

Comment

Ten Growing Soviet Churches: A Response

In choosing a reviewer, one looks for someone who has as broad a knowledge of the book's subject matter as possible in the hope of ensuring careful treatment of the issues discussed and a fair and objective review, be it favourable or unfavourable to the author. Judging by the disappointing inaccuracies and misinterpretations in David Bridge's review of *Ten Growing Soviet Churches*, he must have read the book in only a very cursory manner. This is the obvious explanation for such inaccuracies as Mr Bridge's quoting the authors as saying "Evangelisation in all its many forms . . . is impossible legally or practically". We have no reason to assume any deliberate misrepresentation by the reviewer, but what we said, in fact, was: "Much of what we take for granted is impossible legally or for practical reasons: evangelisation in all its many forms, teaching the faith to children, systematic parish visiting, charitable and social work . . ." By inverting the first two phrases, Mr Bridge has distorted the sense of the whole passage. What we say is that *some* of these activities are against the law, but, as we go on to explain, they still take place; others are impossible for practical reasons. Evangelism is in the first category: it is "impossible" legally, so people are forced to break the law to make it *practically* possible. There have even been restrictions on evangelism within the confines of a church service. It is inaccuracies such as this which place a question mark over the credibility of the entire review.

It is even more curious that Mr Bridge should criticise the book for failing to give due "regard" to those church leaders who "create a space in which the church may live and grow". As I travel representing Keston College in different countries I am again and again horrified by a prevalent misapprehension, which might be

summarised in a question such as, "Surely it's only the underground church which preaches the full gospel?" I must have heard variants on that theme a hundred times in ten weeks of lecturing earlier this year in Australia and New Zealand. In our book, we had hoped to demonstrate that growth is found among the registered as well as the unregistered churches, that is, also among those which have "created space" for themselves. Of the ten chapters, no fewer than seven illustrate this point — though of course in very different ways — and another aim of the book is to make the equally valid assertion that registration, in itself, is no guarantee against persecution. When we wrote the book, we had clearly in mind the need to counteract the simplistic and pernicious idea that martyrdom, deliberately induced, is the only valid form of witness.

At the same time, we make no secret of our admiration of those who suffer for the faith. Why should we? Mr Bridge does not quite put into our mouth another concept he wishes to attack: "that compromise should be regarded as the eighth deadly sin" — but he does imply that we are defective in our understanding, for "the first requirement of any serious student of the persecuted church is theological reflection on the nature of compromise". If, in reference to Romans 13:1, "Everyone must submit himself to the governing authorities", how does one avoid the obligation in some sense to submit to the Soviet doctrine of atheism? What happens when — as every day in the Soviet Union — such an injunction comes into face-to-face conflict with the moral imperative arising from following Matthew 28:19 ("Go and make disciples of all nations")? Matthew 22:2 requires one to "render to Caesar that which is Caesar's" — but not to him that which is God's. *Ten Growing Soviet Churches* illustrates a variety of responses to this difficulty. It tries not to apportion praise or blame for the way in which people make those responses.

Mr Bridge finds the title of our book "misleading". It was in fact dictated by the series ("Ten Churches") in which the book appeared. But, even so, it is hard to see what is misleading about it. Under Soviet circumstances, when the law and the local authorities limit religious practice as far as they can, "church" often means precisely what Mr Bridge goes on to say we are in fact describing: "the experience of a variety of individuals and congregations". As to whether what we are depicting is "growth" or not, Mr Bridge apparently did not read the passage in the introduction where we say that, in studying the Soviet churches, we must "set aside all the standard criteria for appraising the life of a 'growing church'" (p. 16).

The nature of a book such as this dictates the absence of any scholarly apparatus, so it is unrealistic of Mr Bridge to expect us to

quote “more than one source” to back up our statements. That is not to say, however, that a close study of sources did not precede and accompany the writing of the book. Those that we do quote illustrate the use of officially-published sources side by side with *samizdat*. The assertion that Heigo Ritsbek is “obviously acceptable to the Soviet authorities for advancement in leadership” came from an Estonian source which cannot be revealed — and we have since double-checked on it — and it is just as likely to be correct as Mr Bridge’s implicit denial. If you are going to quibble, you should get your own facts right: there are other Methodist leaders who have never been “granted permission to travel abroad”. More importantly, Mr Bridge criticises us for mistranscribing the month of Hugo Oengo’s death. Yet, amazingly, the date he gives is wrong by a decade. Mr Bridge’s “1968” is wrong; 1978 was correct. Regarding our opinions on why Pastor Harri Mötsnik was permitted to preach so strongly for three years (in contrast to Fr Dudko, who was suppressed after six months for much less strong sentiments) and on the experience of Herbert Murd, we stand by them.

We are grateful to David Bridge for pointing out that there is one Methodist society in the USSR which is not in Estonia. The files are correct, and the error is ours.

Despite disagreements, David Bridge demonstrates, in the generosity of his final paragraph, that there is common ground between us, and we look forward to building on this.

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