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What Future for Soviet Christians?

JANE ELLIS

1988 may well prove an important year for Christians in the Soviet Union. It is the year when many of them celebrate the millennium of their churches. And it could well prove to be the year when Mikhail Gorbachev's intentions towards religion (if any) finally become clear. Certainly Christians have benefitted, to some extent, from his reforms, as we shall see below. But at the time of writing they are still waiting to see if there are going to be substantial, lasting changes that will bring them true religious freedom.

In 1987 there was some good news for believers. It was very limited in extent, compared with what they had been praying for and hoping for for many years, but still the prospect was brighter than for a decade or more; since the collapse of *détente* in the late 1970s in fact. The chief good news was the release of a substantial number of prisoners from labour camps, prisons, internal exile, and even a few from psychiatric hospitals. The number of prisoners known to Keston College dropped from an average of around four hundred for each of the last few years to 260 by the end of the year. *Glasnost* (openness) affected believers as it did other members of Soviet society: that is to say, they were as uncertain as anyone else what they could or could not say and where the new boundaries lay, and were suspicious as to how long the new policy would last, but did realize after a time that there were some opportunities to be seized in terms of making the church a more visible presence in society. What was not evident, though, was any clear change in Soviet policy on religion. Rumours had been circulating for a couple of years that the basic legislation on religion was under review, but there was no hint by the end of the year as to whether the changes would be substantial, meeting demands which believers had been reiterating in *samizdat* (unofficially circulated writings) for twenty five years, or whether they would be merely cosmetic. Towards the end of 1987 it became clear that a dramatic promise to release all prisoners of faith (made by the Chairman of the Council for Religious Affairs, Konstantin Kharchev, while on a visit to the U.S.A.), had not been honoured. Believers had no idea what they could expect from their government either in the immediate or the long-term future.

Gorbachev, it seems, does not have a specific policy of his own on religion. He has inherited a policy on religion from his predecessors, which (unlike practically everything else he has inherited from them),

he appears content to maintain, at least for the present. Given the immense, perhaps impossible tasks which face him in other areas, this is hardly surprising. That policy was initiated by Stalin during the Second World War, a complete *volte-face* from the previous policy of exterminating institutional church life which was pursued with such vigour during the nineteen twenties and thirties. It consists of keeping church institutions above ground, under close, often stifling state supervision, hedging them off in every possible way from everyday life and from political and social issues, using church leaders to promote a favourable impression abroad and to support Soviet foreign policy aims, and rewarding them with small but worthwhile concessions when they perform satisfactorily. This mode of church-state relations has been reasonably consistent in the post-war period (except for a five-year period under Khrushchev, who, largely on his own initiative, waged a brutal anti-religious campaign from 1959 to 1964). Gorbachev has not changed this state of affairs yet.

The Millennium

This marks the thousandth anniversary of the Baptism of Kievan Rus', whose ruler, Prince Vladimir, accepted Christianity in its eastern form from Byzantium in 988 or 989 and made it the state religion. The post-war pattern of church-state relations suggests that some concessions made to the churches recently, especially to the Russian Orthodox Church, would have occurred anyway as part of the preparations for this important anniversary, and are not necessarily due to the new atmosphere initiated by Gorbachev. The main celebrations are to take place in June, starting in Moscow and Zagorsk and then spreading to other cities.¹ They promise to be a focus of attention throughout the world, with many foreign church visitors in attendance. It is entirely consistent for the state to want the church to look its best for the occasion, in order to bolster the oft-repeated claim that there is freedom of religion in the U.S.S.R. The best example of this attitude is the return of the Danilov Monastery in Moscow to the Russian Orthodox Church. This extensive thirteenth-century complex, the oldest monastery in Moscow, was returned to the church in June 1983. The despoliation of decades is being hastily repaired in time for the Millennium celebrations: churches are being lovingly restored, the faithful have given their kopeks to meet the cost, reportedly fifty million roubles, a hotel for visitors is to be constructed, and the Patriarch will finally have an official residence there befitting his rank. A community of monks, about fifty in number, has been established in the monastery—the first time that there has been an officially-recognized monastic community in Moscow since the late 1920s.² Truly a concession from the state worth having, and a source of great joy to church leaders and the faithful alike. One hopes that foreign guests at the June celebrations will not

be misled into thinking that it is symptomatic of the state of the church as a whole. If they are, that state will have achieved precisely what it hoped for when it returned the monastery to the church. This event occurred, after all, under the 'old régime', nearly two years before Gorbachev came to power, and represents Brezhnevite thinking on the proper pattern for church-state relations.

Another significant concession has been the increased numbers of Scriptures permitted to be printed or imported by Soviet churches. The Russian Orthodox Church is to print 100,000 Bibles in 1988, and the Baptists have received permission to import 100,000, with hints that more may be in the offing.³ This will be the largest number of Bibles that Soviet Christians have received in a single year since 1917. Again, a cause for great rejoicing. But again, this fits into the post-war pattern of allowing, now and then, ever larger numbers of Scriptures to be made available for believers, in return for what the state regards as acceptable behaviour by church leaders. And both church and state know that although the print-runs may increase slightly over the years, they are still totally inadequate for the many millions of believers, not to speak of seekers after truth who will devour a Bible or New Testament should one fall into their hands.

The importance to the Soviet authorities of creating a good impression in the West should not be underestimated. There is no point in their insisting that Soviet church leaders should constantly maintain that there is freedom of religion in their country unless they can be sure that someone is listening to these claims. There is no point in creating a tangible, striking image of freedom, such as the Danilov Monastery, unless they can be sure that someone is scrutinising the image. Permission to import Scriptures has been given only after many years of patient and sometimes frustrating negotiations by the international church bodies concerned. And this permission has surely been given at least in part to combat the efforts of those who take in Scriptures unofficially.

Time has shown that western churches have an important rôle to play in widening the narrow circle of freedom within which Soviet churches have to live. This is as true of the man and woman 'in the pew' as it is of international church bodies. Although progress is painfully slow, and it is very rare that clear examples of it can be singled out, it is beyond doubt that our neglect, or our assumption that all was well, could have made the situation of Soviet believers much worse—and perhaps could still do so.

This year is not the thousandth anniversary of all the churches in the U.S.S.R., though it does include the largest of them. It is Russian, Ukrainian and Byelorussian Christians who look back to Prince Vladimir as their founder. The Baltic countries, where Catholicism and Lutheranism predominate, have an entirely different history. There are Orthodox in Moldavia, today part of the Russian

Orthodox Church, but owing their origin to the Orthodox Church of neighbouring Romania (from which Moldavia was annexed after the war). The Georgian Orthodox Church and the Armenian Apostolic Church, dating from the third and fifth centuries respectively, have entirely distinctive histories.

Even within the three Slavic lands, the situation is complex. Already controversial national and religious issues are being exploited for both ecclesiastical and state political ends. There is a widespread impression that 1988 marks the millennium of the Russian Orthodox Church alone, since all the official celebrations announced at the time of writing are to take place under its auspices. This impression is in the interests of both that church and the Soviet state. The main group disaffected by it are the Ukrainians. Both Orthodox and Catholics are strongly represented in Ukraine, indeed, the largest proportion of communities of all the major churches is to be found here. Many Ukrainians (like citizens of other non-Russian republics in the U.S.S.R.) resent rule from Moscow, the stifling of their culture and traditions and overt Russification. There are those Ukrainian Orthodox who resent being compelled to be a part of the Russian Orthodox Church. Why can they not have their own independent church—like the much smaller Georgian Orthodox Church? Some feel that the distinctively Kievan traditions of their church are being submerged—deliberately—in a sea of Russian-ness. The problem is much more acute in the case of the Ukrainian Greek Catholics (often called Uniates), who worship in the Orthodox manner but are, since the sixteenth century, Catholics loyal to Rome. They are outlawed in the Soviet Union, having been forcibly obliged to 'rejoin' the Russian Orthodox Church in 1946. The Russian Orthodox regard the Uniates simply as lapsed Orthodox, and therefore are as eager to see them return to the fold as is the Soviet State, which suppressed them as part of its campaign against Ukrainian nationalism. This is a rare, perhaps unique, incidence of the policies of the Moscow Patriarchate and the Soviet régime coinciding. Both Ukrainian groups have widespread and vocal émigré communities to press their claims. Many of these simply argue for the Ukrainian claim to the millennium to be recognized as being equally valid as that of the Russian Church, though some go farther and say that Russia does not derive its origins from Kievan Rus' and therefore the Russian Church has no right to celebrate the Millennium at all.⁴

A recent development, due to *glasnost*, has been an open demand for legalization of the Ukrainian Catholic Church, made in a *samizdat* document by three named bishops who until it appeared were not known to exist.⁵ For a few years previously the demand had been voiced in the *samizdat Chronicle of the Ukrainian Catholic Church*⁶ by Iosyp Terelya, a colourful and charismatic lay leader imprisoned

nine times for his activities, whose emigration last year may well do more to bring his church's situation to western attention.

Byelorussia also has both Catholic and Orthodox communities, but the Catholics derive their origin from Poland and have always been loyal to Rome, so 1988 is not an anniversary for them. The Byelorussian Orthodox, though in a similar position to the Ukrainian Orthodox, are not known to have given any sign that they object to functioning much like any other diocese of the Russian Orthodox Church, and will join in the celebrations organized by the Moscow Patriarchate.

This year is not, strictly speaking, an anniversary for the Baptists, the largest evangelical group, who owe their origins to western missionaries a century or so ago. But they see it as a significant event for their country, to be celebrated in an appropriate manner.

The position of the churches

Though there are variations in policy towards different religions and denominations, particularly where national issues are concerned, a few broad generalizations can be made about those Orthodox, Catholics and Baptists who will celebrate the Millennium this year. All have managed to consolidate their position to some extent since the war, following the massive and sustained anti-religious persecution of the 1920s and 1930s. It is difficult to imagine an anti-religious campaign like Khrushchev's taking place today. And yet the legal basis for church life is just the same as it was under Khrushchev—indeed, as it was under Stalin. Improvements which have taken place since are all *de facto*, not *de jure*. All religious bodies are governed by the Law on Religious Associations, passed in 1929 and revised, but not substantially, in 1975. It is the rumoured review of this law, mentioned above, which could be so important for the future of the churches. To summarize, its basic provision is to confine religious life to worship only. Any involvement of churches in everyday life is explicitly prohibited. Furthermore, worship (or 'performance of a cult' as it is termed) may take place only within the four walls of a registered church, synagogue or mosque. 'Registered' means given permission to function by the Council of Religious Affairs (C.R.A.), based in Moscow. If the C.R.A. refuses permission to open a church, there is no other court of appeal. This means that the believer's sole legal right, the right to worship, can be removed at the stroke of a bureaucrat's pen. And there is in fact a totally inadequate number of churches open for all those who wish to worship. Some communities of Orthodox believers have been trying for twenty five years to reopen churches closed by Khrushchev.⁷ Khrushchev was repudiated by his successors, but they did not re-open the more than ten thousand churches which he closed over five years.

Accurate statistics are not published as a matter of state policy, but I estimate that there are no more than six and a half thousand open Orthodox churches in the U.S.S.R. for perhaps as many as fifty million worshippers or would-be worshippers.⁸ And many of these are small village churches which may have only one service a month. This is perhaps the most striking way in which the state limits the activities of the church. The Baptists are far better off, with over five thousand open churches for a total of well over three million worshippers.⁹ This may be an attempt by the state to allow more freedom to the Baptist community at the expense of the much larger Orthodox one, but a more important factor is the need to sap the vitality of the unregistered and therefore illegal reform Baptist church (the Council of Churches) by promoting the interests of the registered, officially-recognized Baptists (the All-Union Council).

There is a similar picture of strict state control in other areas of church life. Trainees for the priesthood in the Catholic and Orthodox churches are limited to a number which will maintain the present number of priests but not increase it. The Baptists still have only a correspondence course for theological training, despite years of pleading for the opening of a seminary.¹⁰ The Orthodox have nine monasteries and ten convents, but none of them is east of Moscow, and all are restricted in admitting novices. Some still suffer brutal treatment, of monastics and pilgrims alike.¹¹ The Catholics have no monasteries, and not even a regular journal. The Moscow Patriarchate has a well-equipped, purpose-built new publishing centre in Moscow, but its output is still limited by its annual paper allocation from the state. There is no shortage of the faithful, no shortage of believers willing to do the work, of believers ready to give sacrificially—as the heroic efforts at the Danilov monastery have shown—but there are the ubiquitous C.R.A. representatives breathing down the neck of every pastor, priest and bishop in the land, anxious to see that they do not get carried away, that they do not exceed the unwritten rules on church life as well as the already restrictive Law on Religious Associations, above all, that they do not cause their local C.R.A. bureaucrat to be called into question by his superiors.

The fact that the C.R.A. sees it as its duty to limit church life was made crystal clear in a copy of its annual report for 1974 to the Central Committee of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union which was 'leaked' to the West.¹² There has been plenty of evidence since then to demonstrate that its conception of its rôle has not changed, at least until recently.

But this is not the whole story. The vitality of the faith in the U.S.S.R. has not dimmed—quite the opposite. Most of the major churches are at least maintaining their numbers, and some appear to be growing. The power of the Holy Spirit to break through all barriers erected by man can scarcely ever before have been

demonstrated so convincingly. Talk of a religious 'revival' in the U.S.S.R. is premature: this is no mass movement, no overnight wave of conversions. But the number of people, especially the educated urban youth, seeking for the truth, seeking for something to make life worth living, and finding it in Christ, in the Church, must surely be one of the most significant developments anywhere in Christendom today.¹³ Many powerful individual testimonies convince one that the phenomenon is unstoppable.¹⁴

Sadly, however, this has led to some rather glib reactions from some western commentators. It is all too easy to assume that the numbers of young new converts mean that the subservience of church leaders since the 1920s has been vindicated, that the 'influence' and even 'power' of the Orthodox Church in particular is reasserting itself, and that the 'persecution' of a handful of believers (and even that remains a dubious concept in the eyes of some) has virtually ceased and will soon do so altogether.¹⁵ Already some new converts to Orthodoxy have begun writing in some alarm in *samizdat* to the effect that because there is a renaissance in their church, we should not assume that all their problems are over. The leadership is still the captive of the state, still a brake on all the ministries in which young Orthodox intellectuals wish to engage. Growth of interest in Orthodoxy, they say, has taken place despite the leaders of the Moscow Patriarchate, not because of them. Even those bishops who might wish to assist them know that they are not free to do much, and even that must be behind the scenes. 'Remember,' the *samizdat* writers declared, in an appeal to western Christians, 'how long your Renaissance was in preparation before it could be written with a capital letter'.¹⁶

Developments under Gorbachev

Though policy on religion has not changed, other policy changes not specifically directed at believers have had an effect on them. There are three particular policy changes which, to widely varying degrees, have affected their lives.

The first is the release of religious prisoners, mentioned above. This was not due to a change in the official attitude towards religious prisoners, but to a change in the policy on dissent. Those prisoners of conscience, including religious prisoners, who were released before the end of their sentences in the first few months of 1987 had nearly all been sentenced for either 'anti-Soviet slander' or 'anti-Soviet agitation and propaganda'—the latter being a more serious offence with much harsher penalties. Many of these people had originally been sentenced for expressing in *samizdat* opinions which had begun to be published officially in the Soviet press.¹⁷ Believers sentenced for these 'offences' were not necessarily politically motivated: it was possible to be imprisoned for circulating writings with a solely

Christian motivation. Towards the end of the year, a small number of prisoners sentenced for religious offences were released early. However, the hopes aroused by both the amnesty to mark the seventieth anniversary of the 1917 revolution, and later by Karchev's unprecedented promise in the U.S.A.,¹⁸ were dashed. There was no reappraisal of the status of religious prisoners as such. (Though the release of all Jewish prisoners before the end of the year was a welcome development.) The largest single category of prisoners remaining at the time of writing is Baptists belonging to unregistered churches. Their release will presumably have to await the eventual adoption of a new policy on registration of churches. However, there was a further sign of hope: Keston College knows of scarcely any new arrests of religious prisoners since before the end of 1986.

The most dramatic of Gorbachev's new policies has been *glasnost*. Few would have predicted some of the opinions published in the Soviet press during 1987, be it in the realm of economics, where more radical thinkers even suggested that a measure of unemployment might have to be found acceptable, or in the case of the war in Afghanistan, where the veil of silence over casualties and the traumatic experiences of conscripts was finally lifted, or, most strikingly, in the arts, where the announcement that Boris Pasternak's *Doctor Zhivago* would at last be published was only one highlight as a number of creative artists ventured to express long-stifled views. There was no similar dramatic breakthrough where religion was concerned, but nonetheless it was possible to express, to some extent, a positive attitude towards religion. For example, an atheist writer, I. Kryvelev, in an article in the Young Communist newspaper *Komsomolskaya Pravda*, criticized some novelists who include religious motifs in their work. One was the leading writer Chinghiz Aitmatov, whose novel *The Scaffold*, published in the latter part of 1986, caused considerable comment. It has as its central character a young man who has been expelled from a seminary but continues his search for God. In his article, entitled 'Flirting with goddie', Kryvelev accuses Aitmatov of 'farming out morality to religion'—suggesting that religion is necessary to establish moral foundations. Kryvelev argues that only an atheist outlook can form the basis for a real morality.¹⁹ Kryvelev's article was predictable and orthodox—but a few months later he was criticized in his turn. The poet Yevgeni Yevtushenko, the establishment's 'tame dissident', spoke out in defence of Aitmatov and others who asserted that religion had a place in life. Yevtushenko asserted that it was not atheism but culture that was the source of morality. 'Nowhere in our laws,' he wrote, 'is it stated that the atheism is inseparable from the state. Atheism should be one of the manifestations of the freedoms of our state, as should the profession of faith, but it should not be enforced.'²⁰ This incident suggests that the anti-religionists have not fallen silent, or retracted

their views, but that alternative views can now be published alongside theirs. This is backed up by a survey of the Soviet press in general. Anti-religious propaganda is as strong as ever (and attacks on organizations like Keston College are as virulent as ever, especially on television, and perhaps even more frequent), but the anti-religious view of life can now, it appears, be challenged. For example, Academician Dmitri Likhachev, a leading philologist and chairman of the board of the U.S.S.R. Cultural Foundation (who visited Britain last December), sharply criticized attitudes to the church in an article in the leading weekly literary newspaper, *Literaturnaya gazeta*, last autumn. He called for 'the full, effective separation of church and state' and complained that the Council for Religious Affairs had interfered in church affairs 'not too long ago . . . very actively'. He questioned whether it was really necessary to limit the right of the church to publish religious literature.²¹

An unprecedented example of *glasnost'* concerning the church appeared in August 1987 in *Moscow News*, a periodical published chiefly though not exclusively for foreign consumption, which has published some of the most openly critical articles to have appeared recently in the Soviet press. The journalist Alexander Nezhny investigated attempts by Orthodox Christians in the town of Kirov to open a church. Nezhny condemned the destruction and closure of churches in the 1960s, described the fruitless though quite legal struggle of believers to reopen churches, and criticized local officials who had obstructed them.²² Shortly afterwards it was announced that a church would be open in Kirov, and also another in a nearby town.²³ There is a sad irony to this tale. In the 1960s, the very same story was reported in *samizdat* by a retired schoolteacher from the area, Boris Talantov. He was accused of falsifying facts and arrested. Now he is vindicated—but too late. He died in a labour camp in 1971.²⁴

There is a further twist to Nezhny's article. The villains of the piece are the local party bosses who refused to pay attention to the believers—and it is officials and bureaucrats like this who, fearful for their jobs, are the main obstacle to Gorbachev's reforms. Or so Gorbachev himself keeps saying. This attack on Kirov officials could well be part of a campaign to undermine the entrenched power of local officials generally.

The major reform Gorbachev has introduced, *perestroika* (restructuring) has to do with the economy, and therefore affects the churches less than any of the other changes. Reforming the economy is however, the key to all the other changes, and Gorbachev will stand or fall by its success. *Glasnost'* is only a means to the end of *perestroika*. The churches are totally excluded from the economic arena—but individual believers are workers, involved in the process of production, and therefore, in the new climate, their opinion

supposedly counts for something. What does it mean if a church leader says that believers support *perestroika*? Is the church simply a Vicar of Bray, trailing along behind the secular leaders, with nothing new of its own to add? Perhaps. But there is a subtle undertone to such a statement, namely that believers have as much right to support *perestroika* as anyone else does. A believer's opinion, by implication, is of equal value to anyone else's. In a society where believers have for decades been systematically marginalized, excluded from public debate and treated as second-class citizens, such an assertion could be significant. This was made plain by one of the senior Orthodox hierarchs, Metropolitan Alexi of Leningrad, in an interview in *Moscow News* in August 1987. Besides affirming believers' support for *perestroika*, he said: '... the mature years even of the aged members of the Church passed under the Soviet government. They have been brought up by Soviet power and are Soviet people, citizens of the U.S.S.R. in the full sense of the word. A large number of believers are labour and war veterans, and the great majority of them are conscientious and honest workers. Therefore, it is particularly sad when, sometimes, at a local level, and running counter to the basic principles of our socialist state of the people, they are treated as "second-rate" people and looked at with a certain suspicion and watchfulness.'²⁵ This unequivocal statement flies in the face of countless earlier statements by hierarchs to the effect that believers have found their place in Soviet society and are fully accepted as members of it. *Perestroika* may turn out to be a back door by which believers can establish some kind of presence, however marginal, in Soviet life.

As always, of course, there is an obverse side to the picture. This is simply that Gorbachev, as he keeps reminding us, needs all the support he can muster. Even believers, it seems, are acceptable in this rôle, at least for the present. This no doubt underlay Gorbachev's personal appeal to Metropolitan Alexei, at a Kremlin reception, for the church's support for his internal reforms.²⁶ But if Gorbachev did succeed in his overall objective, which is to make communism work, what would the church's rôle be then? As yet, no-one has any convincing answers. Certainly there are hints, no more, that some of Gorbachev's advisers may be prepared to consider that religion is here to stay. They have to recognize that both outright persecution and state limitation of church life have failed to halt the growth of faith. Will they be able to tolerate a vigorous, independently-minded church in their vision of the future? For the present, that can be only a matter for hope and prayer.

What do believers want?

What would constitute true religious freedom? What changes do believers want? It needs to be said that the general attitude among

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believers to Gorbachev's changes is one of uncertainty, even cynicism. There are those who think it is a facade, others who say they have seen it all before (Khrushchev's 'thaw'), others who cannot believe that Gorbachev can succeed. Not many have been willing to stick their heads above the parapet to say what is really needed, for fear that those heads could soon be chopped off again, perhaps by Gorbachev's successors. But, as always, there are a handful willing to take a risk and make their views known. Some wrote open letters to Gorbachev stating what exactly believers wanted, and these are worth quoting because they represent the response to the new situation of the people directly concerned. The first open letter addressed to Gorbachev was dated 23 May 1987 and signed by nine leading Orthodox activists. While welcoming the early release of some prisoners of conscience, the signatories appealed for those still imprisoned to be released as well, citing some especially serious cases by name (by the end of the year, half of these had been released and half were still imprisoned). They set out clearly the way in which Soviet laws hampered believers, highlighting the issue of charitable activity, which is forbidden by Soviet law:

Those who see behind every manifestation of religious life . . . the trace of prejudices, obsolete ideas and illusions . . . have of course a complete right to hold these views and to express them freely. But such an attitude to religion cannot be the basis for state legislation regulating the internal life of the Church. Surely such a mighty state can grant a section of its citizens—believers—the right not only to confess their faith, but also to live by their faith. We profess a religion of love, for it has been said to us: 'Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy mind . . . Thou shalt love thy neighbour as thyself' (Matthew 22, 37–39). On these two commandments, in the words of Christ, hang all the law and the prophets, that is, the very essence of spiritual life. This law is indivisible: one part cannot be separated from the other. But everywhere where love to one's neighbour could express itself in a concrete moral action, it impales itself upon the horns of the law that haunts it. Of course, the right to love one's neighbour cannot be taken away from an individual person, but by what sophistry can one justify the fact that it is taken away from a church community, or the Church as an institution?²⁷

Another open letter²⁸ published on 11 September 1987 included some of the same signatories, but was also signed by leading members of several other denominations. This letter listed eleven main areas of concern to believers, and made some far-reaching requests. The full text is given in the footnotes.²⁹ The main requests were as follows: to grant the church and religious societies the status of a juridical person; to revoke the decree on the nationalization of all church property;

to change the Soviet Constitution so that it proclaims anti-religious and religious propaganda to be equal;
to revoke the 1929 decree by which any charitable activities of the church are forbidden;
to grant the church full freedom in carrying out religious teaching and the spreading of dogma, including outside places set aside for services;
not to hinder the activities of the church in the sphere of education and upbringing, including that of minors;
to grant the church and religious associations the right of public organizations in the Soviet Union, including nominating deputies in local and central organs of power;
to ensure that the new legislation provides a guarantee of independence of religious organizations and banning of arbitrary interference by the state in church affairs;
not to hinder the development of free contacts of the church and believers with international religious centres, public bodies and individual believers from abroad;
all citizens who, through their religious convictions, cannot take up arms, be offered an alternative service instead of the obligatory service in the Soviet army;
not to hinder the activities of Bible societies on Soviet territory.

There is not space here to comment on the significance of all these points, but it is worth noting the enormous distance which any further reforms will have to cover before they are fully met. They cover both issues relating to the inner life of the church—such as teaching children, outreach and free provision of Scriptures, where believers' concern over the restrictions at present in force will be readily understood by Christians throughout the world—and also the church's involvement in the life of society, where the significance of some of the above points is less obvious. The second demand, for example, included a plea for such items as icons, vestments etc., forcibly removed from the church in the past to be returned, as well as books. The law at present forbids any books to be kept in a church building other than those necessary to conduct services. The ninth point is a request for the church itself, and individual members of it, to be able to choose with which foreigners they wish to associate, rather than being obliged, as at present, to have links only with those foreigners and foreign organizations of which the state approves.

Any assessment of the position of believers in the Soviet Union must take all these points into account. These are the signs of possible change to watch for as the splendid Millennium celebrations in June take place. And even more important, these are the signs to watch for once the celebrations are over, the foreign guests and journalists depart, and the international spotlight moves on to some other scene.

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That is when Soviet believers will find out what the new state of affairs really has to offer them.

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NOTES

- 1 For further details on the celebrations, see 'Preparations for the Official Celebrations in 1988 of the Millennium of the Baptism of Kievan Rus', Jane Ellis, *Religion in Communist Lands* Vol. 15 No. 2, 1987, pp. 195-99.
- 2 For more details on the Danilov Monastery, see 'Return of the Danilov Monastery to the Russian Orthodox Church', Jane Ellis *ibid.*, Vol. 14 No. 2, 1986, pp. 216-18.
- 3 *Keston News Service* No. 282, 20.8.87, pp. 2-3.
- 4 The Ukrainian situation with regard to the Millennium is described in 'The Millennium: a Ukrainian Perspective', Andrew Sorokowski, *Religion in Communist Lands* Vol. 15 No. 3, 1987, pp. 257-63.
- 5 *Keston News Service* Nos. 247, 2.4.86, p. 2; 286, 22.10.87, p. 5.
- 6 *Ibid.* No. 250, 15.5.86, p. 5.
- 7 *Samizdat* documentation of several cases is reviewed in *The Russian Orthodox Church: A Contemporary History*, Jane Ellis, Croom Helm, Beckenham, Kent, 1986, pp. 24-27.
- 8 Fifty million appears to be the best round-figure estimate that can be made; the problem of estimating numbers of Orthodox (and other) believers in the U.S.S.R. is described in *ibid.*, pp. 173-77.
- 9 These figures are the ones habitually quoted by Soviet Baptists. Though it is possible that both may be inflated, the ratio of churches to believers still appears to be much higher than for the Orthodox.
- 10 *Soviet Evangelicals Since World War II*, Walter Sawatsky, Herald Press, Kitchener, Ontario, 1981, p. 330.
- 11 The monasteries especially affected are those of Pochayev and Pskov. *Samizdat* reports of brutality are summarized in Ellis, *op. cit.*, pp. 139-44.
- 12 English translation in *Religion in Communist-Dominated Areas*, Vol. XIX, Nos. 9, 10 and 11, 1980; Vol. XX, Nos. 1, 2 and 3, 1981, Nos. 4, 5 and 6, 1981.
- 13 A good analysis of this is *Prikhodyashchiye v tserkov* (Churchgoers), Vladimir Zelinsky, La Presse Libre, Paris, 1982 (no English translation available). Other *samizdat* is discussed in Ellis, *op. cit.*, Part II.
- 14 See especially *Talking About God is Dangerous*, Tatyana Goricheva, S.C.M. Press, London, 1986.
- 15 See, for example, Michael Binyon, 'Salving the Soul of Russia', *Sunday Times* Colour Supplement, 8 January 1983, republished in a revised form in *Life in Russia*, Hamish Hamilton, London, 1983, pp. 232-36. Another example was the two-part N.B.C. film documentary 'The Church of the Russians', narrated by Rev. Bruce Rigdon and screened in the U.S.A. on 24 June and 1 July 1983. For further comments, see *Keston News Service* Nos. 204, 19.7.84, and 205, 2.8.84.
- 16 'A Declaration of Need and a Call to Prayer', *Samizdat* appeal dating from late 1986, copy in Keston College archive. For an analysis of the so-called religious renaissance in the U.S.S.R., see 'The Religious Renaissance: Myth or Reality', Jane Ellis, in *Candle in the Wind* (forthcoming in U.S.A.).
- 17 The best example of this is Academician Andrei Sakharov, exiled to Gorky but readmitted to his home in Moscow early in 1987 and permitted to attend an international peace conference in Moscow shortly thereafter.
- 18 During a meeting with Senator Richard Lugar on 31 August 1987, Konstantin Kharchev admitted that in the past in the U.S.S.R. there had been 'very many mistakes with regard to religion on the side of the leaders . . .'. He promised that

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'all prisoners of faith' would be released by the following November. This was a startling admission, since the Soviets had previously always denied that there were any 'prisoners of faith'—indeed, Kharchev himself had said this a few days earlier in the same visit.

- 19 'Flirting with goddie' (*Koketnichaya s bozhen'koi*), I. Kryvelev, *Komsomol'skaya pravda*, 30 July 1986.
- 20 'The source of morality is culture' (*Istochnik npravstvennosti—Kultura*) Yevgeni Yevtushenko, *Komsomol'skaya pravda*, 10 December 1986.
- 21 *Literaturnaya gazeta*, 9 September 1987.
- 22 *Moscow News* No. 33, 16.8.87.
- 23 *Ibid.* No. 43, 25.10.87.
- 24 *Patriarch and Prophets*, Michael Bourdeaux, Mowbrays, London & Oxford, 1975, pp. 125–52.
- 25 'There are No Insoluble Contradictions!', *Moscow News* No. 38, August 1987.
- 26 'Will There Be Changes?' ('*Budut li peremeni?*'), Boris Medem, *Russkaya mysl* (*La Pensée Russe*), Paris, 19.6.87, p. 7.
- 27 Open letter to General Secretary of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union, M.S. Gorbachev, from Fr. Gleb Yakunin and eight others, 23 May 1987, *Russkaya mysl* 5.6.87, p. 6.
- 28 *Keston News Service* No. 284, 24.9.87, pp. 21–22.
- 29 The text of an Open Letter to M.S. Gorbachev, 11 September 1987:

A press conference took place in Moscow on 11 September 1987, at which a group of leading Christians made a series of suggestions of changes they would like to see in the legal situation of churches and religious groups in the Soviet Union. A detailed letter, addressed to Andrei Gromyko, Chairman of the Presidium of the Supreme Soviet, and the Communist Party General Secretary Mikhail Gorbachev, was made public, which listed eleven main areas of concern.

This open letter has been signed so far by thirty two Christians in the Soviet Union from many denominations. Among the Orthodox signatories are Fr. Vladimir Shibayev (c.f. Shibayev above), Alexander Ogorodnikov and Valeri Senderov, all from Moscow, and Mikhail Bombin from Riga. Among the Lutherans are a group from the newly-formed religious rights group 'Rebirth and Renewal' in Latvia, among them Dean Modris Plate and the former rector of the Lutheran seminary Roberts Akmentins, who was recently removed from his post by the Lutheran Consistory because of his defence of the rights of believers. The Catholic signatories are Lithuanian nun Nijole Sadunaite and Moscow Catholic Vladimir Albrekht. Paruir Airikyan from the Armenian Apostolic Church has added his name to the letter. The collection of signatures is continuing.

The text of the letter reads as follows:

To the Chairman of the Presidium of the Supreme Soviet of the U.S.S.R.,
Andrei Andreyevich Gromyko:

To the Member of the Presidium of the Supreme Soviet, the General Secretary of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union, Mikhail Sergeyeovich Gorbachev:

In our time, when great changes are taking place in the social life of our country, the problem of the position of the Christian Church stands out in all its acuteness as a matter of fundamental principle. This problem demands a serious and thorough investigation, not only on the part of the Church but also on the part of the state and society. Today, on the eve of its millennium, we are unable not to feel our belonging to, and our responsibility towards the Christian culture of the past. This feeling is that much deeper in the face of the rise of religious consciousness in the country. We are convinced that this is not accidental, but expresses the real needs of the spiritual development of society. For this reason we, both Orthodox Christians and members of other denominations, moved by the duty of service to God and country, address ourselves to you with this Open Letter.

Churchman

In accordance with the new law of 30 June 1987, we are taking up the opportunity to present for public discussion the question of the position of the Christian Church in the U.S.S.R. and also the changes which have been proposed in the legislation on religion and religious bodies. Unfortunately the situation is complicated today by the fact that the Church is practically unable to play any real part in the life of the nation. Legally separated from the state, the Church is in reality also separated from society. According to Article 6 of the constitution of the U.S.S.R., the governing and directing force of Soviet society is the Communist Party of the Soviet Union, which is atheistic in its ideology. Therefore the Church can fulfil its extremely important, and scarcely disputed, rôle of spiritual leadership for believers only with great difficulty. Such a situation gives us grounds to outline the main problems concerning the Church's position, which in our opinion ought to find a solution in the new legislation on religion and religious groups.

First of all, the new legislation ought to be drafted in accordance with the international legal Conventions accepted by the Soviet Union, including the Convention on Civil and Political Rights and the Final Act of the Helsinki Conference on Security and Co-operation in Europe. The contents of the relevant sections of these documents creates adequate conditions for (the free development of) the religious life of our country and will remove the sharpness of the contradictions which have arisen at the present time between believers and the state. The new legislation ought to be linked to relevant changes to the Criminal Code of the Russian Federation (Articles 70, 142, 190–191, and 227), along with the corresponding Articles of the Criminal Codes of the other republics, which in the past have not infrequently been used to persecute religious activity and the preaching of religion. It is intolerable that a man should be sent to prison merely on the basis of something he has said. The new legislation must also be accompanied by corresponding changes in trial procedures. The law must absolutely guarantee that an open trial must always be open in fact, that any document relating to the trial must always be available to the interested parties, and that any accused person should have the right to employ the services of a barrister from the moment the accusation, in its very first form, is mounted against him.

The new legislation ought to provide for guarantees against the use of humiliating and not infrequently fatal procedures of judicial and psychiatric expertise in relation to believers. Formerly, healthy people were not infrequently arrested and consigned to compulsory hospitalization and medical care as socially dangerous, mentally ill people on account of their religious beliefs. We would add the following specific changes (which we would like to see) in the legislation on religion and religious groups:

1. To grant the church and religious societies the status of a juridical person.
2. To revoke the decree on the nationalisation of all church property. This must manifest itself in the free return of all property and valuables which historically belong to the church and religious societies: i.e. buildings, church-plate and icons, relics, vestments and other objects belonging to the church, and also books of holy scriptures and other religious and philosophical literature.
3. To change article 52 of the Soviet constitution in such a way that it proclaims both anti-religious and religious propoganda as being equal—likewise with religious and anti-religious organisations.
4. To revoke the decree of 8 April 1929 on religious associations, in which any charitable activities of the church and religious societies are forbidden. To allow the creation of charitable bodies within the framework of the church, with the purpose of rendering material help to the needy from voluntary donations. Not to prevent a free collection of funds for charitable aims. To allow and guarantee in practice visits by priests to places of imprisonment and

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- hospitals, both at the request of believers and their relatives and at the wish of those priests. Not to hinder the performance of religious rites in prisons and hospitals. To allow believers who are serving sentences in places of confinement to wear crosses and other religious symbols and also to have religious literature. To allow them confession and spiritual talks with priests.
5. To grant the church full freedom in carrying out religious teaching and the spreading of dogma, including outside places set aside for services. To grant the church the possibility to use the mass media, to disseminate freely its own publications on the basis of agreements with state organisations. To allow the creation of independent religious printers and publishing houses and not to hinder the publication and spreading of independent bulletins on religious life in the Soviet Union. To allow the creation of open public libraries and reading rooms for religious literature.
 6. Not to hinder the activities of the church in the sphere of education and upbringing, including that of minors. To allow the church to organize public Sunday schools and other religious educational institutions for children, with their agreement and the agreement of their parents. All believers, including children, must have the right not to go to work or place of study on special religious days, as practised in almost every country of the world.
 7. To grant the church and religious associations the right of public organisations in the Soviet Union, including nominating deputies in local and central organs of power. Also the right to own property and other means, and to dispose of them. To grant a greater possibility for church and religious associations to participate in the public life of the country: in particular, to allow their participation in the work of administrative commissions of local authorities, medical institutions, anti-alcohol societies and other social and Soviet organisations.
 8. That the new legislation provide a guarantee of independence of religious organisations and the banning of arbitrary interference by the state in church affairs. To protect the church from discrimination in taxation and to underline the voluntary nature of participation of the church in state funds, often broken in practice.
 9. Not to hinder the development of free contacts of the church and believers with international religious centres, public bodies and individual believers from abroad. To secure the free implementation of the right to conduct pilgrimages to holy places outside the Soviet Union. To allow believers to emigrate freely from the Soviet Union on religious grounds.
 10. As regards understanding the needs of other faiths, members of the Russian Orthodox Church insist that all citizens who, through their religious convictions, cannot take up arms are offered an alternative service, instead of the obligatory service in the Soviet army. We express the confidence that many of these requests which we have outlined here concern not only the Russian Orthodox Church, but other faiths as well.
 11. Not to hinder the activities of Bible societies on Soviet territory and to provide the legal guarantee of such activity.