

Nishanov has on at least two occasions referred to groups attempting to 'bring back the veil under the slogan of democratisation'. There are also indications that Muslims have been demonstrating more frequently for the opening of new mosques, the removal of corrupt clerics and the printing of religious literature. In the months before violence broke out in Fergana Muslims in the town of Namangan, a few miles north of Fergana, took to the streets to demand more mosques. According to *Ogonek* (1989, No. 29) these believers were strongly influenced by 'Wahhabist' — a puritanical form of Islam dominant in Saudi Arabia — and pan-Islamic ideas.

Although there is no clear evidence of a religious component to the recent unrest in Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan, it would not be surprising to find Islamic elements in future conflicts in the region. Muslim leaders, especially unofficial activists, do have considerable influence in rural areas, and for many Central

Asians being a 'Muslim' is the same as being a 'Tadzhik' or an 'Uzbek' — a factor that might play some role in nationalist unrest directed against Russian domination. Yet there are also differences within the region — between the Sunni Uzbeks and the Shiite Tadzhiks, between the Islamic establishment, Sufi brotherhoods, and 'Wahhabi puritans'. Urban based Central Asian intellectuals might find Islam attractive as part of the national heritage and as a means of exerting influence in the rural areas, but many may find more 'fundamentalist' expressions of Islam unacceptable — especially women. What does seem clear is that Central Asia is increasingly going to be affected by the nationalist activities we have witnessed elsewhere in the USSR, and that Islam is likely to be an important aspect of the ferment. And this can only add to the problems facing Mr Gorbachev and his reform programme.

JOHN ANDERSON

Formation of a League of Free-Thinkers in the GDR

In apparent contrast to the gradually more open attitude towards religion of states such as Hungary and the Soviet Union, and their rethinking of the role of religion in a socialist state, a League of Free-Thinkers (*Verband der Freidenker*) has been formed in the GDR to spread scientific atheism.

A document issued by the propaganda section of the Central Council of the Free German Youth (the national youth organisation), dated January 1989, gives details of the

nature of the League. It is absolutely clear that free thought is another name for scientific atheism.

The document sets out the aims of the *VdF*:

1. At a time of intensified ideological conflict to use more refined methods in imbuing all classes and age groups of the GDR with our ideology.
2. To help people to understand the ideology and policy of our party.

3. To work for friendship between peoples, international solidarity, peaceful coexistence and cooperation, and against the perils of a nuclear inferno.
4. To make it clear that religion and science cannot be reconciled.
5. To criticise religion objectively and scientifically.
6. To spread our optimistic outlook.
7. To work for the upholding of the law and constitution; in particular, to uphold the guaranteed freedom of conscience and belief, and the legal division between church and state and between the church and the country's educational system.

In order to fulfil these aims the *VdF* is to try to help citizens in all situations of crisis in which the question 'What is the meaning of life?' crops up — the birth of a child, approaching marriage, bereavement, loneliness and the like. The *VdF* should be at hand with 'wise counselling'. It will therefore be very closely linked with the official state machinery, for example with the organs responsible for name-giving ceremonies, marriages and funerals. There will be constant cooperation with the Free German Youth, and with the committees which are responsible for the Youth Dedication. There will also be close contact with the cultural organisation *Urania*.

It is clear from the document that the *VdF* has been established to counter church influence:

There are certain circles in the churches which attack our beloved socialist ideals and values, setting the so-called 'Christian ideal of personality' against them. 'Christian values' are put forward as unvarying standards of conduct. The occasional mistakes made in our society are blown up out of all proportion, and represented as faults inherent in our ideology.

Some churchmen argue that socialists do not really understand human nature. We must expect this propaganda offensive to be intensified as the 2,000th anniversary of the founding of the church draws nearer.

The *VdF* will help in opposing those churchmen who in recent times have striven to undermine the principle of the separation of church and state. We know that they have misused the legal guarantee of religious freedom to oppose state policies. Certain religious bodies, especially the Protestant churches, have recently been making strenuous efforts to extend their influence among younger people. It is no secret that we live in an age of intensified ideological conflict. Besides the inevitable problems which confront their age-group (like the choice of a career, love and marriage, military service and so forth) young people often take advantage of this situation. Moreover, the churches function as centres or meeting-points for the young, irrespective of any spiritual counsel that may be offered. In view of all these things, we are bound to mount a counter-offensive.

The Propaganda Division of the Free German Youth is no doubt aware that it is treading a difficult path. On the one hand it is claiming to work for the upholding of the law and the constitution, and to uphold the legally guaranteed freedom of conscience and belief. On the other, it is planning to use semi-official and official state machinery for the spreading of atheism. Claims are made from time to time that the GDR is *not* an atheist state, and in recent years efforts have been made to ensure that young people are not compelled to assent to atheism in official ceremonies.

It may be that the authorities feel that accusing the churches of going against the law and the constitution entitles them to reply in like vein. This is perhaps the time to remove the velvet gloves, and drive the believers into a corner. The authorities may conceivably feel that the support and good will of the churches, notably the Protestant provincial churches, is no longer worth having.

The document explains the structure of the new League. It is to have a carefully organised pyramidal structure, with a national leadership, and governing bodies in each *Bezirk* (county) and *Kreis* (district). There will be active branches in urban housing areas and in villages. Although there will be full-time employees, the chairmen at the various levels will be unpaid officers. The League is not intended merely to appeal to workers or to orthodox Marxist-Leninists. Membership is open to all in the GDR over 18 who agree to its constitution and ideals (i.e. to all who reject belief in God) whether or not they are members of the party or of any official organisa-

tion. On 7 April *Neues Deutschland*, the official party newspaper, reported on progress in the establishment of the *VdF*. The chairman of the National Working Committee declared that local working committees had been set up in 180 districts. The chairman claimed that there is great public interest in the scheme — an interest that is reflected in the more than 3,000 letters of enquiry that are said to have come from workers, farmers, artists, doctors and members of the intelligentsia. Large numbers of people, it was reported, had applied for membership of local branches.

Many members of Protestant churches are worried by the establishment of the *VdF*. Why, they ask, should an organisation of this kind be set up in 1989? After all, for more than 40 years there have been almost unlimited opportunities for the spreading of atheism. Churchmen fear the beginning of a new period of conflict, as Christians react vigorously to an aggressive brand of atheism.

*Compiled by members of
Keston College staff*