

Postscript - Keston Institute in Transition

by Gerd Stricker & Walter Sawatsky

During the past year when preparations for the series of articles in this issue were in preparation, one of the best known and respected research institutes, Keston Institute, was undergoing a major crisis that made its participation in the project impossible. Yet in order to provide necessary detail for the sake of comparison, we are attempting to compensate with this postscript. Gerd Stricker published a brief comparison of “Two Sister Research Institutes” which appeared in German in an international ecumenical yearbook on theology (2000), excerpts of which appear below in English translation.¹ Walter Sawatsky met with Stricker at G2W and with Keston Institute staff in Oxford during an extended trip to Europe in February 2003. The up-dated information that follows the Stricker excerpts are constructed from Sawatsky’s travel notes and official statements from Keston Institute.

In its essentials, Keston Institute (which has existed since 1971) was known for three major contributions: a) an archive of rare documents from the Soviet era on religion, including thousands of files of clippings, reports and major research reports on all aspects of religion in Eastern Europe and the USSR; b) a research department consisting of full and part-time researchers plus visiting scholars, and a quarterly journal named *Religion, State and Society*; c) *Keston News Service*, a weekly set of newspaper length set of stories circulated by subscription initially, then terminated, then resumed as an email service.

At its height during the past several years, *KNS* sent out almost daily news stories with weekly summaries. At the end of 2002 *Keston News Service* (KNS) was terminated, there were major staff reductions, and a new strategic plan was announced for sustaining both the archive/library and research department with journal. Three key contributors to the news service resumed their work in March 2003 under the financial sponsorship of a Norwegian Human Rights organization

¹Translated from the German that appeared in *Informationes Theologiae Europae. Internationales oekumenisches Jahrbuch fuer Theologie*. Peter Lang, 2000 (Sonderdruck). 363-369.

named Forum 18. *Forum 18 News Service* is essentially a continuation of *KNS*, now only in electronic form [see separate article by its editor, Felix Corley].

Two Sister Research Institutes on the Eastern Churches - Excerpts

by Gerd Stricker

Both institutes were founded 30 years ago (Keston 1970, G2W 1971). Their goal was the study of the religious situation in the socialist states... The founding of these institutes was characteristic for the religious political situation during the Cold War. Its founders - the Anglican Canon Michael Bourdeaux and the Reformed Pastor Eugen Voss - had specific knowledge of the condition of the churches in the Soviet Union. During the Khrushchev era Bourdeaux had studied in Moscow (1959/60) and deliberately sought to establish contact with the churches. Voss, of Russian Swiss origin, was confronted by the reality of religious life in the Soviet Union upon visiting relatives. Both built-up within the church context in their region a circle of supporters whom they informed regularly about major events, official actions of religious life in the USSR (laws, decisions of the party), new tendencies, as well as the daily repression of churches and believers...

Goals of the Institutes

Starting point for the founding of Keston College in Keston near London (since 1994 Keston Institute, Oxford) and Glaube in der 2. Welt in Zollikon near Zurich was the situation that Christians in the "free world" were being informed about the church situation behind the Iron Curtain from either side in highly selective ways. Their task was to prepare information based on scholarly research about church life in socialism and in this way contribute to a representation of church life in socialism that conformed to actual realities. They did so through collecting authentic information, through an analysis of sources and through the publishing of relevant materials. These goals nevertheless set them up for a long-term conflict with the ecumenical circles in Geneva and numerous other church centers who were seeking to play down the situation of churches in socialism These would often characterize the disturbing information from Keston College and G2W as incorrect and sometimes, drawing on the claims of church representatives from the east, would accuse the institutes that they were

being misused by the CIA in its “the single-minded struggle against communism” and were financed by them.

Finances

As a result, both institutes were denied financial support (used to pay the salaries of 8 to 10 staff members at each) by many state churches. From the very beginning they were forced to engage in fund-raising in local congregations, organizations and from private donors. This was true in England more so than in Switzerland. As to the latter, the German branch of G2W founded in 1973 was able to secure the financial support of several Protestant state churches and Catholic dioceses in West Germany. Both institutes were constantly struggling to survive financially. Since the great political transformation, the ideological conditions have changed completely - both institutes now enjoying broad recognition in the ecumenical world, in Europe and in the former Eastern bloc. Yet this welcome development has not proved to be the financial guarantee for the institutes, because during the past decade the churches of Europe encountered major financial reductions that began to threaten their ability to carry out the most basic tasks.

Information Service

The primary medium for communicating information by both institutes was through their journals. Keston, since 1973, published the quarterly journal ***Religion in Communist Lands***, renamed in 1992 as ***Religion, State and Society (RSS)*** (currently consisting of about 400 pages per year). ***RSS*** was supplemented by the bimonthly ***Frontier***, a publicity magazine. Through its language and the number of rather long articles (up to 30 pages) ***RSS*** was geared to an academic public. Since 1973 as well, G2W has published the monthly journal ***Glaube in der 2. Welt/G2W*** (usually consisting, since 1983, of 32 pages, format DIN A4), and supplemented with a publicity magazine several times a year. In addition, G2W published until 1988 the biweekly ***Informationsdienst*** (news service) in which original documents from all the East European countries were published in German translation. Academics are an important target audience for G2W, but the journal consciously addresses itself to a broader church readership: clergy and laity in the congregations. Thus scholarly treatments, analyses and reports on the situation in

all the east European countries appear in **G2W** as well as interviews, shorter and longer book reviews, plus reports on institute projects. Each issue contains a news section (*Rundschau*, 10 to 12 pages).

In principle Keston and G2W cover all religious communities of the region: Orthodox, Catholic, Lutheran, Reformed and neo-Protestant churches including old and new sects, as well as Judaism, Islam, and Buddhism. Before the breakup of the Soviet empire, church-state relations and the inner church problems related to it, state mechanisms for repression, the progress and decline in church life as well as specific cases of misfortune were the primary themes for reporting. In many articles in both journals the violation of human rights in the religious sphere within Eastern Europe played an important role... In addition, both institutes as non-governmental organizations (NGO) were able to exert their influence. Pastor Eugen Voss served as adviser to the Swiss government delegation on religious questions on Eastern Europe since the founding of the CSCE, during the 1980s he was a coopted member of the Swiss CSCE delegation.

After the Transition

Since the collapse of the Socialist bloc the emphasis in the work of both institutions shifted. If the problem before the transition centered on obtaining authentic reports on religious life in Eastern Europe, now the problem is to filter out the serious items from the flood of information, and from the mass of information that often veils the actual situation to make the real conditions visible. But the concern is not solely with a description of present conditions. Keston is attempting to make its journal a forum for discussion on general church, religious-sociological, contemporary historical, political and ethical questions, in which authors from East and West participate.

In addition to informing western readers on current problems of religious life in post-communist states, G2W also has set itself an ecumenical-pedagogical goal: complementary copies of **G2W** are sent to the theological institutions of the different confessions in the former Eastern bloc. Since a significant number of the lecturers (still) read German and a Russian version of **G2W** will appear in future, one can assume that a significant number of such lecturers are utilizing the articles and incorporating them in their teaching. G2W Institute hopes that its balanced,

differentiated, reports on the life of many different faith communities, it's persuasive analysis and interesting presentation of the history helps the preparation work of the lecturers, and enables them to foster in the future clergy a more open stance toward other denominations...

Since the transition the focus is no longer on religious freedom as such, but rather to secure religious freedom in those countries that have rediscovered nationalism in a chauvinist way in order to harass their ethnic and religious minorities by limiting their rights. Since the opening of the borders, the former Orthodox state churches have been helpless against the missionary activities of other faith communities (proselytism) and are attempting, through the declaration of so-called "canonical territory" and through protective actions of the state (religious legislation supporting Orthodox national churches) to limit the spread of the nontraditional religious groups. In such a context the dominant themes in both journals have been the problems in the Balkans and Kosovo, the war in Chechnya, religious legislation, political elections and the churches ("Patriarch - Electoral Assistant to Putin"), as well as the tensions between Orthodox and Catholic Christians, the tragedy of the Greek Catholic Uniate churches.

Keston and G2W were able to extend their service project activity following the transition, which was formerly possible only in secret. Keston has concentrated more on aid to individuals, the G2W office in Moscow has organized social projects...

Since the political (and electronic) transformation, Keston and G2W have followed somewhat different paths with reference to their information service. Keston developed a network of correspondents in the territory of the former Soviet Union that continues to grow. These correspondents are linked by email to the Moscow representative of Keston Institute who coordinates the information and circulates it to more than 1000 subscribers around the world as *KNS/Keston News Service*. A careful review of this material provides one with quite a complex impression of the religious situation in numerous trouble spots of the former Soviet Union.

G2W's strengths, in contrast, are the analysis of information and commentary on current events in the former socialist states as produced by members of the G2W editorial staff. It's analysis of events in the Balkans,

especially in Kosovo, in Chechnya, or on the religious legislation and elections have gained high international recognition. By producing issues of the journal on specific themes, it has been possible to throw light on a problem from many sides. [In the April 2003 issue of *G2W*, Stricker in an editorial commenting on *KNS* termination due to financial stringencies, announced a two day staff retreat for determining *G2W*'s future focus. - WS]

Postscript -

by Walter Sawatsky

In December, the newly elected chair person of Keston Institute, Xenia Dennen, announced major changes - the resignation of Lawrence Uzzel as Director of Keston Institute, with Michael Bourdeaux, the retired founder resuming interim leadership. Dennen herself represented a shift from a tradition of a board of trustees of prominent British individuals providing benign support, to now playing a more active role in management - she had worked with Bourdeaux during the initial years, was for many years the editor of *Religion in Communist Lands* (1973-81), more recently was often a temporary Moscow correspondent for *KNS*. The other major changes were the termination of *KNS* and its three correspondents - Felix Corley (working from the UK), Igor Rotor (from Central Asia), and Geraldine Fagan (Moscow office). In addition, the staff was reduced to Philip Walters as head of research, Malcolm Walker as librarian/archivist, a business manager and development officer.

The New York based *Religious News Service* published a report by Frank Brown which announced that the changes were the result of a philosophical conflict within the Keston staff.² As Brown put it, one group headed by Uzzel (an American, a journalist formerly based in Moscow) saw *KNS* as *the* essential service focused on religious rights. Bourdeaux and colleagues, on the other hand, wanted a broader focus on research about religious life as a whole. There were certainly elements of truth to such a delineation of difference in perspective, as anyone regularly reading the content of *KNS* (after its resumption as an online service) and the focus of *RSS* should notice. The *RNS* also claimed that the orientation of *KNS*

²Frank Brown, "Religious Freedom Monitory Group Closes Over Policy Dispute", *Religious News Service*, February 23, 2003.

writers was closer to evangelical missions concerned for individual rights, Bourdeaux and Walters as Anglicans were more ecumenical. In their responses to this writer, Bourdeaux and Walters were particularly adamant that an evangelical-ecumenical factor of tension played absolutely no role in their crisis. Although Corley might be identified with the evangelicals, none of the other news service staff, nor Uzzel as a convert to Orthodoxy, fit the label; and Bourdeaux, Walters, and Walker all were perhaps more closely tied to evangelical Anglicans and Baptists than were the others. Perhaps more to the point, as Bourdeaux and Walters both stressed, reporting on religious rights must be based on solid broad research that provides reliable background and interpretation.

Keston researchers have contributed to many publications, beginning with Michael Bourdeaux's early books on dissenters among Soviet Baptists, on Orthodoxy and Lithuanian Catholics. Invariably these books contained extensive citation from documents (many *Samizdat*) in translation. The late Jane Ellis also published two respected books on Russian Orthodoxy in the 20th century. Staff members were primary advisers to the then British Council of Churches committee that produced the research for Trevor Beeson's *Discretion and Valour* book on religion in the USSR and Eastern Europe. Perhaps the most ambitious project has been the sponsorship of an encyclopedic database on religion in Russia, edited by Moscow sociologist S.B. Filatov. Completed in 2002, with the publication of a book of essays,³ and publication in 2003 of the database itself in Russian, Keston will continue to oversee keeping the digital database up to date. Anyone examining its content will recognize its rare value, yet only foundation support is likely to sustain the effort.

The fundamental issues are essentially those touched on by other contributors to this issue - namely the crisis in re-orientation after the great transformation and the attendant financial support, or lack of it. Given the more individualist tradition in Britain, compared to Germany and Switzerland as noted by Stricker, and also reflected in the way Keston's thematic interests and relationships to Christians in eastern Europe have been formed, Keston's capacity to retain financial viability is indeed more dependent on shifting public interest. Religion

³S.B. Filatov, ed. *Religiia i obshchestvo. Ocherki religioznoi zhizni sovremennoi rossii*. Moscow/St. Petersburg: Leetnii sad, 2002. 486pp.

within the area of eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union remains at best on the edge of western Christian consciousness, including for the theologically educated western elite. Neither for ecumenical nor for evangelical relationships can one yet speak of real partnership, given the inequities of knowledge and financial resources. The serial resources and the small network of research scholars reported on here continue to be disproportionately valuable, and will continue to function, it appears, with a more reduced financial base than was true a decade ago.