Russia

Russian Christians at worship

On 6 September 2012 a Pentecostal church building in Moscow was torn down by the authorities during the night. The congregation had struggled for many years to legalise the building, but they were given no advance warning of the demolition and were unable to prevent it. A human rights official denounced the action, saying, “This is the Soviet approach – to come in the middle of the night with mechanical diggers. This is unacceptable.”

In former times, Orthodox Christianity was a strong part of the identity and culture of Russia, which saw itself as a bulwark against the Muslim Tatars and other Muslims of Central Asia. Decades of persecution under communist rule (1917-1990) have left their mark on the very diverse people of this vast country. Estimates suggest that about 200,000 Christian leaders were martyred during this period, and a further 500,000 Christians were imprisoned. However, the Communists’ threat to destroy Christianity and to parade the Soviet Union’s last Christian on television never came true. Instead the end of Communism heralded a massive increase in churches, churchgoing and Christian activities.

Yet in recent years a climate of hostility and antagonism against Christians has spread. The incident described above is just one example of the harassment that is faced by “non-traditional” churches in Russia (those other than the Russian Orthodox Church). They are obliged to register with the authorities and may be burdened with demands for information; unregistered groups can be dissolved. They may have difficulty in obtaining construction permits or in renting or buying meeting-places. Occasionally their services are raided, their literature and other property confiscated, and their members detained. Rising intolerance in society at large is reflected in disparaging remarks made about them in the media.

Some areas of the country have large Muslim populations, and radical Islam is growing here. The North Caucasus has been stricken by a violent insurgency driven by Islamists who are fighting to establish a separate state ruled by sharia. Wahhabism, the extreme and puritanical version of Islam practised in Saudi Arabia, has been spreading, and Christians face harassment, intimidation and persecution from the Muslim majority. In Chechnya women are under pressure to wear the hijab. In April 2012 a Muslim lawyer threatened a “bloodbath” if Muslim demands for the introduction of sharia courts in Russia were not met.

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