

# Editorial

Armenians, like Jews, are spread throughout the world. The only part of their original territory that remains Armenian is now part of the Soviet Union. And half the Soviet Armenians live outside Armenia. But they are intensely conscious of their nationality. And, for good or bad, their common bond is their national church.

The holocaust of one-third of all Armenians between 1895 and 1920 was the terrible climax of Turkish domination of most of their national territory. After the Bolshevik takeover in 1920, those Armenians who survived in that part of Armenia which was under Russian rule were effectively protected from a continuation of the massacres. Therefore they are basically loyal to the Soviet government, but remain Armenians first and foremost.

The Armenian Church in the Soviet Union is the subject of an article in this issue of *RCL* (see pp. 238–42). The author, Eduard Oganessyan, an Armenian cybernetician who emigrated from Soviet Armenia in 1972, appears to have begun to search for a religious faith while still in the USSR. He describes what he considers to be a genuine revival of religious belief in Armenia and contrasts it to a revival of interest in Armenian religious rituals. The first he judges to be “true religion”, but the second to be “false religion”. Faith he believes should not depend on such outward forms of church life as liturgies, sermons, confessions, requiems and buildings. Unfortunately in his eyes that is exactly the kind of religion which has been promoted by the Armenian Church: because of its link with Armenian history and culture, the Armenian Church has been reduced to performing merely a series of rituals which have become national traditions rather than a genuine profession of faith. And when these “external manifestations of the faith” were destroyed by the Soviet regime under Stalin, nothing of the Church’s inner life was left, or so he claims.

But was it as simple as that? The secrets of the human heart and the extent of a person’s faith defy definition and calculation. How is one to judge whether the Church’s faith in Armenia was destroyed under Stalinism? We know that this was not true in the cases of the Russian Orthodox Church, the Baptist Church and the Lithuanian Catholic Church in the Soviet Union. And today, are not “external manifestations of the faith” sometimes a means of nurturing genuine faith? The blocks of stone carved with a cross – the *khachkars* – which are found by tourists visiting Armenia to be often blackened with candle smoke, may have been the object of a genuine veneration for the crucifixion. But Mr Oganessyan thinks otherwise. Most of those who baptize their children, marry in church and have requiems said for the dead, do this not because they are

believers "but because these sacraments have become for them national traditions".

A more favourable view of the present-day Armenian Church in the Soviet Union is taken by Raymond Oppenheim (see pp. 242-3). The *modus vivendi* achieved by the Catholics with the Soviet State has enabled the Armenian Church to have more freedom for the expression of its life than most other religious denominations in the USSR. Such an achievement in the Soviet context should not be underestimated.

A genuine revival of Christian faith appears to be taking place, in Mr Oganessyan's view, outside the Armenian Church among the young intelligentsia. Although he rejects "external manifestations of the faith" as inessential, it is such "externals" – in this case Armenian art, music, architecture, and literature – which are leading young Armenians to search for answers to religious questions. The study of science, too, is leading some young Armenians to religious faith, and Mr Oganessyan writes here presumably from personal experience.

Another article in this issue of *RCL* (pp. 232-7) vividly describes the religious awakening which is affecting many young members of Russian society. Anatoli Levitin, a well-known Russian Orthodox layman and prolific writer on the Russian Orthodox Church, writes in his article, "Religion and Soviet Youth", that "Russian youth, awakening from its long sleep, is searching, . . . it has set out upon a journey". The reason for this revival, which is drawing many to the Russian Orthodox Church and many to the Russian sects, is the general disillusionment with Marxism-Leninism in the USSR. The infallibility of Soviet ideology received a "fatal blow" when Stalinism was attacked officially in 1956 at the 20th Party Congress. The ideological vacuum which resulted has led some to political activity (in, for example, the Democratic Movement) and many to religious faith. "This milieu of the young Soviet intelligentsia is most receptive to religion. You can sense religious ideas in the air when you are with these youngsters, so that sometimes only the gentlest of nudges is needed to bring someone to faith" (p. 235). Many of these young people, like Eduard Oganessyan's contemporaries, started their search by reading religious literature, and Levitin describes one young acquaintance who, through reading the work of Tolstoy became interested in Russian Orthodox theology, joined the Orthodox Church and eventually entered a seminary. "He is by no means unique," states Levitin, "I have met several hundred like him."

Despite sixty-two years of Soviet rule with its state education which gives much time to atheist indoctrination, Soviet youth has not been forever put to sleep. On the contrary, insists Levitin, "The night is over. The sleepers are waking up."