of the radical intelligentsia to a withering critique. But under the unprecedented strain of the Great War, the Romanov dynasty collapsed. Russian civil society, under the same enormous strain, was not able to consolidate whatever prospects there were for liberal development under the Provisional Government. It was unable to prevent the Bolsheviks from taking power, from imposing their dead ideology on society, and from deporting most of the luminaries of the Russian Religious Renaissance. In Paris Berdyaev became the best known Russian philosopher in the world, Bulgakov perhaps the greatest Orthodox theologian of the 20th century, and Frank the “most outstanding” Russian philosopher of all time, in the judgment of historian of philosophy Vasilii Zenkovsky.³⁶

Personalism: Recovering the Traditions of Russian Religious Thought

In the late 1980s, Fr Alexander Men must have thought that Russia was experiencing a historical moment similar to the 1905 Revolution, when constitutional government and the rule of law, based on respect for human dignity and human rights, were viable possibilities for Russian historical development. He wanted to strengthen those possibilities in his day by recovering the traditions of Russian religious thought. The tradition that he valued most was *personalism*. Let me offer a definition: personalism holds that persons are rational, moral, creative, and spiritual beings who bear an intrinsic worth or dignity and who are the very

centre of reality: its ontological centre (persons are the highest form of reality), its axiological centre (persons are the supreme value in reality), and its epistemological centre (through persons reality is intelligible). Men seems to have taken the term “personalism” from Berdyaev, who (so far as I know) first used it in his 1911 book, *Philosophy of Freedom*, which Men greatly admired.³⁷ He must also have known that Berdyaev included a section on personalism in his 1931 book, *Naznachenie cheloveka* (translated by Duddington as *The Destiny of Man*, but more accurately it is *The Calling of the Human Being*).³⁸ The calling is to realise personhood in oneself and others, to build communities of persons, since only in community with each other can persons flourish.

The term “personalism” was not commonly, if at all, used by Russian philosophers before Berdyaev, but it does very well describe a deep feature of the Russian religious-philosophical tradition.³⁹ Beginning as early as Ivan Kireevsky and then in earnest with Boris Chicherin and Vladimir Solovyov around 1880, Russian metaphysical idealists and religious philosophers invested the Russian word “*lichnost*” with the exalted meaning of “personhood,” to emphasise the person’s absolute worth, dignity, and rights. They typically embraced Kant’s idealist conception of human nature, which was based on the astonishing dual power of reason to posit or recognise ideals and to determine the will according to them. They drew theistic metaphysical conclusions from this quintessential human capacity for ideal self-determination, since it defeats naturalism: the absolute

ideals of reason and morality cannot be derived from the positive data of external sense experience, while free will refutes physical determinism.⁴⁰

Most important for Alexander Men was Vladimir Solovyov. In his last lecture, delivered the night before he was killed, Men defined the “essence of Christianity” as Godmanhood (*bogochelovechestvo*), also translated as divine humanity.⁴¹ This was the central idea of Solovyov’s whole religious philosophy. For him divine humanity was both a conception of personhood and a philosophy of history. In several places he elaborated a tripartite conception of human nature, according to which human beings combine in themselves three principles: the absolute or divine principle, the material or natural principle, and (between them) the distinctively human principle (rational autonomy or self-determination).⁴² Together the divine and human principles form “divine humanity.” Together they are also the source of human personhood, dignity, and rights. (It is highly significant that Solovyov begins *Lectures on Divine Humanity* with an astute critique of the modern effort to ground human dignity and rights in secular humanism, without the divine principle.)

Divine humanity also refers to the free human realisation of the divine principle in ourselves and in the world – the process and telos of *theosis* or deification. Human beings, created in the image and likeness of God, are called to work actively toward this ideal: the Kingdom of God and universal transfiguration in the unity of all, in which all will be one

in God. The teleological element is what makes divine humanity also a philosophy of history. But the telos cannot be achieved without free human participation. In Solovyov's words, human beings are called to "consciously and freely turn to the divine principle and enter into a perfectly free and deliberate union with it."⁴³ The concept of divine humanity extends Chalcedonian Christology – which confirms that the two natures of Christ, divine and human, are united in his person in perfect harmony, without "division or confusion," Christ being the perfect, integral "Godman" – to all of humanity, although in this extension the divine nature is made a "principle," an ideal to be realised. Solovyov drew the theistic implications of his idealist conception of human nature in striking terms: "Thus, belief in oneself, belief in the human person, is at the same time belief in God."⁴⁴

The resolute personalism of Solovyov's religious philosophy has not always been appreciated, mainly because his metaphysics of all-unity has been misunderstood as suppressing the individual person. Zenkovsky, for example, criticised his metaphysics for motifs of impersonalism.⁴⁵ By contrast, Michael Meerson, in his important study, *The Trinity of Love in Modern Russian Theology* (1998), demonstrated that the "personalist shift" (his term) in Russian philosophy began with Solovyov.⁴⁶ He even suggested that Solovyov's personalism anticipates John Zizioulas's vastly influential argument, in *Being as Communion* (1985), that the development of Trinitarian doctrine in the patristic period (especially among the Greek Church

Fathers) revealed that *personhood* is constitutive of *being*, that personhood is the fundamental ontological category.⁴⁷ Recall that Meerson, before he emigrated from the Soviet Union in 1972, was very close to Fr Alexander. I want to suggest that his understanding of Solovyov's personalism, and therefore also subsequent Western scholarly understanding of Solovyov, may well have been shaped by Men, particularly by his book, *The Sources of Religion*.

The Sources of Religion

This book, which appeared in an English edition in 2017 (with a foreword by Wallace Daniel), takes Solovyov's concept of divine humanity as its framework. The book is a critique of materialism, that is to say, a critique of Soviet ideology. Reading it today one could easily conclude that it is directed against the so-called "new atheism," which is not new at all. Men makes the point that materialism or naturalism is not science but rather atheism, meaning that it is an ideology driven by opposition to religion.⁴⁸ But his book is not about different ideologies, or even about different psychologies (e.g., the psychology of religion). It is about different conceptions of reality: materialism or spiritualism, atheism or theism. Which of these is more rational, which best accords with reason, with human experience, with everything we know about ourselves and the world? Men wanted to persuade his Soviet readers that theism is the most compelling, most truthful account of reality we have. His approach, based on close philosophical reasoning, centres on the nature of personhood and on the person's experience

of reality. He embraced what might be called the personological argument for God, which I outlined above and which Solovyov famously formulated in his words, “belief in oneself, belief in the human person, is at the same time belief in God.”

Persons are seekers of ideals and through their reason and free will they can determine themselves according to their ideals. That is Men’s basic conception of the person. There is an oft-quoted passage in the book’s introduction:

“Everything on earth has some sort of origin... If the human spirit through the ages reaches out for beauty, goodness and something higher, deserving of worship, can it be right to see this as empty self-deceit? Would it not be more realistic to admit that, just as the body is connected with the objective world of nature, so the spirit gravitates towards its kindred yet self-transcending unseen reality.”⁴⁹

The first sentence is the key to Men’s argument: ideals such as beauty, goodness, and truth have “some sort of origin,” but it cannot be found in or reduced to naturalistic processes, since such ideals are ultimately infinite or absolute. Even when they have lost faith in God or never had it, “people passionately seek the absolute and are not satisfied with the reality at hand,” Men writes.⁵⁰ The human longing for the absolute, when external empirical experience conveys nothing like it, is a deep mystery. Men regrets that so many people are no longer moved by it or even aware of it.

The immediate object of the book is Marxism and its materialistic explanation of religion and of human consciousness in general. Men refers to Evgenii Trubetskoi’s chapter in *Problems of Idealism*, which chapter levels a devastating critique of Marxism. In it Trubetskoi shows that legal, political, and social ideals cannot be reduced to economics, “that in them human consciousness manifests itself as a *creative* principle, that in them there is something irreducible to economic data and inexplicable by such data alone.” Men himself quotes Trubetskoi’s conclusion: “it is not difficult to demonstrate that no ideal is identical with the [economic] needs and interests it is invoked to satisfy, that it contains something they do not.”⁵¹

Fr Alexander Men does not refer to Sergei Bulgakov’s dazzling opening chapter in *Problems of Idealism*, but undoubtedly he knew it well. It bears the title, “Basic Problems of the Theory of Progress,” and is one of the classic Russian idealist refutations of positivism. Bulgakov argues that the idea of the absolute cannot be derived from the positive data of sense experience (the positivist criterion of reality), yet it is intrinsic to human consciousness and cannot be eradicated. Positivist attempts to deny the presence of the absolute lead only to unconscious metaphysics, since it then enters into thought as “contraband” – it is smuggled in under the guise of scientific, historical, social or other concepts – rather than being openly recognised and justified before reason.⁵² The result is that the relative and absolute are distorted and conflated with each other. Marxism is

one of the best examples of such conflation and muddling. It is clear that Bulgakov's analysis deeply shaped Men's understanding of Marxism and of the idea of progress.

Persons are not only conscious of ideals, they are capable of acting on them, even to the point of sacrificing their life on behalf of them – irrefutable evidence that human beings can override natural instinct and inclination. “Only they face moral dilemmas,” Men writes.⁵³ Together with inner or spiritual freedom is human creativity, which also refutes naturalism. Men regarded Berdyaev's *The Meaning of Creativity* as an essential text and he often refers to it. Berdyaev considered creativity to be the main distinguishing feature of humanity, one that allows persons “to penetrate through this world to another world,” in his words, quoted by Men.⁵⁴

The chapter in which Men explores human freedom and creativity is titled, “Image and Likeness.” In the last paragraph he writes, “At the end of the day all our earthly creativity is a joy interwoven with deep longing for the ideal, for perfection. We feel in ourselves great potential that we cannot totally fulfill. The horizon and aspiration are limitless, but human life is short – but the twinkling of an eye.”⁵⁵ Our infinite ideals drive our perfectibility toward them, yet finite earthly existence and human life defeat our aspirations. From this Men draws a certain argument for immortality that recalls Kant's and Solovyov's similar arguments. He writes: “only in the perspective of the endless development of the human person, far beyond its present

conditions of existence... [can] intellect, conscience, freedom, and creativity cease to be just an empty promise, but instead raise personhood to the heights of true God-likeness.”⁵⁶

Men maintained that the basic constitutive and distinctive features of the person already tell us a lot about the nature of reality. Human freedom and creativity defeat naturalism and substantiate a theistic metaphysics in which persons themselves are central to reality, and not merely accidental or epiphenomenal features, as naturalism in the end is forced to concede. But Men believed that persons can know more about reality than just its bare metaphysical nature. Our faculties for knowledge include not only empirical sense experience and abstract thought, but also intuition and inner experience, which can penetrate more deeply into reality. He devotes more than two chapters of his book to ways of knowing and experiencing the world, affirming the reliability of inner experience, including religious experience. Indeed he says that inner experience provides us with the most trustworthy data we have about reality. “The most important thing,” Men writes, “is that man through himself and in himself discovers an existence different from the natural one.”⁵⁷ His main sources include William James, Sergei Bulgakov, and Rudolf Otto.

What is it that religious experience reveals? Men's answer is: God as the supreme person. This divine revelation could be simultaneously the result of the development of human inner experience and self-consciousness, because human beings are themselves persons. Thus, as

Men put it, the Creator God, “the God-Logos, is revealed to the soul as will, reason and personhood.”⁵⁸ The simultaneous discovery or recognition of the absolute and of personhood, divine and human, took place during the period between roughly 700 and 200 BCE, which Karl Jaspers designated as the Axial Age. Men appreciated Jaspers’s concept and devoted an essay to it.⁵⁹ In his view, Solovyov anticipated Jaspers. For Solovyov, as Men recounts, the critical moment came with the Hebrew prophets, who developed Judaic monotheism into a much fuller personalism.⁶⁰ They were the first to recognise that God’s will is absolute love, which acts not as an external law but rather as the inner law for the human will, as the consciously and freely chosen good. “Upon this inner relationship,” Solovyov writes, “is to be established a new covenant between God and humankind, a new divine-human order which is to replace the preliminary and transitional religion that was grounded in the external law.”⁶¹ The religious-historical process of a deepening human perception of the “Absolute as Person,” again both human and divine, culminated in the coming of the Jesus Christ, the God-man.⁶² Men’s understanding of this process was deeply indebted to Solovyov.

Personalism and the Rebirth of Human Rights

I noted above that Solovyov’s concept of divine humanity is both a philosophy of personalism as well as a philosophy of history, the latter because Solovyov believed that history was teleologically oriented toward the coming of Christ and

then toward the Christification or deification of all reality. It is clear that Solovyov’s concept of divine humanity is a robust religious humanism: human beings have the capacities within themselves to make progress toward their perfect self-realisation in deification, though Solovyov did not believe they could achieve it on their own – it was a divine-human process. Solovyov cherished the ideal of progress and thought that religious humanism was the way to work toward it. But the meanings of progress and of humanism are contested and fill volumes of modern intellectual history. Men was preoccupied with all these themes: the philosophy of history, the meaning of progress, and the varieties of humanism. Berdyaev was too, and Men knew his works, even those published in his émigré period, and valued them for their “personalism and historicism.”⁶³

Men closely followed Berdyaev’s interpretation, first advanced in *Philosophy of Freedom* and then developed in *The Meaning of History* (1923) and *The New Middle Ages* (1924), that in the modern period humanism degenerated from religious humanism to atheistic humanism, the second form naturalising and therefore destroying the very concept of the human person. Atheistic humanism became anti-humanism in the genocidal ideologies of the era of the world wars. Men referred to the “elimination of the religious and spiritual foundations of society... which fueled that pathological crisis of culture that marks the boundary between the 19th and 20th centuries.”⁶⁴ In the 1930s, in Paris, Berdyaev promoted personalism as a new religious humanism and a new foundation of human rights in

the shattered West. The Catholic philosopher Jacques Maritain followed his lead (they were close friends), and more directly that of Pope Pius XI.⁶⁵ His 1942 book *The Rights of Man and Natural Law* launched Maritain on the path to becoming one of the great champions – a personalist champion – of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights.⁶⁶ By the Second Vatican Council, the Catholic Church was making the personalist conception of human dignity and human rights a pillar of its teaching on social justice.

Fr Alexander Men wrote little directly on political philosophy, but there are a few important statements. The first is this: “Democracy is founded on two things: consciousness of the high value of the individual, which is nourished on the soil of religious personalism, and secondly the effort to give society a rational structure.”⁶⁷ The second is this:

“We human beings have relied on the ideals of secular, this worldly humanism, which our century has taken such pride in. [...] And yet, the fault lies not in humanism as such, but in forgetting the higher divine sources of the good. [...] When the social order is taken as sacred, rather than people and their lives, their rights and dignity, then in the name of that social order thousands and perhaps millions

may be destroyed as if they were nothing but worthless scum.”⁶⁸

The first two statements are from the last years of his life. But this next statement is from his early book, *The Sources of Religion*: “There is no doubt that a search for optimal social systems [as in Marxism] can serve the task of true freedom, but experience has shown that without recognising the rights of the individual or the spiritual foundation of those rights, the idea of liberation turns into its opposite: into dictatorship, violence, and slavery.”⁶⁹

These three statements make it clear that Fr Alexander Men was part of the personalist rebirth of human rights in the second half of the 20th century. He was one of very few people in the Soviet Union to play that role. So far as I know, he was the only figure to explicitly connect the term “personalism” to human rights.⁷⁰ And like Berdyaev in Paris earlier, he arrived at his conception through the pre-revolutionary traditions of Russian religious thought, Solovyov in particular. The personalist defense of human rights was not originally a Catholic 20th century development. It was a 19th century Russian development. Fr Alexander Men tried to revive it in the inhospitable environment of Soviet atheism, and that deserves to be seen as a central part of his legacy.

1. Daniel, *Russia's Uncommon Prophet*, 301.

2. Remnick, *Lenin's Tomb*, 357.

3. Epstein, “Aleksandr Men (1935–1990).” See also Epstein, “The Philosophy of Christian Synthesis: Aleksandr Men,” in Epstein, *Ideas Against Ideocracy*, 93–100.

4. This theme is also pursued in Bauer and Noble, “Alexander Men and Russian Religious Thought in the Post-Soviet Period.”

5. Louth, *Modern Orthodox Thinkers*, 317–319.
6. Kornblatt, *Doubly Chosen*, 70.
7. French, “Aleksandr Men’ and Jewish-Christian Identities under Soviet Secularism.”
8. Daniel, *Russia’s Uncommon Prophet*, 62.
9. Daniel, *Russia’s Uncommon Prophet*, 84.
10. Daniel, *Russia’s Uncommon Prophet*, 111.
11. Kornblatt, *Doubly Chosen*, 63.
12. Kornblatt, *Doubly Chosen*, 63.
13. Daniel, *Russia’s Uncommon Prophet*, 111.
14. Shukman, “Introduction,” in Roberts and Shukman, eds., *Christianity for the Twenty-First Century*, 11.
15. Daniel, *Russia’s Uncommon Prophet*, 108–110. On Yakunin, see Daniel, *Freedom and the Captive Mind*.
16. Daniel, *Russia’s Uncommon Prophet*, 203–209.
17. Meerson, “Life and Work,” 17.
18. There is an excellent abridged version available in English: Men, *History of Religion*, 2 vols. Volume 1 is *In Search of the Way, the Truth, and the Life*. Volume 2, *The Paths of Christianity*, is based (according to the translator) on Fr Alexander’s (incomplete) book *The First Apostles* and his notes on Church history prepared when he was around the age of 20. The volumes are available at <https://www.classe.cornell.edu/~ib38/hor/>. The translator, Ivan Bazarov, is professor of physics at Cornell University.
19. Meerson, “Life and Work,” 22.
20. Meerson, “Life and Work,” 23.
21. Daniel, *Russia’s Uncommon Prophet*, 194.
22. Meerson, “Life and Work,” 18.
23. Meerson, “Life and Work,” 19.
24. Daniel, *Russia’s Uncommon Prophet*, ch. 14.
25. Daniel, *Russia’s Uncommon Prophet*, 309.
26. Men, “The Russian Orthodox Church Today,” in Roberts and Shukman, eds., *Christianity for the Twenty-First Century*, 165.
27. Men, “Religion, the ‘Cult of Personality’ and the Secular State,” in Roberts and Shukman, eds., *Christianity for the Twenty-First Century*, 127.
28. Men, “Religion, the ‘Cult of Personality’ and the Secular State,” 136.
29. Men, “Religion, the ‘Cult of Personality’ and the Secular State,” 136, 137.
30. Men, “Religion, the ‘Cult of Personality’ and the Secular State,” 127.
31. Daniel, *Russia’s Uncommon Prophet*, 53–59.
32. On the Russian religious revival, see Poole, “Introduction,” 11–31.
33. Poole, “Introduction,” 30–31.
34. Daniel, *Russia’s Uncommon Prophet*, 198–203.
35. Men, *Russian Religious Philosophy*, 169, trans. modified.
36. Zenkovsky, *A History of Russian Philosophy*, 853, 872.
37. Berdyaev, *The Philosophy of Freedom*, 13. Men does not quote the phrase “personalism” from *Philosophy of Freedom*, but extolled the book in his lecture series, *Russian Religious Philosophy*. He wrote that Berdyaev, already in his first collection of articles, *Sub specie aeternitatis* (1907), centralised the theme of human worth or dignity, and that afterwards he “called himself a personalist.” See Men, *Russian Religious Philosophy*, 107. According to Wallace Daniel, “Berdyaev’s philosophy of personalism, creativity, and freedom were among his signature contributions to Russian religious thought, and Fr Aleksandr included much of this philosophy into his own thinking.” Daniel, *Russia’s Uncommon Prophet*, 181.
38. Berdyaev, *The Destiny of Man*, 54–61.
39. Poole, “The Kingdom of Spirits,” 244–250.

40. Poole, "The Liberalism of Russian Religious Idealism," 255–276, esp. 259–263.
41. Men, "Christianity for the Twenty-First Century," in Roberts and Shukman, eds., *Christianity for the Twenty-First Century*, 191.
42. Solovyov, *Lectures on Divine Humanity*, 142, 158; Poole, "Vladimir Solov'ev's Philosophical Anthropology," 137.
43. Solovyov, *Lectures on Divine Humanity*, 17.
44. Solovyov, *Lectures on Divine Humanity*, 23.
45. Zenkovsky, *A History of Russian Philosophy*, 512.
46. Meerson, *Trinity of Love*, ch. 2.
47. Zizioulas, *Being as Communion*, 27–49; Meerson, *Trinity of Love*, 25–26.
48. Men, *Wellsprings of Religion*, 86–87.
49. Men, *Wellsprings of Religion*, 30.
50. Men, *Wellsprings of Religion*, 35, translation modified.
51. Trubetskoi, "Toward Characterization of the Theory of Marx and Engels on the Significance of Ideas in History," 139; Men, *Wellsprings of Religion*, 48.
52. Bulgakov, "Basic Problems of the Theory of Progress," 96, 107.
53. Men, *Wellsprings of Religion*, 168.
54. Men, *Wellsprings of Religion*, 171.
55. Men, *Wellsprings of Religion*, 172.
56. Men, *Wellsprings of Religion*, 172, translation modified.
57. Men, *Wellsprings of Religion*, 79.
58. Men, *Wellsprings of Religion*, 119, translation modified.
59. Men, "Christianity: The Universal Vision," in Roberts and Shukman, eds., *Christianity for the Twenty-First Century*, 75–103. The essay's original title was, "On the Problematics of the 'Axial Age'."
60. Men, "Christianity: The Universal Vision," 90–91, 93.
61. Solovyov, *Lectures on Divine Humanity*, 71.
62. Men, "Christianity: The Universal Vision," 93.
63. Men, "Christianity: The Universal Vision," 95.
64. Men, "Religion, the 'Cult of Personality' and the Secular State," 125.
65. Maritain's 1936 treatise *Integral Humanism* is a profound explication of personalism, yet offers no explicit endorsement of human rights. That changed with *Scholasticism and Politics*, based on nine lectures that Maritain delivered at the University of Chicago in the autumn of 1938. What he calls the personalist conception of democracy "is first of all determined by the idea of man as God's image, and by the idea of the common good, of human rights and of concrete liberty; and it is based on Christian humanism." See Maritain, *Scholasticism and Politics*, 87. It is clear that the direct cause of Maritain's shift between 1936 and 1938 was Pope Pius XI, who in March 1937 issued two encyclicals, *Mit brennender Sorge* and *Divini Redemptoris*, both of which forcefully deployed the idea of human rights against their respective targets (Nazism and Communism). The encyclicals indicated that the Church was moving further along the path laid by Leo XIII, which progress authorised Maritain's new position on human rights.
66. On Christian personalism as the interwar philosophical-theological framework for the rebirth of human rights, see Moyn, *Christian Human Rights*.
67. Men, "Religion, the 'Cult of Personality' and the Secular State," 124.
68. Men, "The Christian Hope: 'Karabakh' or 'Bethlehem'?" in Roberts and Shukman, eds., *Christianity for the Twenty-First Century*, 175–176.
69. Men, *The Wellsprings of Religion*, 169.
70. Mikhail Epstein applies the term "personalism" to a number of thinkers in the late Soviet period, giving the term a broader meaning than its Christian theological use by Berdyaev, Maritain, and Men. See Epstein, *The Phoenix of Philosophy*, 114–151.

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Resistance, Repression, Revival: Remembering Religious Anti-Communism

Talk given by Dr Iona Ramsay at Keston Institute's 2025 AGM

Three words – resistance, repression, revival – capture just some of the contradictions of life for many religious communities under Communism. The experience of church closures, house arrests, exile, imprisonment, underground churches and the silencing of religious expression gave rise to an array of new spiritual experiences and expressions. We might think, perhaps, of Fr Gheorghe Calciu during the Lent of 1978, preaching outside Radu Vodă Church in Bucharest, that “history is, by definition, the chronology of unhappiness, yet the road to salvation”, questioning whether the “ready made authoritarian statements” could ever satisfy the young, and exhorting his crowd of listeners to “come and build churches with us”.

There is, of course, also a more troubling, uncomfortable side to this history. How do we regard, for example, the many cases of informers and “collaboration”? The claims of “internal” resistance? Or religious institutional complicity in the suppression of other religions?

This is all, in short, a way of saying that to study the history of religion under Communism requires, in the first place, sensitivity and imagination in regard to the unexpected ways in which religious faith unfolds. And in the second place, it requires a critical eye to push past the history we might like to see, and to

acknowledge complex and uncomfortable truths. It is in this manner of sensitive, critical, imaginative research that I offer three directions for the future of research into the history of religion under Communism.

The first direction is to expand the spatial horizons of this history. We have become accustomed to doing history within the bounds of national borders – the history of Polish Catholicism, of Russian Orthodoxy, or of Romanian Baptists. Yet religion, perhaps more than anything else, is deeply transnational. The fate of Christians in Central and Eastern Europe was of profound concern for their fellow believers across the region, and for a significant number of Christians in other parts of the world, and religious networks provided important channels of communication – the work of the Keston Institute is testament to this. My first research question is therefore to ask how these global connections and networks operated, and what impact they had.

This does not mean doing away with the nation – ideas of nationhood and the particularities of national history still remain fundamental parts of this story. There were, of course, significant differences in how religious groups were treated in different national contexts. The fate of the

Russian Orthodox Church was quite different to that of the Romanian Orthodox Church. Religious culture in East Germany looked very different to that of Soviet Kazakhstan. For all that the vision of socialist internationalism promised a world unimpeded by religion or national borders, religious life never disappeared, and national histories and ideologies never stopped shaping religion. My interest in global and transnational histories is therefore not an alternative history, but one that adds to and enhances national histories.

I should clarify here that when I talk about global history, I do not mean a history of the world. I am not simply suggesting a geographical expansion of our area of study to include China or the Communist state of Kerala in India, and the comparative approach this can offer. Rather, I mean a focus on global connections, frictions and interaction, examining the relationships and circulations between religious groups in Central and Eastern Europe and religious communities in other regions.

So, what might a global history of religion under Communism look like? If we are looking at Christianity, the largest religion in this region, there are obvious starting points such as the World Council of Churches and the ecumenical movement. This movement became an important international site of real exchange between Christians across the Iron Curtain, but also a platform for the performance of religious freedom, helping mould religion into a form of soft power during the Cold War.

But we can also go beyond the world of church officials and high politics. We can explore the work of émigrés and exiles who attempted to push the issue of religious freedom up the international political agenda. Many of the religious spokespeople best known in the West, such as Richard Wurmbrand, Alexander Solzhenitsyn and Georgi Vins, voiced powerful critiques of Communism – critiques that were often shaped as much by their experiences outside as within their own countries. This prompts further questions: how did their views of Communism, religion and secularism change in light of their experiences in the West? And what role did these well-known figures play in shaping wider views of life for religious communities in Eastern Europe?

When we start to study this type of history, we begin to see the need to push beyond the tendency to focus on Europe and North America. As Latin America, Africa and Asia were key ideological battlegrounds in the Cold War, so religious activism also developed across these spaces in important ways. This is a global religious history that draws together stories of Dutch Reformed Christians in South Africa supporting missionary work to Eastern Europe, Romanian Orthodox monks painting frescoes in monasteries of Syria and Lebanon, members of the Brazilian organisation Tradition, Family, Property inspiring Christian exiles in Paris, and anti-communist Christian writers from Eastern Europe touring South Korea and connecting with the struggle against North Korea.

By exploring these global connections, we see that the situation of religious groups under Communism significantly shaped the lives of many who lived outside the Communist world. Around the world, large numbers of Christians had vicarious experiences of Communism through media, despite often living lives seemingly very far removed from those of Christians living under Communist regimes. The cultural studies scholar Alison Landsberg terms this type of experience “prosthetic memory”: a recollection of the past that you yourself did not experience, but which through mass media can be experienced vicariously, forming an intimate prosthetic memory that becomes a basis for empathy and solidarity. This type of global solidarity with Christians in the Communist world drew on an ecclesiology of belonging in the one Body of Christ, but could easily veer into the territory of fictitious or oversimplified histories. Clearly, prosthetic memory of Communism is not the same as lived experience of Communism. However, the extent to which experiences of religious life under Communism could be equated with other experiences of religious life in the modern world remained – and remains today – an open and highly contested question.

The history of religion under Communism should not therefore be studied in isolation. Despite the international barriers and isolation that were significant features of religious life for many under Communism, the experiences of these religious communities were part of a larger picture of change in the 20th century – a century in which religion underwent dramatic shifts globally.

While religion was controlled and suppressed under Communism, religious belonging was declining across the Western world. Conversely, from the 1970s, the rise of Catholic voices within the Solidarność movement in Poland, the growth of Baptists in the Soviet Union and other Communist states, and the renewed interest in Orthodox spirituality amongst Romanian artists (to mention just a few examples), suggest that – like other parts of the world – Central and Eastern Europe also witnessed a remaking of public religion and spiritual visibility during this period.

The second direction I want to propose in thinking about the history of religion under Communism is to interrogate what we mean by the term “religion”, and to consider how we might bring into this discussion the realms of spirituality and secularism. So far, I have talked only about Christianity, which remains the largest religion in this region and has dominated our understanding of what “religion” means. However, the definition of religion remains a fundamental and unresolved problem for the study of religion, and it is worth just briefly thinking through what our history might look like as we shift our definition of religion.

Our well-established categories of religions and denominations have given us a good body of historical work on the life of various recognised religious groups under Communism: we have histories of institutional churches and theological schools, and can point to biographies of

bishops, priests, monks and nuns. We have histories of Yugoslavian Muslims, Soviet Jews, and Buryat Buddhists, and the varied religious lives they lived.

Shifting our language away from religion to spirituality has also provided us with a number of rich histories of art, music and literature that expressed “spiritual” ideas without direct reference to religion. Much of this type of spiritual expression was, of course, a result of censorship. But it also reflected forms of religious expression that defy the secular lens of much political governance and scholarly analysis, and according to which religion is separated from other parts of life and categorised into a domain of its own. Examining spirituality pushes us away from neat categories into the messier landscape of belief, practice, experience and identity. To consider spirituality in this way also pushes us to consider how atheism, secularism and non-belief also operated under Communism – and the important role that “religion” continued to play in maintaining these worldviews.

In recent years, there has also been an important shift in how and where religion is discussed. We see this most clearly, perhaps, in the history of medicine and wellbeing under Communism. The popularity that spiritual healers, yoga, parapsychology and transcendental meditation achieved from the late 1960s in the Communist world suggests that spiritual practices were – as they were elsewhere – relocated to “scientific” spaces. Many of these practices aimed to offer forms of healing, relaxation, awareness and meaning that served as a kind of substitute for what religion had previously offered.

That much of this was supported by Communist ministries of health and education, and conducted in institutions of oriental medicine, challenge us to rethink what was defined as religious, how spirituality could be secularised, and how alternative forms of spirituality became ways of both supporting and subverting official state ideology.

To deal with the world of spirituality is inherently indefinable and beyond categorisation. Yet by pushing at how spirituality was understood and lived, and in particular the line between the religious and secular within Central and Eastern Europe during the 20th century, we start to address bigger questions about modern religious life that speak across regional divides. This approach may – at a time when many religious studies departments are declining and closing, at least in the West – help stimulate new, interdisciplinary interest around the history of religion under Communist regimes.

The third direction of research I want to offer is to rethink our approach to *remembering* the history of religion under Communism.

History and memory (whatever the difference between these might be) do not only exist in the present, but have their own histories. However, it is all too common to see memory as a phenomenon that kicked in after the collapse of Communism. The majority of scholarly work done on memory is on post-communist memory. This includes studies of school history curricula, oral histories, literature,

films, and memorials. Museums such as the Memorial of the Victims of Communism and of the Resistance in Sighet, the Museum of Communism in Prague, the House of Terror in Budapest, and the Museum of Occupations and Freedom in Tallinn have also begun to institutionally record this past in very different ways.

However, there is also an important history of memory before the collapse of Communism too. Tangible and intangible forms of memory – stories, handwritten notes, treasured belongings, artworks, songs, and informal archives – were transmitted within families, between friends, and within religious communities. And I have already mentioned the long history of “prosthetic memory”, in which people removed from the historical experience of Communism engaged in affective practices of remembering.

We can also trace the formation of international public, collective memory from the publication of the first accounts of religious persecution under Communism. Some of these, such as Richard Wurmbrand’s book *Tortured for Christ*, became huge bestsellers and did much to raise awareness of the history – even as his hardline anti-communism often hindered as much as helped his cause. A somewhat different approach was taken by Keston in gathering and archiving material; this too represented a long process of creating a repository of memory.

The historical context in which such practices of remembering occurred is also important. The 1970s and 1980s represent important decades for shaping the political power of memory as we

know it today. Memory of religion under Communism came to the fore in this period not only because of the rise of dissidence and the growth of human rights – but also because ideas of heritage preservation and memory cultures were shifting. Memory of the Holocaust and the Nazi past were coming to the public fore, and at the same time, theories of totalitarianism were popularised to connect Communism with the Nazi past – particularly in France, where support for Communism had been so strong. Remembering Communism in light of the Nazi past became a powerful way to advocate for the rights and freedoms of those in Communist states, even if this type of historical comparison would at times develop a competitive edge.

Thinking about how the memory of religion under Communism developed historically can, I think, help us reflect on how this memory will live on in the future. There is an idea developed by the sociologists of memory Jan and Aleida Assmann that an important shift occurs in collective remembering when “communicative” memory becomes “cultural” memory. Communicative memory, in this sense, is the type of memory transmitted within families and amongst known individuals – it is personal, lived, intimate. Cultural memory begins to develop several generations later when that lived memory is no longer alive, relying instead on social, cultural and institutional practices of remembering to keep the past alive.

We are already beginning to witness a shift in how we remember the history of religion under Communism – the seeds

of a move, perhaps, from communicative to cultural memory. We live in a very different world to that in which Keston was founded. The generational divide between those who experienced Communism directly and those who now study this history becomes ever greater. At the same time, the history of religious resistance, repression and revival under Communism is being reanimated in contexts that are increasingly far removed from that history – whether in debates around freedom of religion, comparisons with histories of racial oppression, or the defence of “Christian heritage” and “Christian values”. In this context, the task for historians is not only to examine the history of religion under Communism, but also the ways in which this history has been recorded and preserved, retold and reimagined, used and misused.

These are some of the directions in which I will be taking my research over the next three years. The book that I am currently working on will be a history of

transnational religious anti-communism from the 1960s to the present day. This will involve looking at well-known anti-communist activists, missionary groups and human rights organisations, who helped promote religious freedom; religious traditionalists, artists and intellectuals who sought to transcend the binaries of the Cold War in the name of a larger critique of modernity; and the rise of “family values” campaigners who attempted to capture the spirit of spiritual resistance to Communism.

This is all a work in progress still, and I am keen to hear the thoughts and suggestions of people who have been involved with the Keston Institute and who have lived through many of the things I have been talking about. It is an immense privilege to be able to spend the next three years conducting research and writing, and I would like to conclude by thanking the trustees of the Keston Institute and all their supporters for so generously funding this postdoctoral position at the Central and East European Research Centre, Cardiff University.

Dr Iona Ramsay was selected for the Keston Research Associate post at Cardiff University out of a large number of applicants. She read Theology and Religious Studies at Cambridge, then was awarded an MA on Religion in Global Politics at the School of Oriental and African Studies, University of London. Her PhD at the University of Exeter was entitled “From Anti-Communism to Illiberalism: Romanian ‘Spiritual Resistance’ to Communism and the Rise of Transnational Populism”.

Field Trip to the Orenburg Oblast

Last year, Sergei Filatov, head of Keston's Encyclopaedia project, Religious Life in Russia Today, organised a field trip to the Orenburg oblast, nearly 1,500km south-east of Moscow on the Kazakhstan border. Part 1 of a summary of his long report about this field trip was published in Keston Newsletter No.42. Part 2 is published below. The full report will be included in the next volume of the Encyclopaedia. Ed.

Lutheranism

There has been a Lutheran congregation in Orenburg since 1773. In the early 19th century, it became highly influential in the city, with many groups of Brethren Lutherans in the Orenburg province. Germans emigrated *en masse* in the 1920s, while in the 1940s they were totally repressed by the Stalinist regime. In the 1980s German Lutherans were permitted to register parishes and thus to exist legally in the USSR, while at the same time being permitted to emigrate back to their homeland. There was an extraordinary growth in the number of Lutheran parishes, but with the departure of so many to Germany this development was undermined at the same time. By 2025, these parishes had not altogether disappeared as Lutheranism has attracted many Russians and other nationalities, for example Tatars and Kazakhs, converts from Islam.

The Lutheran congregation in Orenburg was revived in 1992 with the support of the German Cultural Society. Pastor Inessa Tirbakh, the granddaughter of a Lutheran pastor, was put in charge while



Sergei Filatov (right) with Lutheran pastor Inessa Tirbakh, January 2001

in addition, in April 2024, Alexei Kubasov was ordained pastor at this church. Inessa Tirbakh did not intend initially to become a pastor, but just to revive the parish. However, when no male pastor was available, she became the first Russian woman Lutheran pastor. She believes that the parish adheres to the traditions of Luther, she does not encourage liturgical experiments and supports traditional Christian moral values. She is supported by conservative Lutheran partners in Saxony, an area once part of East Germany.



Filatov with Pastor Tirbakh in 2025

At the same time, Pastor Tirbakh encourages ecumenical contacts and “dialogue with contemporary culture”. She has about 150 in her congregation: 80% are Russian, but there are also Tatars, Bashkirs and Germans. German is used only for singing a few hymns on feast days. Most of the congregation are well-educated and there are many younger members. The church runs a Sunday School and a choir school; it gives material aid to deprived families and runs a children’s summer camp.

The church has in fact two congregations, a traditional one and a youth movement which has borrowed much from the Lutheran Brethren tradition. According to Pastor Tirbakh, the young people are attracted by the summer camps and the music groups in which many professional musicians participate. The traditional part of the congregation has a stable number of members, whereas the youth movement is constantly growing. The Lutheran parish particularly supports

contact with other denominations and religions. The ROC’s leadership encourages their seminarians to listen to Pastor Tirbakh’s explanation of the Lutheran faith, while she has many friends among the Russian Orthodox clergy. In 2019, when Fr Georgi Kochetkov visited Orenburg to see his small community of followers, he

was also invited by Pastor Tirbakh to give a talk at the Lutheran church. Her congregation maintains close ties with the Catholics and Baptists, organises monthly Taizé services and periodically welcomes the local Muslim leader as a guest.



Filatov with Pastor Tirbakh (centre) & her team in the Lutheran church.

Pastor Tirbakh maintains good relations with the local authorities, on occasion speaks in schools and colleges and writes for the local press.

As well as the church in Orenburg, there is a Lutheran congregation in Orsk and another in Sol-Iletsk which is active and growing.

Baptists

Baptists first appeared in Orenburg in the 1880s when a number of Baptist preachers were exiled there. The majority of converts were Molokans who no longer exist in the area. From the outset, the new Baptist groups were closely linked to the many Mennonites in the area whose beliefs were close to those of the Baptists. The Baptist movement grew dramatically in the 1920s and was severely persecuted in the 1930s, with the last legally existing Baptist congregation liquidated in 1937. In 1943, Baptists were given permission to hold services in private homes, and in 1944, with the creation of the All-Union Council of Evangelical Christians and Baptists (AUCECB, renamed the Russian Council of Evangelical Christians and Baptists in 1992) Baptists in the USSR were allowed to exist legally. From this point onwards, they faced constant opposition from the Soviet authorities and a ban on teaching the faith to children.

In 1991 there were six registered congregations in the Orenburg oblast; by 2025 this number had grown to 15. Orenburg's main church has a congregation of 250; Senior Presbyter Viktor Fyodorov is in charge. About half the congregation have higher education, most having attended

medical college or a teaching training college. The church runs a Sunday School. In addition to this church, which is a traditional type, a "Good News" church of young people was founded in the city, which separated from the main Baptist organisation in the early 1990s.

Orenburg also has a congregation belonging to the Council of Churches (or *Initiativniki* who date from the Soviet period when they rejected registration and restrictions on teaching the Christian faith) which was founded in the 2000s. Its missionary pastor, Andrei Bogachev, comes from Bashkiria and has developed a lively congregation of young people. This group avoids contact with other denominations, but maintains good relations with conservative German Baptist missionaries, and during Covid invited some to come over from Germany to preach.

Mennonites

There have been Mennonites in Russia since 1789 when Catherine the Great invited them to establish colonies in today's Ukraine. At the end of the 19th century, they were offered large tracts of land in the Orenburg area; in 1890 Mennonites moved there *en masse*. By 1916 there were 22 colonies. During the Soviet period they were all Germans, and until perestroika they experienced two types of discrimination – as Germans and as "sectarians". Only during the perestroika years were they given legal status.

By 1986 there were 25 congregations, but in the '80s and '90s almost all of them emigrated, leaving just one dying congregation. However, in the late 1990s a large

number of Mennonites, who did not want to emigrate to the West, moved to the Orenburg oblast from Kazakhstan and other parts of Central Asia. In 1997, a mission called “Hope”, organised by German and Canadian Mennonite missionaries, started to work in the Orenburg oblast under the overall leadership of Hans Berger, a German citizen from a family of Russian Mennonites. In 2001 he established seven communities in various villages and small towns, where many Mennonites were living, which combined to form a central organisation, the Union of Mennonite Churches in the Orenburg Area (UMCOA).

At first the missionaries concentrated on the Germans, those who had Mennonite roots and spoke German, but when many of them emigrated they began in 2000 to use Russian in their services, to which Russian, Kazakhs, Bashkirs and Tatars began to come and learn about the Christian faith. In 2003 Hans Berger left Russia, whereupon a Russian pastor, Pyotr Chernyshev, took over the leadership. In a 2004 interview he said that Mennonites in Orenburg were losing their German identity, with the majority being now mostly Russian; there were now many Kazakhs and Bashkirs with few missionaries from Germany; most of the pastors were Russian apart from one German of Russian origin. The local congregations consisted mostly of young people.

According to Mennonite tradition, UMCOA was much involved in social work, mostly via its mission called “Hope”, and with a particular focus on supporting children. Many of those working with the mission were unaware

that it was run by Mennonites. UMCOA had good relations with the oblast authorities and experienced no discrimination.

In 2020, Pyotr Chenyshev was replaced by Pastor Alexei Bizhko. Since 2000 a number of German Mennonite families have returned to Orenburg, so the German element has become more evident. Today UMCOA is composed of five communities. Previously they were all in the countryside, but now three are in towns – Orenburg, Buguruslan and Sol-Iletsk.

Mennonite pacifism has been only partly preserved: members can serve in the army and bear arms, but they are forbidden to kill.

UMCOA collaborates closely with the Orenburg Baptists: its members attend Baptist colleges, work with them on many projects, and in the countryside attend Baptist services when there is no Mennonite place of worship. In addition, UMCOA works with the Orenburg Lutherans because of historical and cultural connections, although Mennonites have little in common theologically with Lutheranism.

Pentecostals

Pentecostalism reached the Orenburg oblast in the 1950s, later than the majority of other Russian regions. The small Pentecostal group called the Evangelical Christians in the Spirit of the Apostles (“*edinstvenniki*”), who do not accept the doctrine of the Trinity, were the first to arrive. From the start this group was split with some pastors wanting to join the

AUCECB and adopt a more loyal position in relation to the Soviet authorities, and others strongly opposed. In the 1990s, there were more splits and their numbers fell, while other Pentecostals quickly increased.

During perestroika and the early 1990s, many different types of Pentecostal churches arrived in the area. Some of these have now disappeared, while others have grown or amalgamated with other Pentecostal churches. Currently, the largest two Pentecostal unions are the Russian Union of Evangelical Christians (RUEC), whose leader is Bishop Sergei Ryakhovsky, and the Russian Church of Evangelical Christians (RCEC) headed by Bishop Eduard Grabovenko. In Orenburg there are churches from both these groups.

After all their conflicts, today there is only one *edinstvenniki* church in Orenburg with 35 members. RCEC is much the largest Pentecostal group in the area, with 20 communities, while RUEC is much smaller. Pastor Vitali Bushter, a successful businessman who gave this up in order to serve the church, is the RCEC's leader: he considers that his group is more balanced, more united than RUEC and more aware of the Soviet past when they were severely persecuted; more of his members have been rescued from the dregs of society. In Bushter's view, Pentecostalism has become the religion for small and medium businesses; his members experience discrimination and are not employed by large



Filatov with Pastor Vitali Bushter

corporations or by government departments. Before the Revolution, he noted, businessmen were either Baptists or Old Believers, whereas now they were Pentecostals, and, unlike during the Soviet period, Pentecostals now wanted to get higher education. He has more than 350 in his congregation, while other congregations in the area have at least 100 members.

A remarkable feature of Bushter's congregation is the number who are converts from Islam; his assistant pastor is an Uzbek. His Sunday School has four classes which study scripture, but he also runs a youth group which focuses on sport, music and outward-bound activity. Much of his ministry is focused on work with families, preparing couples for

marriage and family life; he involves psychologists and psychotherapists in this ministry. His church's social work which provides material aid and works with drug addicts, alcoholics and down-and-outs, has been dramatically cut back by the Federal authorities.

The much smaller RUEC is less visible in the area. It aims to focus in the future on missionary and philanthropic work among Central Asian migrant workers, a field ignored by most denominations in Russia, and one which badly needs attention in the Orenburg oblast. RUEC may therefore become specialists in this field.

Islam

In the 18th century, Muslims in the Orenburg area played an important part in Muslim life within the Russian Empire, with an influential Muslim cultural and educational centre founded in 1744 in the Sakmar district. Until the end of the 18th century its spiritual teachers were the informal leaders of all Muslims in the South Urals, in the Tatar region, Bashkiria and the Kazakh steppe. Central Asian traders, members of nomadic tribes and other communities would come to this centre for legal decisions on family and business disagreements. Another such centre also developed in Kargaly in the South Urals, which oversaw the correct observance of Muslim rituals and sharia law. Under Catherine II, to conform to the empire's centralising policies, Muslim groups (apart from those in the Crimea), after being given legal status, were united under a central body in 1788 called the Orenburg Muslim Spiritual Assembly, which was based in Ufa.

From 1797-1802, this centre moved to Orenburg and then later back to Ufa. In the South Urals policies towards Muslims were tolerant, encouraging trade and good relations with the peoples of Kazakhstan and Central Asia and helping to protect Russia's borders. Mosques and madrassas were built with government funding. Before the Revolution, there were 600 mosques in the Orenburg region.

During the early years of Soviet rule, unlike many Christian denominations, Muslims were granted relative religious freedom until the 1930s, when many mosques in the Orenburg area were closed and many Muslim leaders imprisoned or shot. In 1944, with Stalin's change of policy, the so-called "normalisation" of relations with religion, a few mosques were allowed to reopen. Muslims who met and worshipped in secret were severely persecuted.

In 1987 Islam began to revive in the Orenburg oblast, and its six mosques grew by 1993 to 56. In 1991 the Orenburg *muhtasibat* (Muslim territorial organisation) was established – in 1994 it was renamed the Orenburg Muftiate (part of the Central Spiritual Directorate of Russia's Muslims) under the leadership of Imam Abdel-Bary Khairullin. The latter's main focus was on reviving the madrassah (founded in 1891) which had produced a whole generation of highly educated Tatars, Bashkirs and Kazakhs. He had no teachers to help, so did all the teaching himself.

Between 1990-2000, as everywhere in the Russian Federation, the Orenburg

oblast saw the growth of many competing Islamic groups; conflicts developed between the different national groups, between Bashkirs, Kazakhs and Tatars, over the ownership of mosques and on how leaders were appointed. In 1994 the Muslim organisations in Buguruslan, Buzuluk and the village of Asekeev left the Orenburg Muftiate and founded a Buguruslan Muftiate under the chairmanship of Ismagil Shangareev, who in 2000 also headed the Association of Russia's Mosques, established in 1994, and in 2001 became a member of the Spiritual Directorate of Muslims in European Russia (SDMER) based in Moscow, which was a rival of the Central Spiritual Directorate of Russia's Muslims (CSDRM). Shangareev obtained funding from Saudi Arabia: in 1993 a Saudi delegation visited Buguruslan and gave the town \$90,000 to complete its mosque. Thanks to Saudi funds, a madrassah was also founded there called "Al-Furkan" which trained imams and teachers for the new, fast-growing Buguruslan Muftiate. By 2006, Shangareev's muftiate controlled 47 congregations.

Shangareev's aggressive policies and foreign support led his opponents to accuse the Buguruslan Muftiate of supporting extremist Wahhabi beliefs, which attracted the attention of the police. In October 2004, searches were carried out on the premises of the "Al-Furkan" madrassah, during which an explosive device was discovered, as well as a lot of Wahhabi literature. In February 2005, Orenburg's procuracy applied to have "Al-Furkan" closed down. That year the local press claimed that seven graduates of this madrassah took part in illegal

armed groups in the North Caucasus, and that two graduates had participated in the Beslan atrocity in 2004. In March 2006 the madrassah was searched again and a cell belonging to a banned international extremist group was uncovered. The madrassah was closed and Shangareev fled to the UAE. In 2010 the Buguruslan Muftiate dissolved itself and its members rejoined the Orenburg Muftiate.

Twenty groups in the region refused to rejoin the Orenburg Muftiate, and instead in 2010 joined a new central organisation based in Moscow called the Islamic United Centre of Russia's Muslim Organisations, renamed in 2012 the United Islamic Congress of Russia (UIC) under the chairmanship of Shavkat Avyasov, who encouraged separatist elements in the west of the Orenburg oblast. In 2012 an Orenburg Regional Spiritual Directorate was formed within UIC with 27 local organisations. The situation became even more complicated with the appearance in Orenburg of yet a third player, the Spiritual Directorate of Muslims in European Russia (SDMER). In August 2014 the Orenburg section of UIC decided to close down, probably due to Moscow withdrawing funding after a legal case against Avyasov and the discovery of extremist literature in the homes of some UIC employees in February 2014. However, it was only in September 2015 that 24 out of its 27 local religious organisations were reregistered under the Orenburg Muftiate, part of CSDRM.

The Orenburg Muftiate's control over Muslim religious life in the area was the result of pressure from the administration and the police, but also of the charisma

and managerial skills of Imam Khairullin who united all Muslims under his leadership. In other areas, such control was not achieved, with continuing conflicts between Muslim organisations. Khairullin managed to set up some successful educational, philanthropic and youth projects. In connection with this youth work, Khairullin started holding meetings with youth leaders in Orenburg's central mosque, at which views on the world and society were discussed. Children's work also developed dramatically: graduates of the local madrassah worked in the Centre for Child Development called "Aladdin". Summer camps, where Islam and Arabic were taught, sport, theatrical productions and excursions organised, also played an important part in the life of local children. Since 2010, students studying at an Orenburg madrassah, have been visiting villages in the summer and setting up day-time camps, at which they taught the basics of Islam, Muslim prayers and rules, as well as respect for parents and for Russia. A number of mosques also ran children's classes which provided basic religious teaching.

Mufti Khairullin retired in 2015 and was replaced by the head of an Orenburg madrassah, Al'fii Sharipov. Today there are 140 communities in Orenburg, the madrassah is stable, and relations with the authorities, local society and Christians are in a healthy state.

Sergei Filatov's report on his field trip to Orenburg, ends with a long and



Filatov with Mufti Sharipov

revealing quotation from his interview (21 March 2025) with Al'fii Sharipov who said:

"We don't have enough imams. There are 14 students studying and 300 doing a correspondence course (these are mostly pensioners without higher education) in the madrassah. Young people don't want to study to be an imam; what you earn as an imam isn't enough to live on. The ethnic composition of the Muslim community is changing. From the time of Catherine the Great, the Tatars were the main bearers of Islam; they were the best-educated and the most loyal nationality within the empire. Today, the Tatars are highly secularised and the most assimilated with the Russians; they prefer to speak



Orenburg today

Russian, and I see fewer and fewer of them able to speak Tatar. Fewer and fewer want to train as imams. Where Tatars once stood in the mosque, now more and more often Bashkirs, Kazakhs and migrants from Central Asia stand. The Kazakh influence is growing in the east of the oblast and the Bashkir in the north-west. Migrant workers are a particular problem: they make up 70% of our mosques' congregations; the mosque is a place for them to find others ethnically like themselves; for many of them our imams have no authority. In Orsk, 90% at Friday prayers are Tadzhiks who don't understand either Russian or Tatar. We have to use interpreters. We know that radical illegal imams are seeking them out; some of these imams have been arrested, deported or put on trial. But no one knows how

big these networks have become. Our grandmother, Empress Catherine, legalised Islam. We the Tatars of Orenburg were the bearers of Islam until the Soviet period. Tatars even became Cossacks and there were Muslim Cossack units. Since that time, soldiers, merchants and simple people have been loyal to Russia. We had a bad time during the Soviet period. Now Vladimir Putin respects our religion. What does sharia law teach us? If the authorities respect our religion, then God's law commands us to live according to the state's laws... What will happen to Islam in Orenburg if another nationality takes charge of our Muslim community instead of the Tatars? Our almost perfect relationship with the government, society and Christians could be destroyed."

Sergei Filatov, head of Keston's Encyclopedia project, is a member of the Russian Academy of Sciences and on the staff of Moscow's Institute of Oriental Studies.

Keston Center Report

from the Director, Professor Kathy Hillman,

Spring 2026



Alyona Kozhevnikova 1943-2025

A memorial tribute to Alyona Kozhevnikova appears prominently on the Keston Center website.¹ As Keston College's Information Officer and later as a Keston Council member, Alyona was not only an eyewitness to the Cold War and the politics of East and West, she lived that history. Her language skills and journalistic training allowed her to forge important behind-the-scenes connections that supported the fight for religious freedom. During her 2018 visit to Baylor to speak on the topic, *Hush! Religion and the Secular Media*, she shared how she kept in touch with the persecuted by phone; for example, she regularly phoned the imprisoned dissident poet Irina Ratushinskaya's husband. Day after day

as she read reports, directed the *Keston News Service*, and interacted with those dramatically affected, Alyona knew better than anyone that "Freedom Isn't Free."

When members of Baylor's committee commemorating America's semiquincentennial called on the University Libraries to join them with exhibitions, educational events, and fine arts presentations, each of the special libraries, including the Keston Center, accepted the challenge to create a related exhibition. The late Alyona Kozhevnikova's words in Waco and her work with those denied liberty inspired Keston's chosen theme, "Freedom Isn't Free".

Created by summer intern Sophia Dalomba and modified and expanded into a pop-up experience by graduate assistant Kealy Treviño, the exhibition celebrates those who refused to let their voices be silenced:

"From the quiet protests of Charter 77 in Czechoslovakia to the signers of the Lithuanian Memorandum, to the bold sermons of Georgi Vins and the Council of Churches of Evangelical Christians and Baptists in the Soviet Union, to the imprisonment of Irina Ratushinskaya for sharing her religious beliefs through poetry, ordinary people

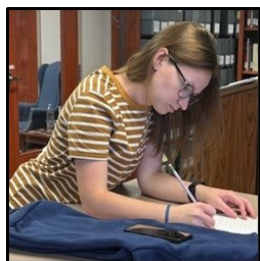
1. <https://library.web.baylor.edu/news/story/2025/keston-center-mourns-passing-russian-historian-alyona-kojevnikov>



Irina Ratushinskaya & President Ronald Reagan in the background. (Left to right) Larisa Seago, Kealy Treviño & Kathy Hillman at the "Freedom Isn't Free" exhibition

and continue to face significant challenges in their beloved homeland. Graduate assistant Kealy Treviño and senior Josh Beuker began their final year of Keston work, while junior Russian minor AM Dougherty continued his employment.

Also working in the Keston Center during the summer were 2025 Special Collections Teaching Fellows. Keston Teaching Fellows for 2026 will be announced later in the Spring. Dr Steven Jug serves as Lecturer in both History and the



Vala Kandabarova at work in the Michael Bourdeaux Reading Room



Dr Steven Jug



Dr Lizbeth Souza-Fuertes

paid an extraordinary price for speaking out against the systems designed to make them feel invisible; yet their acts of faith and conscience lit sparks that inspired the world. Their suffering reminds us that freedom is never free. Freedom is fought for, not only in grand revolutions like our own, but in cold prison cells, in secret journals, and in the unbreakable human spirit."

In late August, Vala Kandabarova, a Ukrainian, filled the student assistant vacancy left by Julia Ash's graduation. Both of these young women have faced

Baylor Interdisciplinary Core. He previously did research in the Michael Bourdeaux Research Center, but spent this fellowship preparing materials to further develop two courses: European Military History for upper-level students and US in Global Perspective with a theme of diplomacy, empire, and propaganda, for freshmen and sophomores.

Dr Lizbeth Souza-Fuertes, Associate Professor of Modern Languages and Cultures (Spanish), examined materials to be used in her Latin American Studies Seminar, which every two years focuses

on the role of the Church in Latin American military dictatorships in the 20th century.

Stephen Thomas, PhD candidate in Political Science and Teacher of Record, explored primary sources for his Fundamentals of International Politics course.



Stephen Thomas

The students will be given an assignment to use archival materials as part of a project, where they will choose a paradigm (including religion) and an historical event and/or decision-making individual/state and make a case using primary and secondary sources as to why the decisions made are explained by their chosen paradigm, and not by the others.



Dr Allie Lopez works with a student one on one

Several past Teaching Fellows, along with other faculty, brought their students to the Keston Center for instruction sessions and primary source research during the fall.

Dr Adrienne Harris, Associate Professor of Russian and Teaching Fellow in 2022 and 2023, met in the Michael Bourdeaux Research Center with 24 students from her Introduction to Russian Film class on 30 September 2025. The course, cross-listed as Russian 3345 and Film and Digital

Media 3345, contained about half film and digital media majors without any Russian background, and about half either majoring or minoring in Russian or taking Russian courses as electives. The students engaged in the collection and especially enjoyed the possibilities inherent in the propaganda posters and other visually appealing items.

On 6 November 2025, Dr Allie Lopez, Postdoctoral Teaching Fellow in History, met three sections of History 1300, International Relations: Power, Protest & Society, in the Center. The students focused on materials related to anti-war protests or pro-war sentiments during the Vietnam War era. Because Lopez does not allow her students to use phones when they enter class, those who arrived early viewed items on display and talked and shared with each other. They also worked together well as



Dr Adrienne Harris explains the Keston assignment to her class



Dr Ivy Hamerly's students complete a work sheet & draw conclusions based on folders from the Czechoslovakia & Poland archives selected by their professor

they explored primary sources. Several shared family stories, including one who said that her grandfather had not talked much about his experiences in Vietnam until she told him about her class.

Dr Ivy Hamerly, 2017 Teaching Fellow, brought three sections of Political Science 3304: Comparative Government to the Center on 14 November. Because the 53 students discussed the Cold War that day, Hamerly chose to highlight Poland and Czechoslovakia. One student stayed afterwards to talk about her Polish roots and to learn more about Keston's Poland archives.

Reflections on the Anniversary of the Council of Nicaea" included "The Eternal Word in Time: The Questions Nicaea Tried to Answer" and "Eternal Word and the Theology of Power: The Trinity and Political Theology" and "The Word of God and the Image of God: The Trinitarian Vision and the Christian Doctrine of



On 28-29 October, Director Kathy Hillman and her husband, Kathy & John Hillman, Tanya Clark & Larisa Seago at the Parchman Lectures

Curator Larisa Seago, and *Journal of Church and State* Managing Editor Tanya Clark attended the Parchman Lectures given by the Rt Revd Dr Rowan Williams, former Archbishop of Canterbury and Keston College patron. The series of three sessions under the general title "The Word Was With God: Trinitarian

Human Nature." The Keston Center group briefly met Dr Williams at the event which had to be moved off-campus to First Baptist Church, Waco, because of the number of reservations requested.

On 23 October 2025, the Center presented the Fall 2025 Keston Conversation



Advisor for Religious Minorities under Bush, Obama, and Trump. Joanne Cummings, Keston Advisory Board member, Director of Baylor's Middle East Studies, and retired US State Department

Lecture with Knox Thames and Joanne Cummings focusing on Thames's recent publication, *Ending Persecution: Charting the Path to Global Religious Freedom*.



Landon Self welcomes students & introduces Knox Thames & Joanne Cummings.



Charley Ramsey moderates the audience Q&A

Approximately 75 people attended from across the world either in-person or through live-streaming. The event included lunch snacks and a book signing and was co-sponsored by Political Science, Baylor Missions, and Service & Public Life. Knox Thames serves as Senior Fellow, Pepperdine University Program on Global Faith and Inclusive Societies & Appointed State Department Special

Landon Self, Baylor's Student Body President who had Cummings for a class, introduced Knox Thames and his professor. Charley Ramsey, Baylor's new Chaplain and 2019 Keston Teaching Fellow, moderated the audience Question and Answer session.

As part of the Institute for Faith and Learning Baylor Symposium on Nicaea: Creed, Culture, and Christendom, Keston

hosted and co-sponsored “The Nicene Creed as a Literary Masterpiece” by Dr Nadya Williams, whose family immigrated from Russia to Israel before moving to the US while she was in high school. The former Professor of Ancient History and Classics received her PhD from Princeton University and is the author of *Cultural Christians in the Early Church*.

Researchers and other visitors in Keston during the summer and fall included:

- Dr Željko Oset (9-29 March 2025; 9-29 November 2025)

Keston Researcher Dr Željko Oset from Slovenia studied the Stella Alexander Papers and Yugoslavia Subject Files. His November trip was funded by a Keston UK research scholarship. Oset applied to be a Fulbright Visiting Scholar at Baylor in the Keston Center during the 2026-2027 academic year, and has reached the final level of the selection process. While in Waco, in addition to his research, he attended the annual Baylor Round Table International Dinner and a Baylor Bears football game.



Nadya Williams

- Dr Tuan Hoang (9 July, 2025)

Dr Tuan Hoang, Professor of Great Books and the Blanche E. Seaver Professor of Humanities and Teacher



Tuan Hoang



Željko Oset (centre) joins hosts Kathy & John Hillman at the annual Baylor Round Table International Thanksgiving Dinner. Students at the table came to Baylor University from Bhutan, Brazil, Chile, Hong Kong, Ivory Coast, Kenya & Mozambique, with Oset representing Slovenia.

Education at Pepperdine University, used the Vietnam Subject Files for research on 20th century Vietnamese history and the history of the Vietnamese diaspora, particularly between 1975-1990.

- Ryan Myers (31 October, 2025)

Ryan Myers, Baylor graduate and PhD candidate in history and a Presidential Fellow at the University of South Carolina, whose research focuses on militarisation of disease and medicine, and whose public history project, *Drugged Dissent*, looked at Soviet abuses of psychiatry and pharmacology in the effort to silence dissent. His online work is available in Dr Liana Kirilova's Russian history course exhibits on Keston's website.

- Dr Valdis Tēraudkalns, General Secretary of the Latvian Bible Society, theologian, religious scholar, and professor at the Faculty of Humanities, University of Latvia, who was scheduled to visit Waco from 3-21 November 2025, as a Keston Scholar, postponed his trip due to a cancer diagnosis and sadly passed away on 27 December 2025.
- Overview and introductory tours of the Michael Bourdeaux Research Center and the Keston Center informational sessions included, among others, Dr Károly Jókay, the Executive Director at US-Hungary Fulbright Commission; English PhD candidate from Hungary Zsanna Maria Bodor; a Libraries mentorship

cohort; and Technical Services Archivist candidates.

In addition to in-person researchers and visitors during the summer and fall, interlibrary loan requests, consultations, and reference inquiries handled by the Keston Curator totalled more than 80,



Ryan Myers

with approximately 40% of those virtual. Other staff answered about 40 reference questions. In her various library roles, including with Baptist Collections and Library Advancement and other University responsibilities, the Center's Director answered more than 140 reference questions and consulted with nearly 135 individuals or groups. About 100 of the total were virtual.

Dean of Libraries Jeffry Archer appointed the Keston Director to the Latin America Working Group and the Baptist History Collective to further the Libraries' support of and involvement in the University's new strategic plan "Baylor in Deeds" that includes these as focus areas. The Latin America Group produced a Latin American & Caribbean Resources LibGuide containing a Keston page that not only enables researchers to locate the Baylor Libraries' materials, but more specifically to understand that



"Big Sort" underway in the basement of the Carroll Library with (left to right) Keston Curator Larisa Seago, Lead Processing Archivist Thomas DeShong, Library Information Specialist Janice Losak & Accessioning Archivist Jillian Tyler

Keston contains items related to Latin America, especially Nicaragua, Cuba, Mexico, Ecuador, and Brazil.

In late fall, Lead Processing Archivist Thomas DeShong and Processing Archivist Jillian Tyler began at Baylor and spent considerable time in the Keston Center reviewing unprocessed and partially processed materials. The team then developed a sorting, accessioning, and processing plan beginning with a "Big Sort." The strategy incorporates the University's new ArchivesSpace, an open source archives information management application for managing and providing web access to archives. Each week, the archivists and Keston staff and students will dedicate several hours to sorting the materials so that preliminary finding aids and/or inventories can be made available digitally.

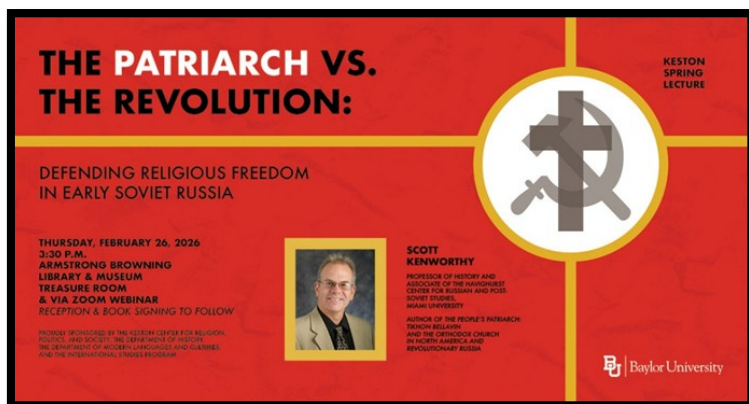
Thanks to a generous grant from the Keston Council for a

digitisation project, the Baylor Libraries hired a temporary, part-time Keston Digitisation Specialist to digitise audiovisual items in-house and to provide basic metadata. Kaitlyn Gerik began work on 10 November. She earned her bachelor's from Baylor and received a Master of Library Science from the University of North Texas in May 2025. She previously worked at the Texas Ranger Museum and Hall of Fame Research Center in Waco. She initially digitised and edited about 250 audio cassette tapes and approximately 2,300 slides and is creating metadata for those and previously digitised tapes. Some tapes are quite challenging due to their age and condition. Gerik is working in the Riley Digitisation Center under the direction of their staff and with Metadata Librarian Michelle Speed to create and utilise appropriate schema and spreadsheet fields for the project.

In addition, the Keston Center will participate in the "Safeguarding Ukraine's Religious Heritage: Digitisation and Preservation of Endangered Minority Archives Project", hosted by



Kaitlyn Gerik at work in the Riley Digitisation Center using a variety of digitisation equipment



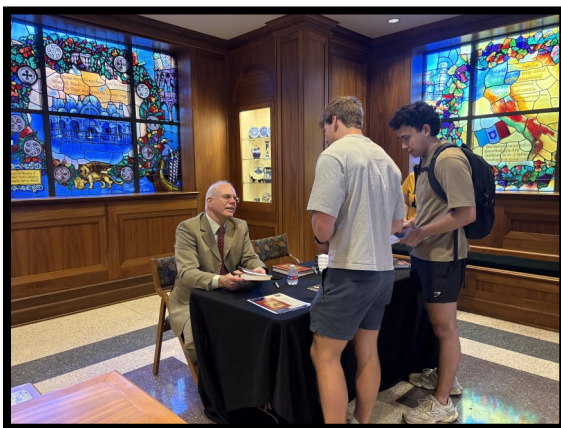
the Barcelona Supercomputing Centre, with Dr Tatiana Vagramenko as Principal Investigator. Other collaborators include the Keston Institute and the Central and East European Research Centre at Cardiff University in Wales. The project’s primary objective “is to safeguard and digitise endangered archival collections of religious minorities in Ukraine, which are under severe threat due to the ongoing war, including risks of destruction, looting, and neglect.” Currently identified collections include Adventist, Baptist and Jehovah’s Witness material.

Future plans include a Women’s World Day of Prayer experience, co-sponsored with Baylor’s George W. Truett Theological Seminary and the Waco Regional Baptist Association, to be held at Waco’s historic First Baptist Church.

On 26 February Dr Scott Kenworthy gave the Keston Spring Lecture, “The Patriarch vs. the Revolution: Defending Religious Freedom in Early Soviet Russia” and afterwards

signed copies of his book on Patriarch Tikhon (1865-1925). Kenworthy serves as Professor of History and Associate of the Havighurst Center for Russian and Post-Soviet Studies at Miami University of Ohio.

With the retirement of Dr Bill Mitchell, Keston and the Baylor Libraries gained use of two offices as well as the James E. Wood Seminar Room. During 2026, Institute for Oral History Fellow Corrinna Corrallo will occupy one of those spaces. Repurposing a former graduate student break room has enabled Keston to house



Dr Scott Kenworthy signs copies of his book on Patriarch Tikhon



The Keston Center's Advisory Board met on 27 February. Seated at the table (left to right): Dr Joanne Cummings, Dr Michael Long, Dr Julie deGraffenried, Dr Scott Kenworth, Professor Kathy Hillman, Dr Steve Gardner (chairman), Xenia Dennen, Tim Abraham, Dr Ivy Hamerly & Bishop Alan Scarfe.

all archival materials in the Carroll Library. Conserv sensors in the Michael Bourdeaux Reading Room and the basement storage facility provide a measure of safety for fragile items by monitoring both temperature and humidity.

Availability of interlibrary loan, coupled with increasing reliance on

electronic access to library materials, has enabled many libraries, including Baylor, to deaccession items that are outdated, seldom used, or duplicates. Set criteria are used to determine whether they should be removed or relocated to the Keston Center. Gifts in kind to Keston are also carefully reviewed before being accepted. Recently, Dr Mark Elliott provided issues of *Occasional Papers on Religion in Eastern Europe* (1994

-2012) as fill-ins for gaps, and Bishop Alan Scarfe donated nine books which met collection criteria and were not in the Keston Center.

Almost eight years ago, on 22 March 2018, Alyona Kozhevnikova spoke

Alyona Kozhevnikova delivers the 2018 Keston Spring Lecture, highlighting her experiences as a journalist & founder of the Keston News Service. As she shared stories of the impact of her profession, particularly during the Soviet period & the Cold War, she added context through the use of images found in the Keston Center's archive, including the one on screen showing Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher.



prophetically in her lecture “Hush! Religion and the Secular Media”:

“Today’s world is in a state of flux, and religion is playing an increasingly important role in just about every aspect of social and political life. It needs to be monitored carefully and reported responsibly. We have it on the best possible authority that ‘In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.’ The fact that we are [sitting] here today is the direct result of three short words – ‘Be our voice!’ – spoken by three Russian Christian women to a young British exchange student in Moscow almost half a century ago; he promised them that he would do so, and [he did].”

Patrons

The Rt Revd Lord Williams of Oystermouth

The Archbishop of Westminster

The Chief Rabbi of Great Britain

The Moderator of the Free Churches

The Archbishop of Glasgow

The Archbishop of Thyateira & Great Britain

Those women knew; Michael Bourdeaux, that student who became Keston’s founder, knew; Alyona Kozhevnikova knew; and we know that “Freedom Isn’t Free.”

Alyona ended her lecture with these words from Psalm 119:105, “May the Word of God be a lantern unto your feet.” May it be so for all of us.

Legacies

Keston’s trustees are very grateful to all members for their continuing support for the Institute’s work. We are, however, a dwindling band of enthusiasts so we would be delighted if you were able to recruit new members. If you are thinking of remembering Keston in your Will, the following suggested form of words, which can be copied directly into a Will, may be helpful:

“I give the sum of £..... [in figures and words] absolutely to Keston College, (otherwise known as Keston Institute), Company Registration No 991413 and Registered Charity Number 314103, hereinafter called “the Charity”, such sum to be applied for the general purposes of the Charity. I direct that the receipt of the Chairman or other authorised officer for the time being of the Charity shall be a good and sufficient discharge to my Executors.”

Xenia Dennen (Chairman)

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