

Religion in Russia

N. S. TIMASHEFF

VERY often, the religious situation in Russia, before and after the Revolution, is discussed on the assumption that at the time of the Revolution, Greek Orthodoxy was a dead and mummified body, used by the Imperial Government as an instrument of stupefaction and oppression. Any sensible government coming after the Revolution had to bury this corpse. The methods used by the communists were perhaps a little too strong. But, in general, the removal of Orthodoxy from the Russian scene was a marked progress.

There are even persons who think that the Russian people, when giving power to the communists, realized that the communists were atheists, but still evaluated the communist rule as the lesser evil and consequently, at least tacitly, approved the anti-religious policy of the years to come.

The reasoning behind this assertion seems impeccable to one who lives in an orderly democratic society with widespread public education, as in the United States. But the communist revolution took place in a society where the democratic process of discussion was a novelty and where elementary literacy was possessed by no more than forty per cent of the adult population.

In such a society the competition for power, in

the midst of a revolution, assumes forms which are almost unimaginable to members of an orderly democracy; in any case, victory in such a competition has nothing in common with the mandate given to a party as the result of a general election. Before the Revolution, even among the intellectuals, only a minority had more than a vague idea about communism; the mass of the people, especially the peasants (about eighty per cent of the total population), had no knowledge whatsoever. On the eve of the Revolution of 1917, the party which finally inherited the power of the czars numbered 30,000 members.

The masses accepted the communists because they promised land, bread and peace. Nobody compared these values with other values, such as religion. This is the tragedy of revolution when the masses are not yet prepared for democratic processes. Like children, they concentrate their whole attention on one or two enticing points and are blind to anything else.

Consequently, from the fact that the Russian people gave power to the communists or, at least, tolerated their ascent to power, one cannot conclude that, for this people, religion, especially Greek Orthodoxy, was a negligible value. Despite many weaknesses, there was true religious life behind the petrified external

structure of the Greek Orthodox Church; there was faith in the flock; there was devotion and readiness for sacrifice.

This may be best proved by the fact of the survival of religion, despite more than two decades of consistent anti-religious policy on the part of the new Government. From the almost unconceivable resistance of the believers, it appears that Orthodoxy was highly valued by millions of men and women. In attacking it, the communists did not try to bury a corpse; they hurt a living corporate body and inflicted pain on millions of its members. Moreover, the corruption of the Church as an organization was not so bad as many would like to think; under the challenge of triumphant atheism, the hierarchy discovered the spiritual values which had been somewhat obscured under the Empire. Many died in the name of Christ, and the blood of the martyrs intensified the faith of believers and provoked many conversions, especially among intellectuals.

Is it not significant that not only faith survived, but also the Church organization and the institutions around it? The attempt to submit the Russian Church to a kind of Reformation failed because the believers wanted to see their Church as the continuation of that of their fathers and forefathers. What has changed is the attitude of the Church toward political and social problems; but the bond with secular power and with a particular social order never had, for Orthodoxy, any dogmatic value. Both the hierarchy and the flock have displayed a real capacity for discriminating between eternal and temporary values which, by necessity, coexist in a Church.

Attack on Religion Necessary

The attack on religion was not a necessary means for the elimination of an evil. Yet, for the communists, this attack was a necessity, since the new rulers believed in atheism as strongly as Christians believe in Christ. Their attitude toward the faith of the people was contempt, rejection and merciless hostility. Intolerance was an essential element in their program. They were certainly not democrats. Religion was one of the main obstacles to the creation of a new society composed of new men. Consequently, religion was to be uprooted.

In the course of the years of official anti-religion, there have been many changes in the intensity of the struggle, as well as in the means used by the government. One of the crudest attacks was launched as late as in 1937-38 on the ground of the necessity of eliminating the fifth column. This version has been endorsed by a number of pro-communist writers who were inclined to believe that, in 1937-38, bishops and priests organized espionage in favor of Germany and Japan, set fire to factories, caused accidents in coal mines, as stated in official indictments.

To those who believe in such nonsense, quite a few questions could be addressed. Do they know what Ralph Ingersoll has to say about the blood purge, namely, that in order not to leave a few traitors unmolested, scores of innocent people were executed? Do they know that, in December, 1938, Yezhoff, the great master of the purge, was dismissed and that early in 1939 many of his former subordinates were tried for having overdone the purge? Do they know of the official statement according to which, in 1937-38, the attack on religion "was carried out by the enemies of the people in order to foster hostility to the Soviet Government"? The implication is that the fifth column was not where they looked for it. Do they know that, since 1927, Acting Patriarch Sergius insisted that the bishops and priests under his jurisdiction be "loyal" to the Soviet Government, *i.e.*, completely refrain from any anti-governmental activity? For one who knows all these facts, the charge against the bishops and priests cannot but appear incredible. The persecution of 1937-38 can be explained without assuming that fifth columnists were hidden in the Church. In the middle of 1937, those in power learned from a suppressed census that religion continued to live in the hearts of about half of the Russian people. In the fall of that year they had to carry out the first general election according to the Stalin Constitution. In spite of having elections well in hand, they still considered the possibility that the surprisingly strong survival of religion would influence the results. An attempt to behead the Church organization by attacking the bishops and priests was a logical response to the challenging situation they discovered to exist.

Religion Could Not Be Uprooted

The obvious failure of this last attack taught the communists a lesson: they learned that religion could not be uprooted from the soul of the Russian nation. This recognition opened a new chapter in the history of communist society, inaugurated early in 1939. About that time, the communists openly acknowledged that such acts as the christening of children, or religious marriage, or religious funerals, were no longer concealed as they had been a few years ago but were openly performed. A few months ago, it was reported that in one of the churches of Moscow a line of mothers could be observed waiting their turn for christening their children. Members of the Young Communist League, who according to the statute must be atheists, were reported to desire their marriage religiously consecrated. Soviet officials could be seen following funeral processions headed by priests. Acting Patriarch Sergius told a foreign visitor that since the outbreak of the war more people, especially more young people, attended church.

These facts, known from official Soviet sources or from reports of reliable foreign visitors, have been recently corroborated by a systematic inquiry into the religious sentiments of the Russians now in German occupied territories and in prison camps, made by a certain P. Perov, collaborator of the *Pravoslavnaya Rus*, published in Slovakia. The author comes to the conclusion that the Russians can be divided, according to their religious sentiments, into three groups. By far the largest group, composed of the great mass of the people, especially the peasants, has not forgotten the faith of their fathers. The anti-religious propaganda has failed to penetrate into the depths of their souls. Only the primitive superstitions and some church customs which too often were identified with real devotion, have been uprooted. The second group which is much smaller is composed of those who have lost all understanding of religion. Nevertheless, the sense of comradeship which has now developed into one of self-sacrifice, has given them an ethical norm which, although it has nothing in common with Christian ethics, is still a hopeful starting point. The third group consists of militant atheists whose purpose still is that of destroying religion in the name of science. Numerically this group is insignificant.

The Interpretation of Christianity Revised

The retreat of the official atheism corresponds to the persistence, even advance of religion. Early in 1939, anticipating an imminent war with Germany which could be won only if all the forces of the nation were united, the rulers decided to revise their interpretation of Christianity and to curb their anti-religious activity. It has been officially declared, in contrast to former declarations, that Christianity was not always an enemy of the working people and of progress. A direction to tone down anti-religious propaganda was given to the agencies entrusted with it. Forcible interference with worship in churches was prohibited. After more than a decade of living according to a revolutionary calendar and celebrating every sixth day as a holiday, Sunday was restored in its dignity of the official rest day.

This revival of religion in a country where it was thought to have been wiped out is not a display put on by the Soviets to please the democratic world. It is a sign of the gradual return of normalcy in Soviet Russia. The startling changes in the attitude of communism toward religion are fully in line with the development of affairs in Russia which can be summed up in one sentence: While holding fast to most of the old principles in the social and political fields, Stalin had realized the necessity of making important concessions in the cultural field. And he had begun to make these concessions years before the

war, thus bringing the country again on the path which leads to normalcy.

After the outbreak of the war, the policy of concessions was accentuated. In response to a message of Acting Patriarch Sergius enjoining prayers and patriotic efforts to defeat the enemy of Russia and of humanity, the Godless Union declared: "If the servants of the Church honestly call upon the believers to fight against Fascism, we must not belittle this fact." The publication of anti-religious journals was discontinued three months after the outbreak of the war, and anti-religious museums were closed. Heavy taxes on the churches were substantially reduced. It is known that, unofficially, Russian priests, serving as privates in the Army, have been permitted to act as military chaplains and that the other privates are not prohibited to attend at divine services thus celebrated. This is the counterpart of the situation officially created by the permission granted to the Catholic priests to act as chaplains in the Polish military units organized in Russia. In October, 1941, the announcement of this permission provoked, in this country, a short but vivid discussion of the problem of religious freedom in Soviet Russia.

General religious education, however, remains prohibited, as well as the training of future priests in special theological seminaries. But, with the mitigation of the anti-religious activity of the Government, a substitute has been found which has been recently described by the Acting Patriarch. If a young man graduating from high school wishes to become a priest, he can apply to the Church; local ecclesiastical authorities suggest to him a program of study and provide him with the necessary books. After having studied for a certain time, the young man is examined by a bishop. If he passes this examination, and if he is known to possess the appropriate character traits, he is ordained deacon, then priest. Still later, the Acting Patriarch has managed to have a correspondence course for future priests printed on Government presses, and an appreciable number of ordinations have resulted. Officials who evidently had to know that the presses were being used for this purpose, obviously closed their eyes to it.

The most significant symptom of change is, perhaps, to be seen in the fact that, in the summer of 1942, a book has appeared in Moscow entitled *Truth about Religion in Russia*. In any country but Russia the publication of a similar book would not have astonished anybody. But, in Russia, its publication was at least unexpected. Have not the new rulers of Russia prohibited both reprinting of the Bible and importing it from foreign countries? And now a beautifully printed and copiously illustrated book on religion appears, comprising contributions of the

highest dignitaries of the Russian Orthodox Church, as well as of a number of priests and laymen belonging partly to the cultural *élite*, such as professors, doctors, or artists and partly to rank-and-file believers. It appears from the book that the Government has committed to quite a few clergymen the task of investigating the acts of German vandalism relating to the Church. This should be added to the fact that, in November, 1942, Metropolitan Nicholas of Kiev was appointed to the governmental commission for the investigation of "crimes committed by the German Fascist invaders."

In this book, the Acting Patriarch states, as he has many times done since 1930, that the Church is not inhibited in performing religious rites in accordance with its teaching; but he is silent about the fact that the Church is legally restricted to the performance of rites, that there is no religious education in the country, that anti-religious propaganda cannot be opposed outside the church buildings, that the Church is not permitted to carry on any social, cultural, or charitable activity. But, in the book, one finds the very significant statement that the Orthodox Church is sad about the fact that anti-religion is the official ideology of the ruling party.

This does not hinder the head of the Russian Orthodox Church from strongly opposing the ideas of those "bourgeois believers" who regret the termination of the old Church-State intimacy and to express the hope that, being independent of the State, the Church may better fulfill its salutary task. He states also that the Church could not separate itself from the nation and never could accept benefits from the nation's enemy. This is an unambiguous response to the challenging situation created by the German invaders in the occupied provinces where they try to organize a Russian Orthodox Church which would be as subservient to them as the Church in Imperial Russia was to the Emperors. In the book, there are frequent mentions of special prayers for the liberation of Russia from the anti-Christian Germans and of special divine services held in towns and villages reconquered by the Russian armies.

As compared with the situation which obtained in Russia in 1937-38, when religion was severely persecuted, the change is drastic. This change does not **however** signify the conversion of the Soviet Government to religion or even to an attitude of tolerance toward religion, as understood in this country. Closed churches are not reopened; exiled and imprisoned bishops and priests are not released. In the course of a totalitarian war against a formidable external enemy, it was necessary to achieve a truce with a substantial group within the nation antagonized by religious persecution. Whether this truce will continue when this war is over, depends on many

circumstances. If the contact with the democratic allies of the Soviet State is strong enough to cause even a partial democratization of that State, tolerance will prevail. If, on the contrary, the Soviet State is not affected by that contact, then, after the war is over, its leaders will be free to choose between tolerance and religious blitzkrieg, and there is no means to predict what their choice will be.

But, whatever their choice will be, one fact will dominate the situation: this is the persistence of religion in spite of twenty-five years of official anti-religion. A nation which proved to be able to resist for so many years will continue to resist indefinitely, up to the termination of the revolutionary cycle. The problem is not so much whether Russia will once more become a Christian nation—under the crust of official atheism she still is one—but whether and when the State will officially return to Christianity.