# Observations on Religion and Atheism in Soviet Society

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The subject of this paper is the relation between religion and society in the Soviet Union, not between religion and the state. The two subjects overlap, but we shall try to keep them distinct. Little will be included here about the legal regulations of religion or about the administrative pressure that the state and the Party put on every kind of religious believer. Putting aside this important subject, it should at least be said that Soviet discrimination against religion has been continuous for over fifty years and that at many times there has been most cruel persecution of religion.

Even from a secular point of view it is impossible to understand the Soviet Union without knowing something about the religious influences. Marxism as a pseudo-religion is at an end in the Soviet Union. Even among Party members it is a small minority that even pretends to take Marxist ideology seriously, whereas the religious believers are numbered by tens of millions. Precise numbers are not available and might not be very significant but it is clear that there are far more believing Christians in the Soviet Union than there are believing Marxists. Similarly, Marxism as an ethical system has never taken hold. If we wish to understand Soviet morality, to enter into the ideas of right and wrong held by Soviet citizens, we must know their Christian, Moslem, or Jewish inheritance of morality.

The Russians are the most numerous and most powerful people in the Soviet Union, but they share the land with many other peoples and the relation between national feeling and religion differs in every case. In the case of the Russians themselves their national feeling is closely intertwined with the Russian Orthodox Church. For many centuries, the test of being Russian was to be Orthodox. A Moslem, a Catholic, a Lutheran, or even a Jew, who became Orthodox was thereby proclaiming himself as a Russian and not a Tartar, a Pole, or a German. In Tsarist days he would generally be accepted as a Russian.

Likewise, to be a Moslem was and is to set oneself apart from the Russian way of life. The forty million Moslems in the Soviet Union, mostly living in Central Asia and the Caucasus, stubbornly maintain their distinct identity. It is difficult to say how many of them are believing or

practising Moslems, but culturally they are Moslem to the core. Samarkand and Bukhara are Middle Eastern cities and the Russian language is less useful to the tourist there than English in India. Moslems may pay conventional compliments to Pushkin but their eyes light up if the conversation turns to Arabic or Persian literature. The Russians on the other hand feel the division equally strongly. Even now this sometimes has the curious result that an unbaptized Russian going to work in Turkestan will get himself baptized to show that he is fully Russian. In the same way to be a Catholic is to proclaim oneself a Pole or a Lithuanian. A Lutheran is a German, a Latvian, or an Estonian.

In Western Europe the only parallel is Ireland, another country where the community you belong to is all important and community is determined by religious inheritance. As in Ireland, religious community in the Soviet Union has political overtones. It is a disadvantage to the Catholics, Lutherans and Moslems that they represent a definitely non-Russian focus of feeling. It is always considered possible that they might want a political separation from Russia. As always, the Jews and the Armenians are in a special position. It is doubtful whether the propaganda against Zionism means what it says. The existence of the State of Israel is really a convenience to Soviet foreign policy, for without Israel the Soviet Union could hardly hope to maintain its position with the Arab countries. The objection to Zionism is rather that under the pretext of Zionism many Jews – how many we do not know – would like to leave the Soviet Union. Their destination is not a primary consideration. Of course there are other people, beside Jews, who would like to leave the Soviet Union, but the Jews have special difficulties in Soviet society. However, these difficulties are racial, rather than religious. The Jewish religion is certainly under great disabilities but (apart from the difficulty of observing the dietary laws of Jewish orthodoxy) not greater than the disabilities of Roman Catholics.

Although the Armenians resemble the Jews in many ways, their proximity to Turkey guarantees a relative loyalty to any Russian state. Half the Armenians are in diaspora spread throughout the world, but unlike the Jews they have no homeland outside the Soviet Union which could be an alternative focus of nationalism. It is clearly in the interest of the Soviet government to give the Armenian diaspora some feeling of attachment to Soviet Armenia and this is best done through the Armenian Church, the oldest national church in the world and a unique focus of Armenian life. So, while the Armenian Church has many difficulties, it is also sometimes able to give its priests a broader education at its one seminary than is possible for other Soviet churches.

To give a complete list of the religions to be found in the Soviet Union and to analyse their national connections and the political consequences thereof would be interesting but excessively lengthy. Our principal focus therefore will be on the Russians.

In the nineteenth century the Russian intelligentsia turned decisively against religion as being supposedly anti-scientific and, more important, closely tied up with a reactionary style of government. In the early years of this century a remarkable intellectual religious revival began but did not have time to permeate the educated classes before it was cut short by the Bolshevik revolution. So Russia came under atheist rule in 1917 at a time when religion was widely accepted by simple people and equally widely rejected by the intelligentsia. In these circumstances it was not unnatural to suppose that with the spread of education religion would wither away. This, however, is not what has happened. Rather it is the Marxist ideology that has petrified.

Before the revolution the Russian Orthodox Church was a human mixture of corruption and deep devotion. When persecution came the corruption fell away at once and the faith remained. There were many martyrs and many who confessed their faith for long years in prisons and concentration camps. The lives of these saints are only known in fragments. When they are known in full, their spiritual courage may restore some of the courage that Western Christians are in danger of losing.

There are nowadays two streams in Russia's religious life. The Russian Orthodox Church is the main stream, incorporating all that flows from the Russian past. This is important, since for over a generation Russian patriotism rather than Marxist ideology has given the country its dynamism. Wherever you look into the Russian past, you come on the Orthodox Church, a universal presence that escapes all definition when you approach it with Western preconceptions, but which speaks to the deepest level of human consciousness in language that is both life-giving and logical, when approached from within. The Orthodox Church may be persecuted but it is accepted as part of the Russian way of life. Even atheists assume that it is the "best" church. If they know that the British traveller is an Anglican, they often say with approval, "The Anglican Church is very close to the Orthodox, is it not?"

The Baptist Church is not the main stream but a tributary of pure clear water that is gaining steadily in size. The Russian Baptist movement is generally thought to have originated about a hundred years ago under foreign influences, chiefly German and British. To be a Baptist can invite suspicion that one is taking part in an un-Russian activity. In fact, however, the Russian Baptist movement is rooted much further back in

Russian history. The German Protestants of the Ukraine; the visiting Evangelical English Peer, Lord Radstock; Dr. Baedeker, the evangelist of Siberia; and other foreigners had an important part in making nonconformist Protestantism in Russia explicit, but the faith itself was there long before Lord Radstock made his celebrated visit to the salons of St. Petersburg and converted the wealthy Cossack Colonel Pashkov.

The Protestants are at present the most rapidly growing section of Russian Christianity. The great majority of them belong to the Baptist Church which is, however, split by a schism, one section being recognized by the state and the other not. This schism is remarkable in many ways, and not least because it has now maintained itself on an all-union basis for over ten years without the state's recognition. The dissident Baptists are fearless and the Soviet authorities, having lost that conviction of rectitude that justified so many cruelties in earlier decades, hesitate to persecute them out of existence, though short of that the dissident Baptists are treated with an arbitrary cruelty. The two sections of the Baptists have said some understandably harsh things about each other, but the split does not seem so clear cut as one might infer from their rhetoric.

The Russian Baptists are irrepressible and open evangelists and ready to suffer for their beliefs, if necessary. They make most of their converts among the working class. An atheist friend once asked: "When everywhere people are leaving religion, why is it that the best, most hard working and most thoughtful workers are becoming Baptists?" An Orthodox believer said to the author: "God has raised up the Baptists in this age, so that the Gospel may be heard at the work bench and in places where no Orthodox priests could go." Another Orthodox said: "The Baptists make more converts than we do, because it seems that their faith is easier to understand."

The Orthodox are quieter but not necessarily less effective in their proselytizing. They appeal more to the educated classes and in particular to those who are drawn to Russia's living tradition. They seem to open doors to mysterious rooms filled with a heavenly light, which the Baptists never enter, but their influence is by no means limited to those who are directly conscious of such values. The gospel is spread in various ways. When mothers of families go to church, for instance, they are often asked by the neighbours: "What did the Little Father say in his sermon?" They are expected to give a full account.

We have already referred to the breakdown of belief in Marxist ideology. This breakdown occurred or rather became apparent during the last decade, but it had been a long time developing. Basically it was a mixture of boredom and the cynicism and cruelty of Stalin that killed all

rational belief in Marxism as a coherent way of thought. If it is sometimes difficult to make religious instruction interesting, it is impossible to make anti-religious propaganda interesting after the first twenty minutes. Most of what passes for "scientific atheism" is very crude, a mere repetition of the arguments of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries; and where it rises above this level, its result can be to stimulate interest in religion. At the beginning of the revolution Marxism could be exciting, but those days are long past. Outward acceptance of the Kremlin's current interpretation of Marxism is enforced, but discussion of the issues involved is prevented. No wonder Marxist ideology died among the Russians. But socialism and Marxism are not identical, and socialism is universally accepted, even if the Marxist ideology, which is supposed to undergird it, is regarded with cold indifference or disbelief. By 1940 the ideology was already mortally wounded, though this was not obvious at the time, since people were too frightened to talk, or perhaps to think forbidden thoughts. But as the memory of Stalin receded and his successors began to lose their aim, and sometimes their nerve, people began to talk and think, until quite suddenly (about 1963) very large numbers realized, "I am not the only one who does not believe a word of it." An immense pride in Russia remained but the Russians found themselves with a vacuum in their souls; and the Russian nature abhors a vacuum.

As they looked for the meaning of life, the Russian people encountered above all the Russian Orthodox Church and were drawn to its values, though not necessarily to the Church as a structure or a society. Indeed, for many the Russian Church was compromised by what seemed an excessive collaboration with a corrupt regime. There are after all police spies in every church and even in the sanctuary, or rather especially in the sanctuary. Some were drawn to non-Christian religions, but they, in common with those who wanted to explore Christianity, were handicapped by the great difficulty of finding in the Soviet Union books that tell one about religion.

Belief, as always, takes many forms. Some are drawn by the unchanging liturgy and a presence which they feel but cannot describe. An educated boy came into church and remained rapt for three hours. Someone asked him, "Do you understand Slavonic?" "Not at all." "Did you understand what was being done?" "Very little." "Why, then, did you stay?" "I only know that it is good for me to be here. You must teach me and I will be baptized." Not infrequently one hears it said, "It is only in church that I feel truly myself."

On the other side there are deeply believing Christians who hardly ever go to church, perhaps because it means nothing to them, or perhaps

because if they were seen in church they might lose their jobs or be expelled from college, or even perhaps incur dire persecution for themselves and their families.

Some Soviet Christians have an intense transcendental belief in God who is above and beyond as well as here and within, a belief of a kind which is sometimes said to be particularly difficult for modern scientific man, but nonetheless is sometimes found among Soviet scientists. Others have a more worldly belief, a feeling for "the beyond in the midst" as Bonhoeffer put it, a loving care for the horizontal texture of human relations with little or no reference to anything that could be thought of as above or beyond.

In the absence of published books, intellectual religion is nourished by unpublished books through that remarkable phenomenon of *samizdat* that has sprung up in the last decade. Bold spirits write books which they know can never be published while the regime remains as it is. These are typed out and bound in stout quarto volumes and passed from hand to hand. These include a considerable number of religious works. Some of the greatest Soviet writers have been and are Christians, a fact that is widely known in the Soviet Union. This is important, because writers have always been the priests of Russian culture, the embodiment of the national conscience. Politicians have been muzzled and the Church has been barred from exercising a prophetic function under Tsarism and communism alike, so the writers have stepped into the gap.

In *samizdat* there are also works of philosophical theology, of recent church history, some lives of martyrs and confessors, and a polemical literature of protest against oppression and persecution. Some of this has come out to the West. Other works are known to exist but little is known about their contents. In the last few years various kinds of protest literature have grown rapidly in the Soviet Union. Of course most of them remain unpublished but they circulate all the same. Naturally most of this protest literature is not religious, but religious protest now has its recognized place along with the protest of writers, of scientists (such as Sakharov), and of oppressed nationalities such as the Ukrainians, the Jews, and the Crimean Tartars. The different groups are clearly aware of each other and religious protest appeared side by side with the protest of other groups in the severely factual *Chronicle of Current Events*, an underground publication that was concerned with the gaining of civil rights and appeared punctually every two months until its suppression in the second half of 1972. It is notable that all sections of what can only be called the protest movements are now asking above all for the honest application of law.

At this point someone will certainly want to ask whether it is not the underground church alone that has preserved true Christianity? Are not the officially recognized churches utterly corrupt servants of an avowedly atheist regime? The truth is not so simple. There undoubtedly are underground religious movements. And there are corrupt Christians who have become police spies. But what does "underground" mean? Even the dissident Baptists are an underground movement in the sense that they have no legal existence, but they do not conceal their activities and sometimes they seek legal registration for their congregations. There are many other movements known to exist with varying degrees of legality and illegality, ranging from a sober and orthodox Christianity to the most wild and fanatical sects. But there is no hard and fast line between movements which are legal and those which are not. The priest who baptized Svetlana Alliluyeva did not belong to an underground church, but when he baptized her in secret he was defying the authorities as if he did. It would be rash to suppose that there is no communication between those who belong to officially recognized religious bodies, those who belong to bodies that are unable to obtain recognition, and those who belong to bodies that would reject registration or recognition by an atheist state, even if they could obtain it. There are true Christians in all these sections and it would be strange if they did not recognize each other as such, particularly when they meet in prisons and concentration camps. Equally they must be presumed to be capable of recognizing the agents of the security police who are certain to be present in all Soviet organizations including, one must suppose, any religious organizations that operate clandestinely. These police agents are a familiar feature of Soviet society and generally, though not always, they are easy enough to recognize. In their presence one does not give one's thoughts away.

If Marxist ideology no longer fulfils the function of a pseudo-religion in the Soviet Union, what, then, will take its place? It is unlikely that the USSR is moving towards a pluralist society and it may be that talk of a pluralist society in the West is no more than a cover-up for sloppy thinking. However that may be, the idea of a pluralist society has no attraction for the Russians. Indeed, they find it impossible to conceive of a society without some coherent inspiration, some standard which, if not universally accepted, is accepted by enough people to give a general direction to the country's social aims. Orthodoxy for a long time provided that coherence which is now supposed to be given by Marxism. At present Marxist ideology is officially unchallenged, but it is a very thin crust over a very large pie.

The Soviet system works after a fashion, perhaps better than most of

us suppose, but it does not work well enough to survive until the end of the century without profound modifications.

In 1973 it does not look as if any spectacular change is impending, but great changes will come and they will come suddenly and at an unpredictable moment. There is every reason, however, to think that the socialist organization of economic life will continue in all essentials, though no doubt there will be modifications. But the Soviet system will no longer claim to be supported by Marxism. A new ideology will take its place. No doubt some of the old will survive and some elements of Marxism will be taken over, but they will be subordinate elements in a new way of looking at society and the aims of life.

Taking care not to exaggerate, it can at least be said that some form of Russian Orthodox Christianity will be an important constituent in the new way of thinking. There are dangers in this. It is all too easy to imagine an alliance between the worst kind of Russian nationalism and a politicized church hierarchy, which could result in a ghastly clerical fascism. But this would set all the non-Russian nationalities – namely over half the population – against the Russians, and thus tend to make the new order unstable. What one may hope is that after its long and testing ordeal the Russian expression of Christianity will grow beyond the restrictions of its Russianness. In that case it will be in a position to make the chief contribution to giving a new and a coherent aim to Soviet society. There are indeed a few signs that this may be so, as well as some disquieting signs that the contrary may be the case.

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## Minority Rights Report

A revised edition of *Religious Minorities in the Soviet Union* has been produced by the CSRC for the Minority Rights Group. It is a valuable introduction to the religious situation in the USSR and can be ordered from the Centre (price: 30p).