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Christianity in Soviet Russia (Part Two)

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On 18 September 1943, after two years of bitter fighting in which the Soviet Union battled for its very survival, Stalin sent a delegation to a little wooden hut on the outskirts of Moscow in order to request a personal interview with its occupant. This was none other than Metropolitan Sergii of Nizhnij Novgorod, *locum tenens* of the Moscow Patriarchate since 1926 and one of the few survivors of the persecutions, which since the October revolution of 1917 had devastated the Russian Orthodox Church. In the months following his appointment, Sergii had done what he could to help the Soviet régime establish itself, but during the persecutions of the 1930s this willingness to co-operate with the authorities was forgotten and the church was very nearly wiped out as a functioning institution. In the Ukraine, for example, there were only three working churches in 1940, and the government was about to embark on a mass closure of parishes in the newly-occupied western territories. Sergii might well have believed that worse was to follow when he received Stalin's invitation, but as things turned out, the great dictator had other plans. Far from wishing to administer the *coup de grâce* to a weak and dying institution, Stalin had called Sergii in order to confirm him in the office of patriarch and to establish a concordat with the church in recognition of the vital rôle which it had played, and would continue to play, in the resistance to Germany.

From the moment the Germans invaded, Sergii had constantly supported resistance to the invader by whatever means were available. Long before Stalin dared to address the country, Sergii had issued an appeal to the nation and initiated a fund-raising campaign which would eventually be able to equip an entire Soviet division. Given the fact that the *locum tenens* had virtually no organization of his own and had to face constant administrative harassment from the state, as well as the fact that neither he nor his followers had any reason to feel grateful to the Communists, his achievement must be regarded as little short of a miracle.

But if Sergii's patriotism earned him Stalin's favour, it must be recognized that that was not the only factor which prompted Stalin's action. Indeed, in the overall equation it probably counted for relatively little. Stalin was only too well aware of the negative impact which his persecutions had had on the morale of the Russian and Ukrainian peasantry, whose support was essential if the war were to

be won. He knew that the Germans could court popularity by reopening churches, which they did on a massive scale in the areas under their occupation. In two years, over half the churches in the Ukraine were opened again, and priests materialized as if from nowhere to conduct services. These men were generally anxious to avoid any taint of collaboration with the enemy, and those who accepted Sergii's authority waited to see what his attitude towards the invader would be. It is important to recognize this, because in addition to the supporters of Sergii, there were large numbers of nationalist and generally anti-Communist churchpeople who were prepared to co-operate with the Germans to rid the country of Bolshevism and establish an autocephalous church in the Ukraine. Here was a danger which touched Stalin and Sergii equally, and gave added point to an alliance between them.

The concordat established with Sergii in 1943 did not alter the basis of the Soviet state, in which atheistic Communism remained the official ideology. Nor did it revoke the discriminatory laws which had been passed against the Church after 1917, and which had culminated in the anti-religious legislation of 8 April 1929. On the other hand, it did lead to the cessation of atheistic propaganda and to the disbanding both of the League of Militant Atheists and the so-called 'Living Church', which had briefly occupied the patriarchate in 1922–3. More important from the church's point of view, it contained the promise that after the war the patriarchate would be allowed to reorganize church life on a legal basis, reopen seminaries for the education of the clergy, and carry on its pastoral activities more or less unhindered. These promises were confirmed in a second concordat of 1945, following which the church was able to reopen about twenty thousand places of worship, eight seminaries and about a hundred monasteries. A similar agreement was reached with the Evangelical-Baptists, originally two groups until Stalin compelled them to merge in 1944, and with the other Protestant churches, mostly in the Baltic states. The Roman Catholic church did not benefit from the new conditions, partly because of the hostile attitude of the Vatican and partly because both Stalin and Sergii were determined to reintegrate the Uniates ('Greek Catholics') into the Orthodox church.

This reintegration took place at the Synod of Lvov in 1946, when the Greek Catholics met to renounce their allegiance to Rome and to rejoin the Moscow Patriarchate, from which they had been severed in 1596. It is probable that some of the Uniates were happy to return to Orthodoxy, as voluntary reunions of this kind had taken place in Western Europe and in America before the war. But it is quite certain that the majority were not, and many went underground, where they formed the backbone of the continuing anti-Soviet resistance in the Western Ukraine. Outside the country, this resistance was led by Cardinal Josif Slipyj, whose anti-Soviet activities

eventually became an embarrassment even to the Vatican. Slipyj's death in 1981 opened the way for a new relationship between Moscow and the Vatican, but political paralysis inside the Soviet Union made that impossible until 1989, when the Uniates were finally legalized once more.

Information and Statistics

Before we proceed any farther, it is of great importance to try to determine the factual basis on which the history of the Russian church since 1945 must be based. This is not an easy task, partly because official sources are even more unreliable than usual, and partly because the church itself has constantly issued selective and misleading reports about its activities. On the other hand, there is a wealth of *samizdat* material, most of it unverifiable by the normal criteria of scientific research, and statistics which have been compiled in indirect ways, which may or may not give an adequate picture of what is going on.

To illustrate the magnitude of the problem, we have only to consider the question of the number of religious believers in the Soviet Union. We may begin by discounting Muslims and Jews, not because they are insignificant—far from it—but because the boundary between national consciousness and religious conviction is unclear in their case. There is certainly a tendency for national minorities in the Soviet Union to turn to their respective religious allegiances in defence of their identity, but by the same token this tendency cannot be regarded as a fair test of genuine religious conviction. It is only among the majority of Slavs, where national consciousness is relatively less important (though by no means insignificant), that we can really talk of a religious revival as something distinct from national awareness, even if it is closely connected with it.

Confining ourselves therefore to the majority of the population, what do we find? When it joined the World Council of Churches in 1961, the Russian Orthodox Church claimed to have twenty thousand parishes, thirty thousand priests and thirty million members. In the 1985 handbook of the World Council of Churches the number of parishes and priests was the same, but the membership estimate had risen to fifty million, or about twenty per cent of the total Soviet population. It is obvious that such an increase cannot be accounted for by natural growth, which has been very low over the same period, so other explanations must be found. It is also known that the number of working churches was drastically reduced during this period, so that by 1985 there were probably not more than five thousand seven hundred actually open. But is a parish to be identified with a working church? And where are the thirty thousand priests? This enormous figure, which at first sight appears to be the most dubious of all, is in fact the most probable, on the basis of what we

know about seminary training since 1945. From reports of ordinations and deaths of clergy which have appeared in the *Journal of the Moscow Patriarchate*, the former outdistance the latter by about four to one. Officially reported ordinations numbered about one thousand per annum in the 1950s, and subsequently declined by about half. This means that since 1945 over twenty thousand clergy have been ordained, and about five thousand have died. If we add to this number those who have been ordained without attending a seminary—known to constitute a growing proportion of priests since 1960—the figure of thirty thousand comes within the range of possibility. But where are they, if there are only five thousand seven hundred working churches?

In estimating the total number of believers, we are faced with all the difficulties which attend realistic assessments of religious statistics, in addition to the problems imposed by the nature of church-state relations in the Soviet Union. Does the Russian Orthodox Church count only those adults who identify themselves with it, as Soviet law demands it should? Or does it estimate the total number of baptized, whether they are believers or not? How regularly are even convinced believers able to participate in church activities like public worship? It is well-known that only old people are able to practise their religion freely, and many obviously do, but what does this tell us about the rest of the population? Are they mostly secret believers who will start going to church once they retire, or have the younger generations turned away from God as Soviet propaganda likes to claim? To these questions there is no readily available answer. But some independent attempts have been made to estimate the strength of religious practice in the Soviet Union, of which the most detailed is the one published in the *World Christian Encyclopedia* (Oxford University Press, 1982). This estimates the picture in 1980 as follows:

Christians	:	96,726,500	36.1%
Muslims	:	30,297,000	11.3%
Jews	:	3,120,000	1.2%
Atheists	:	136,166,900	51.2%
Others	:	804,600	0.2%

The atheists in the above table must be subdivided into declared unbelievers, who were reckoned to number 59,253,000 (22.1%) and the merely non-religious, who supposedly amount to a total of 77,913,900 (29.1%).

The Christians in the above table were subdivided as follows:

Crypto-Christians	:	28,339,500	10.6% (of total population)
Orthodox	:	60,326,000	22.5%
Protestants	:	4,301,000	1.6%
Roman Catholics	:	3,760,000	1.4%

By redistributing the Crypto-Christians, the following figures were arrived at:

Orthodox	: 84,288,000	31.4%
Evangelicals	: 7,620,000	2.8%
Other Protestants	: 168,500	0.1%
Roman Catholics	: 4,750,000	1.8%

These figures obviously contain a high degree of speculation on the part of the compilers, but they are not merely guesswork. The figures were compiled from data like the amount of wax sold for votive candles, and number of people willing to admit that they had had their children baptized in the Orthodox church. Figures for the smaller churches have been based on the number of places open for worship and the average attendance in the larger centres, which can be easily checked. For this reason, the statistics relating to the smaller bodies have a much greater chance of being more or less accurate. In addition, the Orthodox total includes the Georgians (over four million) and the Armenians (about two and a half million), who must be deducted if the figure for the Russian church is to be arrived at. It also includes the suppressed Uniate population, whose true attachment to Orthodoxy must be questioned. But however unsatisfactory these statistics are, two facts emerge from them which are beyond dispute. One is that religious practice is widespread in the Soviet Union, though much of it is outside the organized and controlled ecclesiastical structures. The second is that religious observance is growing, since the number of Crypto-Christians is much less now than it was in 1940. It is also interesting to note that the Soviet Union appears to have a problem of 'nominal atheism'—that is indifference to the whole issue of religion as opposed to active opposition as encouraged by the state. It is among these people that the revival of Christianity seems to be making the greatest headway, and it may well be their presence in the organs of state which has blunted the force of the various anti-religious campaigns which have been staged since 1960.

Church-State Relations since 1945

Whatever one makes of the available statistics, it is beyond dispute that the church emerged from the Second World War in a stronger position than at any time since 1917. Attempts were made to initiate new campaigns promoting atheism, and there were cases of administrative harassment in the provinces, but in general the period from 1945 to 1958 was one of prosperity and growth for the church. A Council for Russian Orthodox Church Affairs (C.R.O.C.A.) was set up alongside the existing Council for Religious Affairs (the two were merged on 8 December 1965), and the sympathetic Professor Georgy

Karpov was named to head it. A real sense of co-operation and partnership developed between Karpov and Patriarch Alexii (1945–70), a war hero who as Metropolitan of Leningrad had been decorated for his part in the great siege of that city. New churches were opened and old ones restored, sometimes with discreet assistance from the state. The church survived the death of Stalin in 1953, and looked set to become an accepted feature of Russian life once more. The price for this toleration was paid in the sphere of foreign relations, where the Russian hierarchy was expected to toe the party line. This was most blatant at the time of the Korean War (1950–53), but after the death of Stalin it became more muted. In fact, the *Journal of the Moscow Patriarchate* briefly dropped its political commentary in 1953, but was forced to restore it the following year.

The period of relative toleration came to an abrupt end in 1959, when Khrushchev launched a new anti-religious campaign. Within three years over half the churches were closed, along with five of the eight seminaries and all but four of the hundred or so monasteries. Atheist agitators, inactive since the 1930s, were once more sent into the villages, children were expressly forbidden to participate in religious activities and anti-religious instruction was intensified in the schools. The campaign continued until Khrushchev was overthrown in 1964, when it was relaxed. But until 1987 very few of the confiscated buildings were returned to the church, none of the seminaries was reopened, and monastic life remained severely curtailed.

At the height of the persecution in 1961, the bishops were convoked in a semi-secret council which met at Zagorsk from 18–25 July. The legality of this council has been questioned by more than one canonist of the church, and it is certain that most of its proceedings must be described as unusual, to say the least. The bishops were not told in advance what they would be discussing, and it seems that they were presented with a series of documents to sign which emanated from state sources. The friendly head of C.R.O.C.A., Professor Karpov, had already been replaced at the beginning of the repression, as had Metropolitan Nikolai, who had apparently advocated a policy of resistance to state pressure. In his place was Metropolitan Nikodim, one of a new breed of Soviet clerics who believed in accommodation with the régime, and who was deeply distrusted by many of the hierarchy.

The council was forced to approve a series of regulations which reorganized parish life by removing the priest from the parish council and giving local laypeople the right to dismiss the clergy and even to close the church if they so wished. The new measures were presented as a welcome democratization of church life, but the almost immediate closure of about ten thousand churches reveals that the real effect of the measure was to enable party activists to infiltrate church

councils and abolish them from within. According to the law of 1929, a church could only remain functioning if a council of twenty (the *dvadtsatka*) applied for registration as a religious society. These twenty—all laypeople—could easily be infiltrated or intimidated, and it seems likely that this must have happened in a great many cases. But even when the *dvadtsatka* could not be undermined in this way, churches were occasionally closed or torn down if the local party officials were unsympathetic. In the well-documented case of the village of Roi (near Smolensk), protests were even sent to Khrushchev and to President Podgorny, as well as to the patriarchate, though nothing was done to prevent the church's destruction. But by the time the protests finally ceased, the original twenty objectors had grown to over four hundred, and these had actually marched on the local party headquarters in a demonstration against the move!

The 1961 legislation imposed on the Orthodox church followed a similar injunction against the Evangelical-Baptists in 1960. But when the Baptists tried to implement the new regulations many of their congregations refused to accept them and chose to reconstitute themselves as unregistered, and therefore illegal communities. After that, they suffered constant harassment, and many of their leaders were jailed for long periods under the infamous Article 227 of the Penal Code of the R.S.F.S.R. (closely paralleled in the other republics), which provides for imprisonment and confiscation of property for anyone convicted of participation in unregistered religious gatherings.

Also decided at the 1961 council were two matters of far-reaching significance, which in the long term were destined to counteract some of the effects of the persecution. The first was the ratification of the Russian Orthodox Church's membership in the World Council of Churches. At the W.C.C.'s 1961 assembly in New Delhi, six Soviet churches (the Russian, Georgian and Armenian Orthodox; the Estonian and Latvian Lutheran and the Evangelical-Baptists) were accepted into membership. As we now know, this did little for the reputation of the W.C.C. which found that it was prevented from making any statements about the situation of the churches in the U.S.S.R. while at the same time it was encouraged to support pro-Soviet resistance movements in the Third World. On the other hand, it was of great benefit to the Soviet churches themselves, since they now had some assurance that the state would not attempt to eradicate them altogether, as it had tried to do in the 1930s.

The second decision rescinded the pre-revolutionary ban on communion with the Old Believers, thereby healing the schism which had begun in 1667. All the observers of the 1961 council, even the most hostile, agree that this was a generally popular move which was long overdue. That it had a wider significance was to become apparent in

the later 1960s, when observers of the Russian church scene began to realize that fundamental changes were taking place in its inner structure and self-awareness.

With hindsight it is possible to see that the events of 1959–64 marked a turning-point in the history of the Russian Orthodox Church. Until that time it had been possible to hope that a *modus vivendi* with the state could be achieved with a little good will on both sides. Certainly, the church authorities had worked hard to achieve that, and their record of subservience to the party line was virtually unblemished. In 1949, on the occasion of Stalin's seventieth birthday, the patriarch himself went out of his way to praise the dictator as the protector of the church and the saviour of the nation, and subsequent statements were hardly less obsequious. Yet in spite of everything they had done to flatter the authorities, the hierarchy could do nothing to prevent the decimation of the achievements wrought under the concordats of 1943 and 1945. Whether from fear or not, they caved in to every demand made of them, a kind of behaviour which remained characteristic of the church under Alexii's successor Pimen (1971–90).

Instead of destroying the church though, the events of 1959–64 merely convinced many of its more active clergy and laity that the policy followed by the hierarchy must be repudiated, and more militant tactics adopted instead. For the first time, Orthodox voices were heard praising the attitude of the Evangelical-Baptists, and demanding that the Orthodox take a similar approach in their own dealings with the state. Harassment of those whose baptisms and weddings had been officially registered according to law did not stop these things from happening—they merely went underground. more and more priests began to baptize without registration, and many weddings were performed *in absentia*, the parties concerned having signified their intentions to the priest by post.

On 13 December 1965 two priests of the Moscow diocese, Nikolai Eshliman and Gleb Yakunin wrote to the patriarch with a detailed account of the damage done to the church since 1959. They were particularly critical of what they called the uncanonical synod of 1961, and of the actions which the patriarch had taken against the protesters, especially Archbishop Yermogen of Kaluga, who had withstood the pressures of C.R.O.C.A., and in whose diocese not a single church had been closed, Yermogen was relieved of his duties in the summer of 1965, and placed under a discreet form of house arrest on the outskirts of Moscow. The two priests attacked the patriarchal chancery for complicity in this, as in many of the other illegal actions which had taken place in the preceding five years, and demanded an open repudiation of them on the part of the patriarch himself. Instead they were rebuked for their protests and ordered to recant.

When they refused, they were relieved of their duties, sometime between 23 May and 8 June 1966.

The heart of Eshliman and Yakunin's protest was that the Soviet state had violated its own constitutional provision for the separation of church and state. They were prepared to live within the limits of the 1929 law (unlike the Evangelical-Baptists, who consistently called for its abrogation), but believed that the church should be allowed to organize itself without state interference. In making their protest in this way, the two priests effectively condemned the Soviet interpretation of the principle of separation, which is simply that the church cannot interfere with the state, but the state can do what it likes. It was also an implied attack on the policy of the patriarchate, which had always hoped that by accepting the system, it might be possible to exercise some influence within it.

The case of Eshliman and Yakunin soon became public in the West, and evoked a groundswell of support inside the Soviet Union itself. It provided the cue for two laymen, Boris Talantov and Anatoli Levitin (who often wrote under the pseudonym Krasnov) to rally support at grassroots level. Working independently, Talantov and Levitin-Krasnov collected testimony from eye-witnesses of anti-church activities in the provinces, and made them public in *samizdat*. They were both severely critical of the hierarchy, and especially of the patriarch himself, whom they accused of complicity in the destruction of the church. For their pains, Talantov was imprisoned (where he died in 1971) and Levitin-Krasnov was exiled to the West, where he has continued to publish whatever material he can find to substantiate his claims.

The New Church

The revolt of Eshliman and Yakunin turned out to be both the sign and symbol of the regeneration of church life in Russia. From it, the new generation was to date the beginning of the religious revival which has now reached quite substantial proportions, not least among the younger intelligentsia. Eshliman and Yakunin were significant because they were the first Orthodox priests who openly advocated a policy closely resembling that of the unregistered Baptists in their dealings with the state. The Orthodox church, even in its darkest days, had never found it easy to adopt the sectarian mentality, and had always tried to keep itself clearly distinguished from Old Believers and the like. But with the onset of the persecution of 1959, the younger generation of clergy, who had no experience of the pre-revolutionary situation, sided with the sectarians as their natural allies, and began to learn from them what tactics to adopt in dealing with the authorities. They realized that religious dissent was an ancient Russian tradition into which the Orthodox church had been plunged against its will, and they were eager to seize the

opportunities which that situation afforded. In particular, they became convinced that an active policy of evangelism was needed to combat atheistic propaganda, and they began to encourage local believers to form house groups and organize themselves unofficially as much as possible.

The hierarchy reacted to all this by suspending the offending priests, but they were not excommunicated. In fact, as it has transpired since, there were always elements in the patriarchate which tried to protect priests like Eshliman and Yakunin, and which secretly supported their course of action. For their part, the dissenting Orthodox clergy and laity have not left the church, but have tried to remain as loyal as possible to the patriarch even when they have dissented radically from his chosen policy. To some extent there seems to be a feeling that the hierarchy has little choice; its compliance to the will of the state at least allows unofficial activity to continue more or less unmolested. At the same time, as the Evangelical-Baptists have discovered, the existence of a large unofficial body of believers encourages the authorities to treat the official church more leniently, so as not to lead to further defections from the legal order.

What happened next takes us out of the closeted world of ecclesiastical politics and into the mainstream of Russian national culture. The protests of Eshliman and Yakunin coincided with a reawakening of traditionalism among the Russian intelligentsia which could only lead back to the church one way or another. Its beginnings can perhaps be dated to the publication of Alexander Solzhenitsyn's *One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich*, a searing denunciation of the prison-camp régime and at the same time a reaffirmation of Christian moral values, particularly in the figure of Alyosha the Baptist, whose simple faith survived all the onslaughts of the prison authorities. Solzhenitsyn saw in Alyosha and his fellows something of the heart of the Russian peasant, whom he regarded as the mainstay of the nation's identity. From that time on, he became increasingly involved in church affairs, taking the side of the protesters against the hierarchy and the state officials.

Soon afterwards, Mikhail Bulgakov's famous novel, *The Master and Margarita*, was rediscovered and published (1966). Among other things, the book is a stinging denunciation of the naiveté of atheism, and a reaffirmation of the power of spiritual forces. The reality of the Devil—a German with a French lady assistant, both clearly representing the Enlightenment—is reaffirmed, and Soviet society is portrayed as being in his grip. Only those who keep their hearts and minds pure by following Yeshua Ha-Notsri—the Aramaic name of Jesus—can sup with the Devil and yet live to tell the tale. Along the way Bulgakov throws in references to wonder-working icons, church choirs and the patriarch—all obvious symbols of traditional

Orthodoxy, which somehow carry on despite the Devil's presence.

Written in 1938, at the height of the Terror, Bulgakov's novel created a sensation, and rapidly became the textbook of the new intelligentsia. For the first time since the early 1920s, intellectuals began to seek a way into the church in large numbers. In 1974 two religio-philosophical seminars were organized independently of one another, in Leningrad and in Moscow. The Leningrad group spawned a number of *samizdat* publications, including the journal *37*, which for many years continued to appear on an irregular basis. One of the leaders of this seminar was a young philosopher, Tatiana Goricheva, who was exiled to the West in 1980. She has described her conversion from the anarchistic hippy movement in Leningrad in the late 1960s and the steps by which she found her way back to Orthodoxy. In her account we see both the hostility of the hierarchy, the importance of the monasteries as spiritual centres, and the close links with the Evangelical-Baptists, who participated fully in all the activities of the seminar.

Tatiana Goricheva's testimony is typical of many which have come out of the Soviet Union in recent years. Born into a family of believing grandparents but unbelieving parents, she grew up in a spiritual void made worse by the disillusionment which followed the exposure of Stalin after 1956. Unable to square the tenets of Marxism with the reality around her, she sought release in oriental mysticism, sex and drugs. Eventually, exhausted and depressed by her life of Bohemian debauchery, she made her way back to the church. As she describes it, she had to fight her way in, not only against the state authorities, but also against the church officials who were afraid of letting someone of her type into the church. However, by this time the trickle of intellectuals was growing, and the church could not keep them out. Slowly they learned the intricacies of ecclesiastical ritual, adapted their behaviour to the prejudices of the old ladies who were shocked at the sight of young people who did not even know how to cross themselves, and made themselves at home.

In their seminars they began to discuss Christianity as a way of life which might one day replace Communism in Russia. Tatiana Goricheva herself started a Christian feminist movement, along with her friend, the poetess Tatiana Mamonova. Though not very successful, the fact that such a thing was even attempted demonstrates the vitality and the range of the new breed of Christian intellectual in the U.S.S.R.

The Moscow seminar, which also began in 1974, met with more resistance from the authorities, and it soon ceased to operate openly. In 1978 it attempted to produce a journal called *Obshchina*, which advocated the establishment of a Christian collective farm and an organized programme of evangelism among the nation's youth. This earned its editor, Alexander Ogorodnikov, a twelve-year prison

sentence which he began serving in 1979. (He was released after eight years in 1987). By then the movement which he had started had spread far beyond the confines of a single seminar and was impossible for the authorities to stamp out. From 1977 there was a regular *samizdat* publication, *Nadyezhda* ('Hope'), which was edited in the Soviet Union and smuggled to the West for publication. In addition, numerous Russian-language Christian journals sprang up in the West, and older established publications like *Vestnik* ('Herald') began to draw a large proportion of their material from *samizdat* sources. Particular mention should be made of *Kontinent*, a journal published in Paris by a group of Christian exiles, many of them of Jewish origin, which has reached a high standard of literary achievement.

One of the characteristic features of the newly-converted Russian intelligentsia is its general ignorance of Christianity as a detailed system of thought, and much of the material produced in the Soviet Union since 1970 reflects this. Of special importance are the writings of Fr. Dmitri Dudko, a parish priest of the Moscow region, who used his church as a centre for Christian teaching. In 1974 this attracted the notice of the intellectuals, who flooded to hear him. Before he was silenced, Dudko managed to give twelve talks on the Christian faith, which were later published as *Our Hope*. Dudko was subsequently tried and imprisoned for political agitation, but he was released after making a public recantation on Soviet television, which was broadcast on 30 June 1980. He was then assigned to another parish in the Moscow region, but his influence vanished in the wake of his forced confession.

However, in spite of its unfortunate features, the recantation of Dmitri Dudko is important in several respects. First Dudko in no way denied his Christian faith. All he was willing to confess to was a series of rather improbable political offences and disobedience to the patriarch. Second, it was subseqently revealed that the patriarchate had attempted to help Dudko get out of prison—a new and hopeful development in a quarter where total subservience to the state had become the norm. Third, Dudko's followers were not prepared to accept the excuse that he had recanted under duress—the standards of martyrdom had gone up, and such weakness could no longer be condoned. Fourth, and not least, the Soviet authorities obviously felt that there was some advantage in showing such otherwise unpromising material on television, thereby confirming the widespread influence which Dudko had exercised, and the hollowness of their own position.

Meanwhile a new movement for believers' rights had sprung up in the wake of the Helsinki agreements of 1975. It was spearheaded by Gleb Yakunin, who devoted much of his time to a denunciation of the new Soviet law on religious associations, which was published in

1975. This tightened up many of the provisions of the 1929 legislation, but it is not known how effectively it was applied, given the widespread disillusionment with the patriarchal policy of compromise. In any case, Yakunin was eventually arrested and condemned to ten years' imprisonment, of which he served seven (1980–7). But the activist group did not die when its leader was jailed; on the contrary, a new generation of dissenters, including a young professor at the Moscow Theological Academy (who was relieved of his functions and transferred to a country church, but not arrested) emerged to take the place of those who had gone to jail. It seemed that at last a movement had arisen which was too widespread and deep-rooted to be eradicated by government decree.

It is of course obvious that the new movement has taken hold among the intellectuals in the big cities, which is one reason why it has attracted so much attention in the West. What has been happening among the workers and peasants, who form the bulk of the population, is much harder to determine. There is no doubt that traditional folk religion survives to a considerable extent, especially in the countryside, and many surveys have claimed that the rate of baptisms among newly-born children in working-class towns and districts remains well above half the total. Certainly the epic struggle between the determined grandmother and the worker fearful of losing his job if the baptism takes place (or is discovered) became a common theme of Soviet folklore, which would hardly have been the case if the phenomenon were rare. Some indication of attitudes has been provided by an unofficial survey of Leningrad industrial workers, which was published in the émigré journal *Posev* (6, 1980, p. 13). It gives the following information:

	1971	1979
Marxists' attitudes	27%	10%
Vulgar anti-religious (priests=crooks)	17%	4%
Positive attitudes	11%	19%
No answer/no opinion	34%	49%
'Waverers'	11%	18%

Such statistics can do no more than illustrate a general trend, but the high figures for 'waverers' and those with no expressed opinion, together with the sharp drop in open hostility, indicates that the mood in the 1970s was slowly changing among industrial workers as well as the intelligentsia. What this means for the future is the great question which observers of the religious scene in the Soviet Union are now asking themselves.

Perestroika and the Future[1]

When Mikhail Gorbachev became General Secretary of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union on 10 March 1985, there was little hope for a rapid improvement in the position of the church. Gorbachev was known to be a reformer in the tradition of Yuri Andropov, who had been head of the K.G.B. and no friend of religious dissidents. In fact, very little happened at first. Believers themselves knew that a high proportion of people attending services regularly was young and well-educated, that there was a wide range of Christian literature available in *samizdat* and that possibilities for open evangelism and charitable work might start to develop as reform progressed. But very few expected the restrictions, which had been placed on church activities in 1929 and later, to be removed.

The first sign of impending change came towards the end of 1986, when prisoners of conscience were gradually freed. A large number of these were religious dissidents, and within a few months most of them were able to return to their homes. By Easter 1987 there were only a few such prisoners left, though it was far from clear what would happen to those who had just been released. During the course of 1987, the state took the decision to allow the celebrations for the Millennium of the Conversion of Russia to go ahead as planned in 1988. The Danilov monastery in Moscow was returned to the patriarchate, and work was begun to make it his principal Moscow residence. Elsewhere in the country, churches and monasteries were repaired as part of the celebrations.

During the course of 1988, the Millennium gradually gathered its own momentum. The ceremonies in Moscow in June were transmitted nationwide on television—the first time that any religious broadcasting had been allowed. The patriarch and the hierarchy were officially received in the Kremlin, and state officials were present at church events, though not normally at services. An indication of how swift the changes had been was the fact that state publishing houses were still busy turning out anti-religious propaganda, designed to demonstrate that the conversion of Russia had not been a great cultural awakening, but in the excitement of the celebration this had little effect.

By the end of 1988 it was clear that church and state were moving towards a new form of accommodation. Religious workers were to be permitted to go into hospitals, and a few clergy were allowed to visit schools, and to speak about the church. Broadcasting of services became more common, and was soon an accepted feature of Soviet television. Restrictions placed on worshippers were gradually relaxed, though this did not happen uniformly across the country. Projects were launched for setting up Christian schools, possibly with state support. Even dissidents were to be permitted to travel to the

West, and to return home afterwards—a new departure indeed!

It was in the course of 1989 that apparently irreversible changes were made. A new Soviet constitutional framework was set up, introducing a Congress of Peoples' Deputies, to which a number of prominent clergymen were elected. The thought of a bishop sitting as a deputy in a Soviet parliament must have greatly angered the conservative elements in the Kremlin, but there is no doubt that once believers were openly acknowledged as part of society, the remaining restrictions on them would have to go. This in fact occurred almost overnight, so that by the end of the year even the Uniates were being allowed to register their communities with the authorities. The Uniate question was a difficult one, because it was tied up with Ukrainian nationalism and with relations with the Vatican. Pope John Paul II had long stated that there would be no accommodation with the U.S.S.R. until the problem was resolved, and it was announced that registration would be permitted from 1 December 1989. This allowed the Uniates to celebrate Christmas in public for the first time since 1945, but it caused a certain amount of friction with the Orthodox, who in some cases found themselves deprived of their church buildings.

Legalization of the Uniates risked embroiling the state in a conflict with the Russian Orthodox Church, which had always regarded them as politically-motivated schismatics, but so far that does not seem to have materialized. Whatever their private feelings may be, it seems that most of the Orthodox hierarchy are still too grateful for their newfound freedom to be overly critical of the government's policy in the Western Ukraine.

An urgent question facing the hierarchy is that of leadership, which is now desperately needed. There were a few internal changes in the patriarchate in the latter part of 1989, designed to bring younger and more energetic bishops to the fore, but nothing much could be done as long as the patriarch was still alive. Pimen had always compromised with the regime, and when change finally came he was too old and too ill to be able to adjust to it. His death on 3 May 1990 removed the last obstacle to the pursuit of *perestroika* within the church, but it remains to be seen whether the hierarchy will have the courage to grasp the opportunity for decisive leadership which is opening up before it.

The process of reform in the Soviet Union may be halted or even reversed to a certain extent, but it now seems highly unlikely that there will ever be a return to the situation which prevailed before 1985. Even if current liberties are curtailed, it is unlikely that this will seriously affect the internal life of the churches. They now have the freedom to import Bibles, to print religious literature, to instruct children in the faith and to establish seminaries for training. The existing legislation on religion has not yet been repealed, but there is

a new law in preparation which will probably do away with the remaining restrictions on religious activity. In a sense it is in the church's interest to wait, since early legislation might soon be outdated as the pace of change quickens.

One very real danger is that the church will be hijacked by Russian nationalists, who regard it as the pillar of their national consciousness. Russian nationalism is by tradition highly anti-Semitic, and there are disturbing signs that this is once more growing among the people. Organizations like *Pamyat'*, originally established to preserve cultural monuments (churches), have now developed a virulent anti-Semitic strain which does not seem likely to go away. The church could once again find itself, as it did in the early 1900s, supporting a movement of persecution against the Jews on the specious grounds that they are 'Christ-killers'. Fortunately there are a number of believers who are acutely conscious of the danger, and who are making a brave stand in the face of the new threat to Jews and Christians alike. So far they have been able to invoke the anti-discriminatory articles of the Soviet constitution, but that may not be enough if popular discontent at the sufferings which the transfer to a market economy will bring in its wake forces the government to find a convenient scapegoat.

Whether the change to a market economy will benefit the church in the long run remains highly problematic. The attractions of a consumer society are far greater than those of communism, and it is quite possible that religious enthusiasm, which flourished in times of persecution, will dissipate itself as prosperity spreads across the country. On the other hand, the memory of the martyrs and the suffering is still very recent, and new revelations are being made all the time. For many years yet there will be testimonies of what life in the camps was like, and we may expect to see a great unearthing of skeletons in the national closet, as historians begin their work filling in the blanks in Soviet history. The prestige of the church is liable to gain from this, since so many of the victims were believers, and it may yet be that Russia will find a way to inject its spiritual fervour into the dead materialism of Western society. If it does, and travel restrictions become greatly eased, the Western churches may yet benefit from the wisdom and experience of those who have metaphorically speaking descended into Hell, only to be resurrected in the glorious light of the Gospel of Christ.

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NOTE

1 For a detailed exposition, see Jane Ellis, 'What Future for Soviet Christians?' in Churchman Vol 102 No 1, 1988.