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# RELIGION AND RESISTANCE: INTRODUCTION<sup>1</sup>

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This special issue brings together several articles that have originated as papers presented at the annual conference of the *Commission Internationale d'Histoire et d'Etudes du Christianisme* that took place at the University of Tartu from 11 to 13 June 2012. The topic of the conference was "Religion and Resistance in Europe from the Middle Ages to the 21<sup>st</sup> century". Each of the six papers presented herein, which range from medieval England to late Soviet society, deal with the topic of resistance in their own way. While it is impossible to offer a comprehensive overview of resistance throughout the whole of church history in this special issue, we believe that these six articles provide rich and thought-provoking material for historians to reflect upon.

Resistance often has positive, even heroic connotations, yet it defies precise definition.<sup>2</sup> There is a profound ambiguity about the Christian understanding of resistance. The condemnation of resistance to an evil person (Mt 5:39) stated in the Gospel is counteracted by the call to "resist steadfast in the faith" (1 Peter 5:9). Christianity had amplified the discourse already in use in Antiquity that non-retaliation, mercy and love of one's enemies were ethical imperatives. The early Christians "knew that zones of peace could be established, that models of non-retaliation could be created, and that victory over demonic bestiality could be hoped for, not only through the victory of the cross ... but also through the power of human love."<sup>3</sup> In this sense resistance can be understood as resistance to the logic of this world that values the heroic (and violent) struggle against

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<sup>2</sup> Ian Kershaw as cited in Priit Rohtmet's article.

<sup>3</sup> François **Bovon**, "The Child and the Beast: Fighting Violence in Ancient Christianity" – *Harvard Theological Review*, 92/4 (1999), 371.

oppression. The problem of non-violent resistance is, of course, not specific to Christianity. Gandhi's concept of Satyagraha (literally "holding on to truth"), arising from religious and philosophical sources, was a powerful instrument of non-violent resistance to the British colonial power that had given a sense of higher moral superiority to the Indian national movement.<sup>4</sup>

Broadly speaking, the articles in this special issue deal with three types of relationship in which resistance can be located: the relationship between religion and the state; the relationship between the established church and various dissenting or non-conformist groups and, finally, the relationship between secular society and religion. Historically, Christianity had given a powerful impetus to resistance to various oppressed groups. The early Christian communities resisted the Roman state; women embraced Christianity and the ascetic way of life in defiance of the social expectation to be good wives and daughters; slaves and other oppressed people found a message in the Gospel that responded to their innermost longings. The established church that began to enjoy the position of the state authority's partner in power since the Edict of Milan in 313 had certainly lost much of its earlier non-conformist spirit. However, despite political dependence on the state, at certain historical periods the church and its representatives stood up to state power and challenged its authority.<sup>5</sup>

Yet, would it always be correct to associate domination with power and control, and resistance with the weak and powerless?<sup>6</sup> Traditionally, the established church had been presented as an institution that was in possession of diverse instruments of power to control and keep in check various expressions of dissent, heterodoxy and popular religiosity. Thus dissent was normally presented as a form of resistance to orthodoxy, and

<sup>4</sup> Shanker Raj points out that the principle of satyagraha was "a vindication of truth not by inflicting suffering on the opponent but on oneself". Alaj Shanker **Raj**, *Gandhian Satyagraha: an analytical and critical approach* (Delhi: Concept Publishing Company, 2000), 36. On the Christian sources of Gandhi's thought see Uma **Majmudar**, *Gandhi's Pilgrimage of Faith: From Darkness to Light* (State University of New York Press, 2005).

<sup>5</sup> Notably, such clerics as St. Thomas Becket, Patriarch Nikon and others lost their positions and often their lives in confrontation with sovereigns.

<sup>6</sup> James **Scott**, *Weapons of the Weak: Everyday Forms of Peasant Resistance* (Yale University Press, 2008).

popular religion as resistance to more elitist forms of Christianity. The attempts of the church to penetrate further the broader masses, to bring people into the fold and reform their religious habits would often encounter resistance, which despite minor dogmatic differences was fairly massive and dramatic.

Robert Swanson's article sets out the notion of resistance understood in the logic of bottom-up resistance, as formulated by James Scott: "Relations of domination are at the same time relations of resistance".<sup>7</sup> Professor Swanson offers his article on the late medieval Lollards as a testing ground for the notion of "reciprocal resistance" that could be applied to other internal conflicts within religions in different periods of history. The dissenting Lollards' resistance to orthodoxy has not always been "heroic" and blatant, but instead hidden, passive and low key. Similarly, orthodox resistance cannot be narrated in terms of "control" and "repression" and reduced to the shameless exercise of power through detection, trial and punishment. Reciprocally, it could be characterised by the appropriation of "the hidden transcript of heresy" and the adoption of alternative spirituality. Thus this new understanding of resistance as reciprocal places a different emphasis and evaluation on both dissenters and orthodoxy, shifting the categories of resistance and domination.

Even though the Edict of Milan had formally legitimised Christianity as a state religion, the relationship between church and state has not always been amiable. The church resisted the state's claims to the political upper hand. The competition between the Emperor and the Holy See (pope) for the title of "Vicarius Filii Dei", the struggle between the church and the state for the leading role in the "Imperium Christianum" had accompanied the development of the Latin church. In the East, despite the principle of *symphonia*, the church too had to defend its identity and sphere of influence. The conflict between "Josephites" and "non-Possessors" in the Russian church raised the problem of the church as an owner of estates. It seems that even in this period, the state already preferred to have an economically and politically dependent church, a development that some powerful hierarchs resisted.

The political theology of the Reformation distinguished between two

<sup>7</sup> James C. Scott, *Domination and the Arts of Resistance: Hidden Transcripts* (Yale University Press, 1990), 45.

types of government on earth, the “realm of the spirit” and “the realm of the world”. In practice, the Reformers called upon Christians to obey their secular rulers, while most reformed churches eventually accepted the right of secular authorities to act in religious matters.<sup>8</sup> While the movement of Pietism in late 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup>-century Europe did not deviate in essence from the Reformed doctrines, it caused many conflicts with orthodox religious and civil leaders. Pietists (or nonconformists) sought to enhance spiritual engagement and strengthen religious commitment within Protestant circles, instituting devotional circles for prayer, Bible readings, etc. The resistance of orthodoxy to Pietism took various forms: some Pietist leaders were expelled from congregations, and their teaching was criticised and mocked. In his study of Dutch Pietist minister Theodor Undereyck, Jan van de Kamp focuses on the tempestuous relationship of Pietism with the civil authorities. To start with, van de Kamp re-defines the vague notion of Pietism as “nonconformism”, proposing instead to use a more neutral term, “religious dissidence”. The author then challenges the widespread notion that the civil authorities resisted Pietism as religious dissidence, perceiving it as a subversion of religious orthodoxy and social order. While the activities of the dissidents quite clearly appeared scandalous and subversive to some, that was not the case for others. Thus the city council of Bremen patronised Undereyck and supported him in his clash with the Ministry. In comparison with the more expected reactions, such as that of Count Wyrich at Mülheim, the support of the Bremen council must be explained. According to van de Kamp, the reasons for such patronage were local power struggle, pietist beliefs shared by some members of the council, envisaged economic benefits, the moral influence of pietism on youth and the aristocratic origin of Undereyck himself. Therefore the relationship between dissidents and the representatives of power were always historically specific and contextualised.

The third type of relationship in which resistance can be encountered is the relationship between secularising society and religion. When the medieval and early Modern churchmen used the expression “the secular realm”, they referred to the sense of the separate sphere of life, a semantic equivalent of the “world”, which was not yet opposite to the kingdom of Christ, but had other non-spiritual functions. The new semantic meaning

<sup>8</sup> Euan Cameron, *The European Reformation* (Oxford University Press, 1991), 152–153.

of the “secular” as opposed to religion, had emerged in the course of the nineteenth century, “after a long period of rivalry about the true understanding of religion”.<sup>9</sup> Yet, according to Charles Taylor, secularisation can be understood as an emergence of modern social imagery, which transformed ideas about community and the individual in the moral order. The “Age of Mobilisation” that began from the English Reformation led to the emergence of new structures and imagery, shifting people into denominations that functioned like “affinity groups”.<sup>10</sup>

Eighteenth-century European rulers began a program of secularising church estates, causing resistance from some clergy, but this also led to the embracing of deeper spiritual engagement by the church. Despite the utopianism of some of its cultural programmes, the French Revolution shook the established churches in Europe through its pronounced anti-Christian ideology.

Hugh McLeod’s article deals with resistance to the real and perceived threat of secularisation among the European Christian churches and communities during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. He defines four such strategies. The first strategy was to “work closely with governments and social elites to re-Christianise society from above”. Strategy 2 led to the formation of a “sub-culture with which church members will be partly protected from hostile forces”. Strategy 3, “embracing the *Zeitgeist*” was aimed at adaptation to the world of modern ideas and movements, allying Christianity with what was regarded to be progressive at a time. Finally, strategy 4, “Evangelisation From Below”, focused on the impact of social change and on the inner reform of the church’s methods and activities. Even though none of the above-mentioned strategies were completely successful and all had inherent limitations, they did enjoy temporary success and affected many people’s lives. In the final analysis, McLeod argues that “there is no strategy either for promoting secularisation or for resisting it that is free from all disadvantages. Moreover, one of the salient features of modern European and American societies is their considerable degree of ideological pluralism. In a democratic society with freedom of religion,

<sup>9</sup> Lucien Hölscher, „The religious and the secular. The semantic reconfiguration of the religious field in Germany from the eighteenth to the twentieth centuries“ – *Religion and Secularity. Transformations and Transfers of Religious Discourses in Europe and Asia*. Eds. Lucien Hölscher and Marion Eggert (Leiden: Brill, 2013), 35–58.

<sup>10</sup> Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age* (Harvard University Press, 2007).

people will make a variety of religious and non-religious choices”.<sup>11</sup>

Hugh McLeod’s sweeping analysis allows us to reflect on the differences and parallels in the ways church institutions, leaders and broader communities across Europe reacted to the socio-cultural, ideological and political changes that could, under many limitations, be described as secularisation. The “four strategies” approach could serve as a trigger for further debates and historical elaborations on the theme of “secularisation and resistance”.

The period that followed the First World War saw the rise of totalitarian regimes and mass ideologies that rivalled Christianity in a hitherto unknown manner. The ideologies of communism and fascism had offered new forms of secular community and secular salvation, whilst also employing coercion against the opponents. Even though Nazi Germany had not attempted to eradicate the Christian religion in the manner of the Soviet state, the implications of the Nazi ideology on the *status quo* between the secular authority and the church were quite comprehensive.

The next three articles in one way or another deal with the problem of resistance to totalitarian and illiberal regimes in twentieth-century Europe, thus focusing on two major facets of the issue, i.e. the relationship between religion and the state and the encounter between secularising society and religion. Priit Rohtmets focuses on the activity of the ecumenical church organisation entitled “The world alliance for promoting international friendship through the churches”. Facing the dilemma of submitting or resisting to the rise of illiberal regimes, the Christian churches had managed to overcome their dogmatic differences and forge a common front to resist the “zeitgeist” and threatening political developments.

The resistance of this organisation can be understood on three levels: ideological confrontation, spiritual resistance (which is how the author defines resistance to violations of human and religious rights), and finally individual resistance by the members of the World Alliance to the policy of their own national government. On all three levels, the activity of the Alliance was not easy and straightforward: problems varied from the weak theological basis to the political obstacles to carrying out the declared work. Nonetheless, the impact of the World Alliance should not be

<sup>11</sup> P. 61 of this issue.

underestimated: to belligerent and narrow national totalitarian regimes it “offered an alternative and opposing ideology of Christian internationalism and peace”.<sup>12</sup>

The Soviet state did not leave many choices to churches in periods of active anti-religious policy, yet at other times the lack of direct persecution allowed for a variety of tactics from underground resistance to active collaboration with the authorities. Immediately after the communist revolution and in the 1930s, a fierce attack was directed against religion in general, in which the Orthodox Church, as the largest and most influential organisation, was the main target.<sup>13</sup> The position of the Russian Orthodox Church was far from that of a victim: the church had tried to mobilise believers’ resistance. The forms of resistance after 1927, when Patriarch Sergii expressed political loyalty to the regime, had been taking the form of illegal and semi-legal underground activities.<sup>14</sup>

A notable change took place in Soviet religious policy after the Second World War. The war and post-war reconstruction gave religious organisations breathing space. The Orthodox church, in particular, was initially in a favourable position.<sup>15</sup> However, even though some churches were more conformist than others, their position vis-à-vis the regime did not have much influence on the direction of state religious policy. Not even the interests of foreign policy could help to avert the severe atheist campaign of 1958–64 that aimed not simply to take power away from religious organisations but to replace religious belief with belief in communism, which only led to mass secularisation. In this period, the forms of resistance available to believers ranged from active struggle to passive protest. One might say that even the mere fact of being a member of a religious

<sup>12</sup> P. 63 of this issue.

<sup>13</sup> William **Husband**, *“Godless Communists”: Atheism and Society in Soviet Russia, 1917–32* (Northern Illinois University Press, 2000); Nathaniel **Davis**, *A Long Way to Church. A Contemporary History of Russian Orthodoxy* (Boulder: Westview Press, 2003).

<sup>14</sup> Алексей **Беглов**, *В поисках «безгрешных катакомб»: церковное подполье в СССР* [Summary: In Search of “Ideal Church Catacombs”. Church Underground in the USSR, 253–256] (Москва: Издательский Совет Русской Православной Церкви «Арефа», 2008); Михаил **Шкаровский**, *Иосифлянство: течение в Русской православной церкви* (Санкт-Петербург: Научно-информационный центр «Мемориал», 1999).

<sup>15</sup> Tatiana **Chumachenko**, *Church and State in Soviet Russia. Russian Orthodoxy from World War II to Khrushchev’s Years* (Armonk, N.Y.: M.E. Sharpe, 2002).

congregation not bound by Soviet ideology was an expression of resistance to the totalitarian system.

The expansion of the Soviet state into the territories of Western Ukraine, Bessarabia and the Baltic States during the Second World War encountered robust resistance from the churches. Lithuanian scholar Regina Laukaitytė focuses on the Sovietization of Lithuania in the years 1944–53 and its implications for the churches. While the Soviet authorities aimed to subvert the strength of Lithuanian Catholicism, believers managed – at least to some extent – to play down these efforts by engaging legal methods and, when legal methods did not succeed, to retreat into the religious underground. The Lithuanian case, which differs from that of the two other Baltic States<sup>16</sup> because of its high ethnic and religious homogeneity, serves to demonstrate that the aims of the church and national resistance were largely one and the same. Perhaps this fact also explains the more severe treatment of the Roman Catholic Church by the Soviet authorities. The Catholic Church was also considered a political enemy because of the anti-Communist politics of Pius XII.<sup>17</sup>

While our special issue is primarily focused on Christian churches, resistance to the Soviet regime did not only originate from Christians. The vast field of non-Christian religions and spiritual circles in the last decades of the Soviet Union remains unexplored. The popularity of abroad variety of alternative cultures among the last Soviet generation was the background for the fascination with the oriental religions that Maria Petrova's contribution examines.<sup>18</sup> The implications of such fascination remain open to debate: according to Yurchak, these alternative cultures were able to exist within the Soviet system without openly trying to subvert it. In contrast, Petrova's article, which deals with the followers of Indian religions in Soviet Russia, who resisted the Soviet ideology and

<sup>16</sup> About Estonia and Latvia: Riho **Altnurme**, *Eesti Evangeeliumi Luteriusu Kirik ja Nõukogude riik 1944–1949* [Summary: The Estonian Evangelical Lutheran Church and the Soviet State 1944–1949, 309–315] (University of Tartu Press, 2001) and Jouko **Talonen**, *Church under the pressure of Stalinism: The development of the status and activities of Soviet Latvian Evangelical Lutheran Church during 1944–1950* (Jyväskylä: Historical Association of Northern Finland, 1997).

<sup>17</sup> Peter C. **Kent**, *The Lonely Cold War of Pope Pius XII: The Roman Catholic Church and the Division of Europe, 1943–1950* (McGill Queens University Press, 2002).

<sup>18</sup> Alexei **Yurchak**, *Everything Was Forever, Until it Was No More. The Last Soviet Generation* (Princeton University Press, 2005).



way of life by adhering to Buddhist and Hindu spiritual practices, shows the subversive potential of such circles.

Despite the long history of engagement between Russia and Asian religions, the late Soviet regime had perceived – with various degrees of intensity – that oriental circles were subversive. Nonetheless, attempts to keep control over religion had the opposite result. The suffocating spiritual atmosphere of the Soviet way of life led to the rise of a generation of spiritual seekers “whose protest against the lack of freedom and information developed into specific forms” that included both individual self-improvement and collective activities, including seminars, lectures, the publishing of *samizdat*, contacts with foreigners and underground dissident activity.

The limitations of this special issue do not permit us to explore the multiple meanings and forms of resistance in religious history. As mentioned above, a fuzzy concept of resistance allows for a variety of interpretations, none of which should be privileged over others. The broadly defined three “areas” or relationships in which resistance can be located within church history would surely be complemented by further research. There is, for example, a need to explore the gender aspects of resistance, its colonial and postcolonial context, in addition to its nature as a broad field of popular or folk religion. Furthermore, an additional effort is required in comparative history in order to build a model and typology of religious resistance. Finally, the problem of resistance and religion must be posed theoretically; that would surely involve questioning the definition of both religion and resistance.<sup>19</sup> But this, we hope, is a topic that will be addressed in future.

<sup>19</sup> Talal Asad, „The Construction of Religion as an Anthropological category“ – *Man*, New Series, 18/2 (June, 1983), 237–259.