

Documents

Religious Freedom in USSR: Izvestia's Claims

The author of the following important article in Izvestia (31 January 1976) is Vladimir Kuroedov, Chairman of the Council for Religious Affairs under the Council of Ministers of the USSR. Thus this article can be taken as a pronouncement by the Soviet government on religious policy.

Kuroedov maintains that Soviet legislation on religion is fair because it upholds the interests of believers and unbelievers alike. RCL readers, the editor hopes, will have been provided with at least some material upon which to base an assessment of Kuroedov's claim. Four religious "activists" are singled out for attack – Georgi Vins, Fr. Dmitri Dudko, Fr. Gleb Yakunin and Lev Regelson. Readers of Vins's autobiography, Three Generations of Suffering, will know what faith, courage and integrity belong to Vins. Fr. Dmitri Dudko, Kuroedov states, was expelled by his parishioners from his church. Petitions for the reinstatement of Fr. Dudko from such parishioners have reached Keston College and these show that it was the churchwarden, acting on orders from the local soviet's executive committee, who dismissed Fr. Dudko. The so-called "slandereous letter" to the WCC written by Fr. Gleb Yakunin and Lev Regelson appeared in RCL Vol. 4, No. 1, pp. 9-14.

Despite international détente and the obligations taken on themselves by the countries which signed the Final Act of the European Convention in Helsinki – to strain every effort for the strengthening of peace and mutual understanding

between peoples – in a number of Western countries a deceitful propaganda campaign about the imagined suppression of human rights in the USSR has recently been intensified.

The organizers of this campaign, which bears a flagrantly slanderous character, deliberately distort, in particular, the policy of the Soviet State towards religion and the church.

At the editor's request, Vladimir Alexeevich Kuroedov, Chairman of the Council for Religious Affairs under the Council of Ministers of the USSR, describes the basis and the substance of Soviet laws on religion and the church.

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Indeed, reactionary circles in the West have recently intensified anti-Soviet propaganda and attacks on the Soviet way of life, making wide use of every kind of fabrication to disinform public opinion.

In his speech at the seventh congress of the Polish United Workers' Party L. I. Brezhnev, the General Secretary of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union, emphasized that these circles had become especially active immediately after the successful conclusion of the Convention on Security and Cooperation in Europe. "The campaigns of disinformation and slander directed at the socialist countries, pin-pricks of every kind . . .," he said, "all this is of course very far from responding to the spirit of the decisions taken at the European Convention."

By such actions the opponents of *détente* try to weaken the authority and influence of the Soviet Union and other socialist countries in the international arena. With this aim, all kinds of "Sovietologists" and professional "expert-theoreticians" manning bourgeois propaganda services, have also put into circulation the filthy invention that there is no freedom of conscience in the USSR, that Soviet legislation suppresses the rights of the church and believers.

How do things stand in reality, what is the essence of Soviet legislation on religious cults?

In its legislation on religious cults the Soviet State is guided by Leninist principles of the relationship to religion and the church. At the same time it takes the interests of all citizens into account. All this is reflected in the Constitution (the fundamental law) of the USSR, article 124 of which states: "With the aim of ensuring freedom of conscience for citizens, the church in the USSR is separated from the State and the school from the church. Freedom for the performance of religious rites and freedom of anti-religious propaganda are recognized for all citizens."

There is full reason to call Soviet legislation on religious cults legislation on freedom of conscience. It guarantees for all citizens of the USSR complete freedom to define their attitude towards religion: to believe or not to believe in God, to hold or not to hold religious views, to change their faith without hindrance, to be a member of one of the religious associations. In the USSR no one is compelled to be a believer or an atheist, to perform religious rites or not perform them. All this is a matter for the conscience of every citizen, a matter for his convictions, his indisputable right. At the same time, every Soviet citizen has the right to be an unbeliever, to deny any religion, to conduct scientific-atheist propaganda.

In reply to a question from a correspondent of the Novosti Press Agency, on the situation of believers in the USSR, Patriarch Pimen of Moscow and All Russia said: "Freedom of religion is guaranteed by the fundamental law – the Constitution of the USSR. All religious associations, including the Russian

Orthodox Church, are in an equal position in relation to the State, each of them is self-governing. In the USSR there is no census or statistics of the population on a religious basis. One is not asked about religious affiliation when being hired for work, at a census, when being issued a passport (internal passport – Translator), and so forth. Soviet legislation provides for strict accountability for any kind of suppression of the civil rights of the believing part of the population, including the clergy. Believing people of all religions, including priests, are citizens of the Soviet State enjoying full rights, who participate actively in the political, economic and social life of the country."

What guarantees from the State ensure the implementation of the principle of freedom of conscience in the USSR?

The most important guarantee is the law on the separation of the church from the State. In accordance with this, the State does not interfere in the internal activities of religious associations, and the church does not interfere in State affairs, which come within the scope of political, economic and cultural-educational organizations, bodies for the protection of health and social security, etc.

For the satisfaction of the religious requirements of believers, the Soviet State gives them for their use, without payment, church buildings, which are the general property of the people, and also cultic objects.

In the USSR there are more than 20,000 open Orthodox churches, Roman Catholic churches, synagogues, Lutheran churches, Old Believer churches, mosques, Buddhist *datsans*, Evangelical Christian and Baptist prayer houses, Seventh Day Adventist prayer houses, and so on and about 20 monasteries and convents.

Religious associations enjoy the right of training their leaders and priests in special secondary and higher spiritual educational establishments. At the present time 18 of them are open, including six Orthodox academies and seminaries, two Catholic seminaries, an Islamic academy and *medresseh*, a Jewish *yeshivah*, and so on.

Religious centres are granted the op-

portunity of publishing religious literature: the Bible, Koran, theological works, prayer books, journals, church calendars, etc. Thus, the Russian Orthodox Church has six periodical publications, and regularly issues prayer books; the Bible has been published twice in a mass edition in recent years. Such publications will continue to be issued in the future. Soon the second edition of the New Testament will come off the press; the works of the late Patriarch Alexi were published in four volumes, the works of Patriarch Pimen of Moscow and all Russia are being prepared for publication, and so on.

Believing Muslims have published the Koran twice, and a new edition is planned in the near future; an Islamic lunar calendar and the journal "Muslims of the Soviet East" in four languages (Uzbek, Arabic, English and French) are issued regularly; for the jubilee of the famous Islamic theologian and scholar Ismail Bukhari his book *As-Sakhikh al Bukhari* was published in two volumes, and so on.

For the preparation of religious cultic objects, utensils, candles, *matzos* and so on, the churches have 39 special establishments, which fully satisfy the requirements of believers; all the necessary raw materials and resources for them are allotted in the planning system from State funds.

The church's means, consisting of the voluntary offerings of believers, are not taxed.

Religious associations may hold all-union or local congresses and conventions to resolve internal church questions, elect centres of guidance and so on.

Soviet legislation, guaranteeing the existence of freedom of conscience, continues to develop and perfect itself. This is indicated in the adoption by the Presidium of the Supreme Soviet of the USSR of the Edict of 23 June 1975 (published in *Vedomosti Verkhovnogo Soveta SSSR* of 3 July 1975). Similar work is also conducted in other union republics.

Soviet legislation has established special legal norms, defending believers, religious associations and ministers of the cult from infringement of their legal rights. These norms make provision for accountability for obstructing the performance of religious rituals, inasmuch

as they do not violate the social order and are not accompanied by infringement of citizens' rights. Any kind of discrimination against believers and any kind of violence to their consciences are categorically forbidden.

In general, in our country everything is done to guarantee freedom of conscience, and we have every right to affirm that our legislation on religious cults is the most humane and democratic in the world. It guarantees the interest of both believers and unbelievers to an identical degree.

This is not the case in a single bourgeois State. It is generally known that in a number of States in the USA the laws do not allow atheists to occupy posts in State institutions; the evidence of atheist witnesses is not taken into account in court. Surely such a situation is flagrant discrimination against unbelievers?

The bourgeois falsifiers accuse us of not granting complete freedom for religious activity.

But what are we to understand by freedom of religious activity?

Western propaganda affirms that freedom of conscience must grant religious associations and their members the opportunity to act as they think fit. To this we may reply that there is no State in the world which would have an indifferent attitude to the violation of legislation and the generally accepted norms of the community, under the guise of religious principles. Believers can be guided by such principles only in so far as they do not contradict the laws of the State. M. Nigry (?) Vice-President of the General Conference of Seventh-Day Adventists of the USA, spoke correctly about this in an interview with a correspondent of Latvian radio and the newspaper *Golos Rodiny* ("Voice of the Motherland").

"Real freedom is to live in accordance with the law, not 'freedom' to break the law. Alas, many people, including Christians, substitute for a correct understanding of freedom discussions of the right to act at their own sweet will. In the socialist countries a stronger stand is taken on this question: your people are more inclined to and more interested in living correctly than in doing things that are not agreed. In the West, however, we are too free

from obligations and therefore we muddle the concepts of freedom and license."

It is natural that the Soviet laws regulate the relations between the church and the State and precisely formulate the rights of the church and believers.

Thus, legislative acts prohibit the use of meetings of believers for political speeches directed against the interests of the Soviet State, inciting believers to evasion of the performance of their civic duties, winning them over to a refusal to participate in socio-political life; performing fanatical rituals inflicting harm on citizens' health, and also fraudulent actions to arouse superstitions (for example, spreading of rumours about "the end of the world", about "miraculous healings" at graves or around so-called "holy places", pretences of such "healings" and the like). Religious associations have no right to compel believers to pay any dues.

Surely this does not limit freedom of conscience? Of course not. This is why the clergy in the USSR honestly fulfil the requirements of the legislation, and take a position of loyalty to the State.

The *Pomestny Sobor* (General Council) of the Russian Orthodox Church, the All-Union Congress of the Evangelical Christians and Baptists, the *Sobor* of the Old Believer Church, the *Sobor* of the Georgian Orthodox Church and others which have taken place in the last five years, clearly reflect this political loyalty of the clergy, their support for the internal and foreign policies of the Soviet government.

However, as they say, every family has its black sheep. We have our extremists in their own way, in and around the church, whom at times we have to call to justice for their unlawful actions.

Quite often reports appear in the West about people who have been sentenced here and are serving sentences allegedly for religious convictions. Such reports are gross falsehoods. "It is absurd to uphold," says A. E. Klimenko, Chairman of the All-Union Council of Evangelical Christians and Baptists, "that any believer of our church or of any other church has been put in the dock in the Soviet Union simply because he is a believer; Soviet legislation simply

does not envisage the persecution of citizens for their faith."

In fact, there is not and never has been in Soviet legislation a single norm envisaging punishment for religious convictions, or, by the way, for other convictions. Only people who have broken Soviet laws or incited others to do so are called to account.

Certain individuals try to evade the law and arouse dissatisfaction with the Soviet State's policy towards religion among believers, usually pursuing careerist, mercenary goals, and at the same time using religion as a cover. We most often come across such facts among the sectarian groups (Jehovah's Witnesses, Pentecostals and a few others). Fanatical forms of worship, which do harm to the health of believers, are a characteristic feature of such groups.

Some leaders of sectarian groups, striving to hold believers under their influence, forbid them to take part in the life of society, to visit cultural and educational institutions, listen to the radio, read newspapers, and turn to doctors for medical help, and sometimes they even try to compel believers to refuse to serve in the ranks of the Soviet Army. All these actions are violations of Soviet laws, and of the rights and duties of citizens of the USSR. And surely it is natural that for such actions the Soviet State punishes the guilty by process of law?

It is precisely these "activists" whom reactionary propaganda in the West eulogizes in the worst traditions of the "cold war", making them out to be "heroes" of some mythical "religious front", allegedly "suffering" for their religious convictions.

Take one of these "sufferers for the faith" — Georgi Vins. His case was heard openly in the Kiev regional court, which established that the accused had incited believers to unlawful actions, and to violation of Soviet laws on religious cults. Vins has enriched himself at the expense of the offerings of trusting believers, concealing information about his income and evading payment of taxes. He was the author of a provocative forged document about how the soldier Ivan Moiseev was apparently "brutally tortured for the faith". In fact, however, as was established by a commission of

forensic experts, Moiseev drowned through his own blunder while bathing in the Sea of Azov. (See RCL Vol. 1, No. 1, p. 15. Ed.)

Vins's criminal activity, of course, had nothing in common with religion. It is no coincidence that believers themselves, including Evangelical Christians and Baptists, have condemned the actions of this criminal.

Every citizen of the USSR is obliged to obey the laws of our State, to fulfil his civic duties honestly, to respect Soviet law and order, and the rules of the socialist community. And Soviet justice has waged and will continue to wage a struggle with law-breakers who hide their criminal activity under religious convictions.

It must be said that attempts to conduct unlawful activity under the cover of religion meet with the decisive condemnation of the population itself, including believing citizens. Thus, the parishioners of the Church of St. Nikita in the Orekhovo-Zuevsky district of Moscow region rejected the services of the priest Dudko, expelling him from his church for preaching with an anti-social content. Previously he had been expelled by parishioners of two other churches for the same motives. And now this "pastor", who has been imprisoned in the past, has been proclaimed by reactionary propaganda in the West as a "true fighter for the faith, suffering in Christ".

Bourgeois propaganda has also declared the Orthodox priest Yakunin a "great martyr". As long ago as 1966 he was banned from priestly duties by the Patriarch for improper activity and violation of church discipline.

It is not surprising that anti-Soviet Western propaganda creates a halo around such "martyrs for the faith". This is its well-paid "work". But we cannot but be surprised that Philip Potter, the General Secretary of the World Council of Churches, took upon himself a far from honourable mission, that of popularizing the slanderous letter about the situation of believers in the USSR cooked up by this very same Yakunin, together with a certain Lev Regelson (a person without a defined occupation) at the General Assembly of that organization which took place recently.

We have not the least intention of

suppressing the fact that we still have individual incidents when certain local bodies allow incorrect actions in relation to the church and believers. But such incidents are decreasing. However, the reactionary press in the West, continuing its speculations concerning the situation of religion in the USSR, just as before makes out individual, factual offences to be the policy of the Soviet State. Meanwhile it is well known that in all such cases measures are taken to eliminate the offences, and the people guilty of performing such actions undergo punishment in accordance with the law.

Many visitors from abroad visit our country, including religious figures. What do they have to say about the situation of the church and believers in the USSR?

In 1975 more than 100 church delegations from countries in every continent visited the Soviet Union. We may note with satisfaction that among them there was not one which spoke negatively about the situation of religion in the Soviet Union. Let us quote some of their opinions.

"Having come from the USA, where the press maintains that freedom of religion does not exist in the Soviet Union, it was especially good to see with my own eyes the free manifestation of religious sentiment which takes place here." This was written by the American writer Kennedy* in the visitors' book at the Holy Trinity Monastery of St. Sergius.

* The impression given by Kuroedov that Kennedy visited the USSR in 1975 is misleading. According to an official Soviet source, he actually visited the Holy Trinity Monastery on 8 August 1954, and wrote in the visitors' book: "Coming from the United States of America, where it is frequently asserted by the press that freedom of religion does not prevail in the Soviet Union, it has been most gratifying to see with my own eyes the free exercise of religious conception here today. At the same time, it has been inspiring to see the Church fulfilling the function of service to the people." (*The Russian Orthodox Church: Organization, Situation, Activity*, published by the Moscow Patriarchate, 1957). Ed.

"We have heard sermons in many Soviet churches and are convinced that the Christian virtues, love to one's neighbour, desire for peace and good relations between people are preached in them. We have become acquainted with the training of priests in the USSR and have found that it is well founded. We have not only met with brothers in Christ, but also with leaders of the Jewish communities. We are convinced of their well-being" was the opinion of Dr. Robert Marshall, head of the delegation of the National Council of Churches in the USA.

In an interview with a correspondent of the Novosti Press Agency, the general secretary of the People's Council for Islamic Affairs, Malaizii Dato Khadzhi Ismail Bin Pandhag Arisa said, in particular: "We are convinced that freedom of religion exists in your country. Believers perform their rituals in complete freedom. Holy places are kept in good order. We have met believers and talked to them. They express their opinions freely." After Friday prayers in the mosque "Khadzhi Alambardar", Malaizii, at the head of a delegation, announced: "Propaganda has not told us the truth. Our opinion about the Muslims of the Soviet Union has changed. We have realized that to hear is one thing, but to see is another."

Such are the testimonies of people from East and West who have observed religious life in the Soviet Union with their own eyes. Therefore, the assertion by the Catholic Cardinal König, Archbishop of Vienna, in an article* published by him in the *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* (October 1975), that the Soviet Union is a society consisting of two classes, believers and atheists, between whom a bitter struggle is in progress, seems very strange. By the way, Cardinal König has not been to the USSR once, but none the less he was able to expose our two struggling "classes" of atheists and believers. Such are the absurd jungles of fabrication into which even a Cardinal may wander if he is blinded by hostility to the land of socialism.

In the history of humanity no social structure has been distinguished by such unity as socialism. In the cohesive Soviet society there is no division of people into believers and unbelievers. Both labour hand in hand for the good of their Motherland.**

* An English translation of this article was published in *The Tablet* 3 January 1976, pp. 4-7. Ed.

** A commentary on this article by Kuroedov appeared in *Keston News Service* No. 21. Ed.

Children and Atheism in the Soviet Union

As a background to the review article on pp. 32-34 of this issue, we print the text of an atheist article published in the newspaper Soviet Belorussia on 31 January 1976. It is written by a lecturer at a pedagogical institute in Minsk, and is entitled "Save the Children". In theory parents in the Soviet Union are free to bring their children up in a Christian spirit. In fact atheist education is obligatory in schools and makes nonsense of the parents' legal right. The writer's reference to "split consciousness" is painfully relevant, for the children of believing parents can be pulled apart by the conflicting teaching of home and school.

The mind of a child is, figuratively speaking, a blank sheet of paper. And we are by no means indifferent as to what is written there: whether it is "Man" with a capital letter, or "slave of the flock of Christ" with a small one. As we think about the future of our children, we strive to bring them up as individuals who will be strong, bold, cultured, educated and useful to society.

But sometimes it happens otherwise: religion, which we sometimes think has already disappeared, gradually gets hold of a child's soul, and makes it into a meek "slave of god", a passive observer, expecting mercies from heaven and liv-