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Christianity in Soviet Russia (Part One)

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Foreword

Recent events in Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union have re-awakened interest in the churches which until recently suffered persecution in those countries. Nowhere has this persecution endured longer, or been more severe, than in the Soviet Union. Yet curiously, the history and nature of the Church in that country is little understood in the West. There have been many learned studies and books published on the subject, but it is difficult to find a short digest, written with the non-specialist in mind, which will help the interested reader to put in their place the various movements and splinter-groups which are now reappearing after many decades of suppression. In two articles, *Churchman* will offer its readers a short history and analysis of Christianity in Soviet Russia. The first will cover the period from the revolution to the outbreak of the Second World War, with an introduction to the earlier period. The second will concentrate on the period from the outbreak of war till the present, with special attention being given to the most recent events.

Introduction (988–1917)

The religious history of Russia begins with the conversion of Vladimir, Prince of Kiev, to Christianity in 988. This event followed a pattern common to the barbarian tribes of Northern Europe, according to which the baptism of the ruler became the signal for the conversion of the entire tribe. Russian Christianity therefore began as a state religion, a position which it was to occupy for nearly a thousand years. But unlike the embryonic nation-states of Western Europe, which acknowledged the spiritual and temporal jurisdiction of the Roman Papacy, Vladimir acceded to the Eastern Orthodox form of Christianity, in which the church was an organic part of the state and not supreme over it.

Orthodoxy reached the Russians *via* Bulgaria, whose missionaries brought their own language with them. Church Slavonic, as this language came to be called, became the official language of both church and state. It was quite close to the Russian vernacular, but it was also heavily influenced by Greek, and most of its literature consisted of translations from that language. Russian Christianity thus had little scope for intellectual originality, a trait which in any case was not held in high esteem by the Byzantines. From the

beginning, its genius was more mystical than philosophical, in common with the general culture of the Orthodox world. Among the more specifically Russian (or Slavonic) features was an aversion to the death penalty, a feeling which was so deep and long-lasting that it continued to influence even Lenin, after the October Revolution.¹

In ecclesiastical [canon] law, Russia remained tied to the mother church of Constantinople until the fifteenth century. The break came when Isidore, the Greek Metropolitan [Bishop] of Kiev voted, along with the Greek church, for union with Rome at the Council of Florence (1439). When Isidore returned to Kiev he was disowned (as were the Greek signatories when they returned to Constantinople), and from 1444 the Russian church elected its own metropolitan. After Constantinople fell to the Turks (29 May 1453), an event widely regarded in Russia, as elsewhere, as a punishment for the 'apostasy' of Florence, Russia was the only independent Orthodox country in the world. As such, it became a rallying point for Orthodox everywhere, and the Princes of Moscow began to adopt the customs of Imperial Byzantium, the New Rome. Moscow was claimed to be the 'Third Rome', the last and greatest of the imperial Christian cities. In 1472 the Muscovite prince Ivan III married Sophia, niece of the last Byzantine emperor, and took on the imperial trappings—the double-headed eagle, the imperial crown and the title of Tsar [Caesar]. The church recognized this officially in 1501, and charged Ivan with responsibility for the 'peace and salvation of all Orthodox Christendom'.² This charge was reinforced in a famous sermon, preached by the monk Philotheus of Pskov, before Tsar Vassily III in 1511, a statement which set the course for future events.

Philotheus maintained that the state was the guardian of the church, but the Tsars preferred to believe that the church was a prop for their God-given right to rule. Both sides claimed the authority of the ancient Byzantine constitution for their position, but in fact neither understood it, and in any case, Byzantine precedents were largely inapplicable in a society which lacked an educated laity (cf. Lenin's problem in applying Marxism to a society which lacked a powerful middle class). The opposing views of church-state relations manifested themselves in the struggles between the so-called 'Possessors' (headed by Joseph, abbot of Volokolamsk), and the 'Non-Possessors', led at first by Nil Sorski (later canonized) and after 1518 by an extraordinary expatriate, Maximus the Greek. The Possessors believed that the Church should own property, and take a full part in secular affairs. The Non-Possessors preached the separation of church and state, and promoted the idea of a spiritual church, whose leaders would be hermits and *stary* (Greek: *gerontes*), of whom the last and most famous was to be Rasputin (though few Russians today would regard him as an authentic *starets*).

The Possessors won the battle for influence in the church because they supported the Tsarist autocracy, Russian nationalism, and a church organization closely tied to the state, though things did not work out the way they might have wished. On the other hand, the Non-Possessors did not disappear, but remained as a kind of spiritual, semi-underground opposition to the official position. In 1589 the Patriarch of Constantinople was persuaded, while on a visit to Moscow, to enthrone Metropolitan Job as Patriarch, thereby confirming both the independence and the isolation of the Russian church. Shortly after this a double crisis afflicted Russia. In 1596, Roman Catholic missionaries managed to cajole most of the Russians then living under Polish rule to accept the Pope as head of the church. In accordance with the provisions of the Council of Florence, they were allowed to keep their own liturgy and canon law, thereby becoming Catholics of the Eastern [Greek] rite, who have generally been known as Uniates since that time. The *Unia* of Brest-Litovsk, where the submission of the Orthodox bishops to Rome was made, had great and lasting consequences for the history of the Eastern Slavs.

Until 1596, religion had been the dividing factor which distinguished Russians from Poles. But after that date, Russians living on Polish (and Lithuanian) territory acquired a distinct identity which was neither Russian nor Polish. These Ukrainians (mainly Polish Russians) and Byelorussians (mainly Lithuanian Russians) were now Orthodox with a difference, though this difference—and, by implication, the 'nationality' associated with it—was never recognized by Moscow. On the contrary, the Great Russians continued to regard the Uniates as traitors to Orthodoxy, and considered their very existence to be an ecumenical scandal. When the Russians eventually reconquered the western borderlands, many Uniates returned to the Orthodox church, regarding the *Unia* as a political device to ensure Polish control. But many others did not, preferring to regard the *Unia* as a useful way of distinguishing themselves from Moscow. In 1839 the Uniates were officially suppressed (as they were again in 1946), but by then it was too late. The *Unia* had fostered a nationalism which would surface in 1917 to bedevil both the church and the newly-established Soviet state.

In 1588, two years after the proclamation of the *Unia*, the ruling dynasty of Muscovy died out. The Poles tried to take advantage of this, and for a time they were able to place a pro-Uniate 'False Dimitry' on the throne of Moscow. This left a lasting bitterness in Russia against the Roman church and the Poles, and helped to increase the influence of the Orthodox Patriarch Hermogenes, who maintained order through most of the so-called 'Time of Troubles'. In 1613 a new tsar was elected. This was Mikhail Fyedorovich Romanov, whose father was a relative of the last legitimate tsar and who

had himself been an earlier candidate for the throne. Mikhail accepted on condition that his father, then in Polish custody, would be elected patriarch, Hermogenes having died a short while before. This request was granted, and when Fyedor Romanov was released in 1618, he became Patriarch of Moscow, ruling Russia alongside his son until his death in 1633. The prestige and influence of the church was at that time much stronger than that of the state, though Fyedor (known now as Philaret, his name in religion) was succeeded by much weaker men who could not consolidate his gains.

However, Mikhail's son soon met and fell under the influence of a village priest by the name of Nikon. In 1652 Tsar Alexei (1645–76) made him Patriarch, and Nikon set about reforming the church in a way which would give it permanent power over the state. By 1658 the tsar had realized what was happening, but so strong was Nikon's position that he could not be deposed until 1666, and then only with the help of the other Orthodox Patriarchates, who were alarmed at Nikon's somewhat uncanonical behaviour. At a church council (*sobor*) in 1667, Nikon's political pretensions were disowned, but the same synod approved his liturgical reforms, which were designed to modernize Russian practice and bring it into line with international [Greek] Orthodoxy. These reforms provoked a great schism (*raskol*) in which the conservative 'Old Believers' broke away from the main body of the church. These *raskol'niki* were numerous, dedicated to their cause, and extremely active in proselytizing among the peasantry. They soon merged with the Non-Possessor tradition, but later split into sects distinguished by ever greater extremes of Puritanism. By 1917 they were a widespread religious underground movement, whose real strength was unknown but greatly feared. In some places it was thought that religious toleration would produce an Old Believer majority, though when the time came this did not in fact happen. One area in which they were particularly active was the Middle Volga region, and Simbirsk, the birthplace of Lenin, was one of their principal centres.

The patriarchal church survived the upheaval of 1667, and for a while it continued to dominate the state. This was particularly easy during the minority of Tsar Peter I (1676–1725), but when the Patriarch Adrian (1690–1700) tried to resurrect the policy of Nikon, Peter decided to suppress the patriarchate. When Adrian died, he refused to nominate a successor, preferring to govern the church through a succession of Ukrainian clergy who resented the Muscovite domination of their homeland and who were more sympathetic to Western ideas, which had entered the Ukraine under the *Unia*. Between 1700 and 1721, Peter initiated a number of far-reaching reforms which, intentionally or not, cut the church off from the mainstream of Russian life. He adopted the vernacular as the chancery language, leaving the church with its ancient Church

Slavonic. He established theological academies on the Western model, in which the language of instruction was Latin! He forbade the teaching of religion in schools (though this was restored in 1832), closed monasteries and seized church property. As a result, the church was greatly impoverished, subjected to unwelcome foreign influences and alienated from the new Russian intelligentsia.

After trying a number of expedients, Peter finally abolished the patriarchate in 1721, and instituted government by a Holy Synod, under a layman with the title of Over-Procurator. This official had to be Orthodox himself, but usually he had no theological training and little sympathy with the church as a spiritual institution. His main task was to keep the church loyal to the régime, and later to ensure that it could be used as an effective instrument of Russification in the newly-conquered territories. As Russian power expanded, this became a major task. Peter himself added what are now the Baltic States of Estonia and Latvia, with their large Protestant [Lutheran] population. Later, under Catherine the Great (1762–96), huge areas of non-Russian speech were added to the empire, and German Protestants (of which Catherine had originally been one herself) were invited to settle the Volga region. There they established religious communes which were later to have a great influence on the early Russian communists, who saw in them potential models for collective farming.³

By 1815 Russian expansionism had brought it large Catholic, Jewish and Muslim populations. As early as 1778, Russia's claim to be the 'Defender of Orthodoxy' was officially recognized by the Ottoman Turks (in the Treaty of Küçük Kainarçı) and this assumed considerable importance in the course of the nineteenth century. In 1812 the Russians took over Bessarabia (now Soviet Moldavia) and about the same time they completed their occupation of the Caucasus. Here there was an ancient Georgian church, in communion with Constantinople, which the Russians absorbed in 1817. There was also an Armenian church, the oldest national church in the world (it dated from 301), which had been out of communion with Constantinople since 506, and which was therefore something of an embarrassment to the Russians. The other Caucasians were mostly Muslim—the first large community, along with the Crimean Tatars, to be absorbed by Russia. This religious background explains how and why the Caucasus developed as it did up to 1917. Georgia was much closer to Russia than the rest, even to the point of being the only non-Russian region of Asia to develop a real Social Democratic party. The Armenians were never trusted or integrated, whilst the Muslims remained complete outsiders—a state of affairs which is still largely true even today.

Tsar Alexander I (1802–25) was deeply influenced by the revival of Protestantism associated in England with the name of John Wesley,

and he promoted a Russian Bible Society which, during its short life (it was suppressed in 1826) produced a Russian New Testament (the complete Bible appeared in 1867) and introduced Protestantism to the Russians. Once established, the Protestants grew rapidly, and by 1917 they were a force to be reckoned with in many parts of the empire.

During the nineteenth century official Russia became more conscious of its Orthodoxy. Alexander I's foreign minister, John Capodistria, was a Greek from Corfu who became the first ruler of an independent Greek state (1828–32). Russia helped Bulgaria and Romania to gain their independence (1878), and tried to befriend the Serbs and Greeks as well. After 1832, conversion to Orthodoxy became the state policy towards the minorities of the empire, and a considerable amount of missionary work was undertaken. In Siberia (and Alaska) this was quite successful, but it was an almost total failure in the western borderlands and in central Asia. The fact that these minorities lived in sensitive border areas and were often prone to revolt, made their situation even worse.

In 1914 the Russian Orthodox Church could claim 117 million members out of a total population of 160 million (73%). It was divided into 67 dioceses with 130 bishops, 48,000 churches and 50,000 priests. It ran 35,000 primary schools, 58 seminaries and 4 theological academies.⁴ These figures sound impressive, but they conceal some very important weaknesses. Many of the 117 million were Orthodox in name only, being either tribal people who had received some kind of missionary activity or other Christians whose true allegiance was to illegal sects. Statistics were deliberately inflated, and the upper classes adhered only very loosely to the church. The number of schools conceals the fact that the intelligentsia did not use them, nor did their graduates normally proceed to further education. After 1879 seminarians were barred from the universities, which meant that the priesthood was the only career open to most of them—whether they had a real sense of vocation or not. All these things weakened the church, and pushed it further behind in the drive to modernize Russian society.

The condition of the religious minorities depended very much on where they were. In Great Russia they were persecuted, especially in the period 1881–1905. Some, like the Dukhobors, were simply exported *en masse*—in their case, to Canada. In Finland, the Baltic States and Poland the native Protestants or Roman Catholics had to be tolerated up to a point, but even there the Orthodox church was granted a special status and proselytism was (unsuccessfully) encouraged. The Muslims fared better than anybody, in the sense that their autonomy was recognized to a certain extent (especially in the protectorates of Khiva and Bukhara), and their extreme cultural backwardness did not encourage outsiders to interfere with them.

The price for this relative tolerance however was that any form of development was denied them, and by 1917 they were the most excluded of any major group within the Russian Empire.

The biggest problem of all though was not the Muslim but the Jewish. Jews were allowed to live in the so-called 'Pale of Settlement', established by Catherine the Great on the western borders of Russia. Most of them spoke Yiddish (a German dialect) as their native tongue, and they were predominantly urban traders. Their main centres were at Minsk, Odessa, Vilna (now Vilnius) and Kishinëv, where they formed the majority of the population. Better educated and wealthier than the Russians, the Jews were frequently objects of envy and subject to attack. During the reign of Nicholas II (1894–1917) a series of organized persecutions (*pogromy*) was carried out against them, and it is estimated that as much as 20% of the Jewish population may have left the country.⁵ The Russians could never quite decide whether to classify the Jews as a religion or as a nationality, since they had important aspects of both without being confined to either. Long before 1917 many Russian Jews had become secularized, and some had melted into the general population. Others experienced a religious revival in the form of Hasidism (centred on Vilna), and many became Zionists. Still others grouped themselves into a workers' union (the *Bund*) to defend Jewish interests and promote socialism, whilst others joined Russian revolutionary parties. Trotsky was the clearest example of the latter, but there were many more—so many in fact, that Hitler later had no difficulty in convincing many Eastern Europeans that Bolshevism was a Jewish plot. Even Lenin never quite knew what to make of the Jews, and his attitude towards the *Bund* ranged from a cautious acceptance to an outright rejection of an organization whose origins did not conform to his own understanding of Marxism. For all these reasons, the Jewish problem was one of the first to surface in 1917, and has since proved to be one of the hardest for the Soviet authorities to contain—let alone solve.

The Revolutionaries and Religion (1825–1923)

From the moment when revolutionary feelings first stirred inside Russia, it was generally assumed that the loss of religious feeling, even overt atheism, must be the main cause. This belief was reflected throughout the nineteenth century in everything, ranging from government decrees designed to strengthen the position of Orthodoxy to the complaints heard in many of the great writers of the time. Loss of faith, of course, was mostly an urban phenomenon, and in this respect it was common to Europe as a whole. Indeed, Russian atheism was really a foreign import, coming as it did from the writings of the French and German *philosophes* and their heirs.

For this reason, the attitude of the main revolutionaries to religion had a remarkably uniform character, despite their great differences of background. For them religion was a powerful social myth which could be used to support autocracy (as in Russia) or capitalism, as in Western Europe. The emergence of a bourgeois intelligentsia had turned religious observance into a formality designed to support the existing moral and social order. Real belief in the supernatural was no longer either possible or necessary, having been replaced by faith in progress and science. Of course, old-fashioned Christianity continued to thrive in the countryside, but it was so mixed up with superstition that the revolutionaries believed that it would quickly lose its hold, once education became widespread among the young. Russia differed from Western Europe primarily in the fact that 80% of its population was rural, so that the process of secularisation, like the process of industrialization, lagged far behind the West. To the revolutionaries, these two things went together, and it must be admitted that the history of industrialization in Western Europe gave considerable encouragement to their point of view.

The revolutionaries understood religion primarily in terms of its impact on society, and therefore it is not surprising that they concentrated much of their attention on the church, an institution which was obviously an important bulwark of the tsarist régime and generally thought to be a hotbed of reaction within it. But those religious groups which were not so associated with the régime, and which lacked an organized church with a priestly order, were generally regarded with far less hostility by the revolutionaries. Indeed, it is remarkable to what extent the revolutionaries were drawn from the religious minorities within the empire, a fact which doubtless helps to explain why their hostility was directed mainly against the Orthodox.

The extent to which the revolutionaries identified religion with personal faith is something of a mystery, though it may well be that the clue to understanding their activities lies in answering this question. None of the leading Social Democrats (who split into majority 'Bolshevik' and minority 'Menshevik' factions in 1903) gives the impression of having ever had a personal faith of his own, nor does it seem that they ever met it in their contemporaries. Many early Marxists were associated with ideas of free-love and anti-morality, which they tried to popularize immediately after the revolution, and this hardly suggests that they had much in common with the kind of Christian Socialism which so influenced the origins of the British Labour Party, for example. Young men of faith were decidedly lacking among the intelligentsia of late imperial Russia, and this may help to explain the success of Marxism among some of them. For Marxism came to Russia almost as a substitute religion, to which the Social Democrats were converted, even though they rejected such

terminology. The abstract ideas of freedom, justice and universal brotherhood were all ultimately derived from Christian sources, as was the idea that history had a purpose leading towards the eschatological fulfilment of these ideals. Marxism offered a vision and a cause to fight for, which demanded personal commitment of a generation which had nowhere else to channel its idealism.

It is interesting and instructive to compare the attitudes of the three leading Bolsheviks towards religion. Lenin came from a bourgeois family in which church-going was part of good behaviour, but was not to be taken too seriously by adults. He stopped going to church when he was sixteen, and never seems to have thought about it afterwards. Marxism became his creed, and he spent most of his subsequent career turning a rather vague philosophical theory into a rigid orthodoxy which could be used to conquer the world. In a very real sense Lenin invented Marxist heresy, and was seldom (if ever) deterred by such things as rational argument, or votes which went against him. Trotsky was a secularized Jew with no religious upbringing. For him, the Jewish problem was a national issue to be solved within the context of the Bolshevik nationalities policy. The idea that religion could be divorced from nationality, indeed, had nothing to do with it, probably never even crossed his mind. Stalin was also deeply conscious of the link between religion and nationality, but with the difference that he came from a deeply religious home. For him the seminary, the official agent of Russification in Georgia, was a window to the outside world. It was there that he learned Russian, and there that he first came into contact with Marxism. It was there also that he developed the mental outlook which would govern his whole career. Stalin was impregnated with Orthodoxy in a way which went far deeper than was normal among bourgeois Russians, and in a curious way this probably helped him to gain hegemony over the Soviet Union at a later date.

Stalin felt in his bones something which the others only thought about, and this brought him much closer to the average Russian. He also knew that it was Orthodoxy which put his native Georgia in the Russian, and not in the Turkish camp, and throughout his career he was always acutely conscious of the divide between the civilization of Christian Russia and the barbarism of non-Christian Asia. When he developed the theory of socialism in one country he must have known that he was refashioning the Third International around the Third Rome, and not felt that that was in any way incongruous. His speeches and writings were liturgical in form, and heavily Biblical in content. To the end of his days he was surrounded by devoutly religious relatives, and in his later years it was he who took the initiative in restoring the public profile of the church, and in using it to further Soviet foreign policy. It is true that other factors supervened to force Stalin's hand, but it may be questioned whether a man

less steeped in Christianity from his youth would have reacted in quite so bold and dramatic a manner.

Marxism in Russia therefore filled a gap left by the inadequacy of organized religion. It was not regarded as a religion by its followers, at least partly because it lacked the sociological apparatus which in Marxist eyes gave religion its status. Of course, those Russians who were spiritually aware were not slow to recognize what was really happening. Bluntest of all was Dostoyevsky, who wrote in *The Possessed* [*The Devils*] that the revolutionaries were possessed by evil spirits. It is also noteworthy that the revival of religion, which was beginning to penetrate the Russian intelligentsia at the beginning of the twentieth century, took the form of commitment to a personal faith, in which guise it began to make inroads among the Marxists. In other words, Marxists who acquired (or retained) an interest in Christianity were liable to be converted out of their Marxism—the surest sign that Marxism was really an alternative religion. The most famous example of this was Sergei Bulgakov, a professor of political economy who was a Marxist before 1905 and then slowly drifted into the church, where he was made a priest in 1923, just as the Bolsheviks were consolidating their power. Bulgakov tried to live with Marxism and Christianity together but discovered that he could not, because the two were mutually incompatible.

After the revolution, this realization was brought home to the Bolsheviks as well. Much to their own surprise, they found themselves engaged in what amounted to a spiritual struggle for the souls of the Soviet people. Far from simply disappearing with the collapse of the old order, religious faith actually grew stronger and became a deeper and more insidious challenge to Bolshevik power than the institutional church of tsarist days could ever have been.

Before looking at that however, we must consider the internal situation of the church in the face of the revolutionary ferment. Many seminaries were centres of revolutionary propaganda long before there was any sign of revolution, and we must not forget that it was a priest, Father Gapon, who organized the demonstration which sparked off the events of 1905. This alerted the authorities to the danger of radicalism among the clergy, and there was a severe crackdown on the seminaries at this time. Gapon himself was driven into exile and later recruited as a tsarist agent, which helped to convince the revolutionaries that the church was not to be trusted. (He was murdered as a renegade by a St. Petersburg anarchist in 1907).

The church came off very badly from the upheavals of 1905–6, being repudiated by the revolutionaries for being a tsarist tool on the one hand, and on the other hand being thoroughly penetrated by government agents, who thought it was too radical. But these misfortunes should not blind us to the fact that this period also

witnessed a new ferment within the church, which would surface again in 1917 and bear fruit.⁵ The arch-reactionary Over-Procurator of the Holy Synod, Konstantin Pobedonostsev (1827–1907), who had been a tutor to the imperial children since 1861 and Over-Procurator since 1880, was finally forced to retire. As he had been the chief architect of the Russianizing and proselytizing movements among the national minorities, this was a considerable victory for the reforming wing of the church. Agitation began for a Sobor [council], and for the restoration of the patriarchate, neither of which the tsar felt able to grant. About all that actually happened at the time was that the Orthodox liturgy was translated into the different languages of the empire, thus dissociating the church from the state's policy of Russification. But this did not affect the three Slavonic languages (Russian, Belorussian and Ukrainian), which continued to use Church Slavonic in worship.

Nevertheless, the events of 1905 revealed that not only had the church survived the nineteenth century, it had also bred a generation of scholars and theologians who could match the best in the world. Furthermore, most of them were nurtured on a monastic tradition which Peter the Great had tried to suppress but which would not die. A persecuted Russian monk named Paisii Velichkovsky (1722–94) had fled to Mount Athos, where he translated the *Philokalia* into Slavonic. This collection of monastic sayings was published at Moscow in 1793 as the *Dobrotolubiye*, and came out in a Russian translation in 1857. (The English version is still awaiting completion!) Universally read among the Orthodox, it became the inspiration of St. Seraphim of Sarov (1759–1833) and of a whole new generation of monks, who established themselves at Optino, Sergievo (now Zagorsk) and St. Petersburg, among other places. Their purpose was to revive the traditions of Hagioretic [Athonite] monasticism in Russia, and with them, the Byzantine tradition. They were totally non-political, but made a great impression on the Russians, as Father Zossima in Dostoyevsky's *The Brothers Karamazov* demonstrated. It is often supposed that they were identified with the Slavophiles, a group of anti-Western Russians who wanted to return to primitive national traditions, but that is not correct. They certainly inspired some Slavophil writing, but they themselves were neo-Byzantine, looking towards Maximus the Greek, not the Old Believers, as the true guardian of Orthodoxy.

In February 1917 the church was thus only too glad to cut its ties with an oppressive régime which had stifled these attempts at reform and placed the Holy Synod at the mercy of the protégés and accomplices of Rasputin. They were dismissed from their offices and bishoprics, and plans were made to re-establish the patriarchate. Permission to hold a Sobor was obtained from the Provisional Government, which on 05/18 August 1917 abolished the office of

Over-Procurator and created a Department for Religious Affairs in its place. The Sobor met in Moscow from August to November 1917, and again from January to April 1918. Unlike other revolutionary gatherings of the time, its complexion was mainly conservative, though there was also a fairly strong left-wing contingent. The Sobor did not adopt a vernacular liturgy, nor did it accede to the reform of the calendar proposed by the Provisional Government and adopted on 01/14 February 1918. (Dates in this section are given in both styles, the Old coming first).

But the Sobor did vote to re-establish the patriarchate, and on 05/18 November 1917 it elected Tikhon, Metropolitan of Moscow, as patriarch. It then proceeded to a far-reaching internal reform of the church. Sermons were made compulsory at all liturgical services (01/14 December 1917), monastic houses were reorganized and strengthened, provision was made for continuity in the event of the patriarch's arrest or death, and a decree was passed demanding a new constitutional arrangement in which a free church would be recognized by the state but not controlled by it. In practice this would mean that all high officials would be expected to belong to the church, but that the ecclesiastical administration would function separately. This of course, was the Byzantine model of church-state relations, which was much in favour at the Sobor, though totally out of line with political reality.

On 19 January/01 February 1918 Tikhon issued an encyclical in which he admonished the Soviet régime for its anti-church actions and for its prosecution of civil war, instead of calling a Constituent Assembly and respecting its right to govern. Bolshevik reaction was swift and brutal. On 25 January/05 February church and state were formally separated, and all church land was seized. On 19 February it was decreed that the church could not own any real estate at all, but could only lease premises for public worship from local government officials. At the same time, about 6,000 churches and monasteries were confiscated as 'historic monuments'. On 28 January/10 February 1918 all bank accounts belonging to religious associations were seized. From that date all church associations were to be regarded as private clubs, without the right to obtain funds from, or discipline their members in any way. Clergy were deprived of the right to vote (restored in 1936) and denied citizenship of the new state. Religious education was banned, except among consenting adults in private.

In December 1918 there was a temporary respite, when the Soviet government issued a decree which condemned the closure of the churches, but as the civil war moved in their favour, repression was intensified once more. On 01 March 1919 a decree was passed which ordered the relics of saints to be opened, and in August 1920 it was further ordered that they should be destroyed. This move was a major blow to the church's prestige, because many of the relics

turned out to be fakes. On the other hand, its long-term effect was probably beneficial to the church because it removed what could have been a source of acute embarrassment. On 13 June 1921 the state decreed that sermons must be confined to religious topics, and on 27 April 1923 the forced closure of churches was finally legalized. With that decree, the first stage of revolutionary opposition to the church reached its climax.

During the initial period of Soviet power, the official attitude towards religious minorities was remarkably tolerant, in sharp contrast to the treatment meted out to the national church. There were several reasons for this, as we have already noted. Many of these groups had suffered persecution before 1917, and were as anti-Orthodox as the Bolsheviks themselves were. They were therefore inclined to support the régime as the harbinger of religious freedom. Also, many sectarian and Protestant groups were progressive and communistic in their economic habits, which made them appear to be ideal forerunners to collectivization. Finally, their numbers were too small to make organized persecution seem worthwhile.

In 1918 most of the ethnically Protestant or Catholic regions of the Russian Empire became independent. Those that remained were scattered and disorganized. Many thought that a new era had dawned, and in 1919 some Protestant peasants even volunteered to set up collective farms, under the guidance of their dynamic leader, Ivan Prokhanov (1869–1935), who was the leading Russian Evangelical from about 1911 till his death. Russian Protestants were divided into Evangelicals (similar to the Open Brethren) and Baptists. Their teachings were almost identical, but they were divided by different attitudes to church discipline (the Baptists being stricter) and mutually antagonistic leaderships. They tried to unite in 1920, but administrative disagreements prevented them from coming together, and after 1923 the two groups went their separate ways (to be united by Stalin, of all people, in 1944!). In 1922 some of the Baptists became Pentecostals, and a further division was added to the earlier ones. In addition, there were small groups of Lutherans, Calvinists and Mennonites, who mostly belonged to one national minority or another. During the 1920s they were tolerated and there were few problems, but when repression finally came they were especially hard-hit and ill-equipped to resist.

The Muslims were also encouraged to seek religious freedom, and in Daghestan and Azerbaijan Islam was almost recognized as a state religion. But it soon became apparent that the mullahs were just as anti-Bolshevik as the Orthodox clergy, and tolerance gave way to repression. The Muslim Commissariat, set up in 1918, had ceased to function by 1920, and the semi-independent emirates of Khiva and Bukhara were suppressed at the same time. Nevertheless, Central Asia was not properly incorporated into the Soviet state until 1923,

by which time the Russians faced a full-scale revolt in the region, which dragged on until 1925 or so. The repression of Islam which followed was not so much ideological as nationalistic. In Central Asia most of the resident Great Russians, including the clergy, became Bolsheviks simply in order to preserve Russian domination. This was a matter of the gravest embarrassment to Lenin and the Politburo, who gave strict orders that Muslims should be recruited into the party. But socio-cultural reality could not be denied. In this area, alone of all the Soviet republics, the state has continued to permit and even to finance the building of Russian Orthodox churches, for reasons which are not hard to guess.

The Jewish question, however, was by far the most pressing minority problem in 1917. Most of the Jewish population found itself in Poland or Rumania after 1918, but there were still substantial numbers on Soviet soil. Furthermore, of all the religious groups, they alone had played a prominent part in pre-war revolutionary movements, and were therefore overrepresented in the Bolshevik party. As long as the Bolsheviks were in opposition this hardly mattered, but when they took over the state they could not afford to let the party have too Jewish a complexion. On the other hand, they had to be tolerant of a minority which had obviously suffered and contributed more than any other to the cause of revolution. Jews were permitted to form an autonomous section within the Communist party (as were other nationalities), and would be treated as a national group, not as a religion. For a while this worked tolerably well, but as Stalin's star rose, Jewish fortunes began to decline. The lively Yiddish theatre and press which had made their appearance in 1917 were shut down, and in 1934 a Soviet answer to Zionism was established in Manchuria, and called the Jewish Autonomous Region (popularly known after its capital, Birobidzhan). Not surprisingly, few Jews went there, and after 1934 anti-Semitism became more ominous once more. Religious Jews were few in number, but soon they were suffering alongside their Christian counterparts, often at the hands of their secularized co-religionists.

Religion and the Soviet System (1920–41)

By 1920 the Soviet régime was firmly established and could begin to develop its religious policy. This was worked out in stages, and continued in operation until the Second World War, when the German invasion forced Stalin to take a very different line. During this period, Bolshevik opposition to religion was aided by internal splits within the church itself. These schisms were not directly related to the Bolshevik takeover, but inevitably politics became entwined with ecclesiastical debates and the church was compromised in a way which it would have preferred to avoid.

Events in the Ukraine give a fair idea of the kinds of difficulties which the church encountered. In 1917, the Ukraine and its church broke away from Russia and declared their independence. The Soviets quickly reconquered the region, but they continued to support the breakaway church, which in 1920 abandoned the use of Church Slavonic and adopted Ukrainian instead. Soviet tolerance did not last though, and by 1923 repression had begun. Soon the breakaway church declined dramatically, and many parishes sought to be reintegrated into the patriarchal church. In 1930 a Sobor met to dissolve the autocephalous Ukrainian church, which now survives only in the West (Russians characteristically reject the whole affair, and blame it on the influence of 'ex-Uniates'!) There was a similar movement in Byelorussia, but it was nipped in the bud before a separate church organization could be set up.

During its short independent existence, the Ukrainian church had been deeply influenced by the so-called Renovationists within the Russian church. These were mainly left-leaning clergy who had strongly supported the workers in 1905, and who were generally sympathetic to Marxism and opposed to the monastic revival in the church. In June 1917 the Renovationists organized a Christian Socialist political party, which later merged into the Communist party. In 1919 one of their priests, Father Alexander Vyedensky, opened talks with the Bolshevik leader Zinoviev, which aimed at a 'reconciliation' of church and state. In practice, the Soviet authorities hoped to use the Renovationists as a wedge to infiltrate the church and disrupt it. The Renovationists seemed to be promising candidates for this rôle, since after having supported the restoration of the patriarchate in 1905, as an anti-tsarist measure, they resisted it in 1917, fearing that the new patriarch would become a substitute tsar. They had therefore boycotted the Sobor election, and regarded Tikhon's election as canonically invalid.

Their chance to reverse the events of 1917 came in 1922. The patriarch had ordered the church to sell its non-consecrated property in order to help with famine relief, but the government responded with a demand that the church should sell its consecrated vessels as well. Tikhon refused, and on 6 May 1922 he was placed under house arrest. Six days later the Renovationists occupied the patriarchal chancery, and for a year they governed what became known as the 'Living Church'. They convened another Sobor, which deposed and unfrocked Tikhon (29 April 1923). However, the same period also witnessed the first full-scale persecution of the church, which discredited the Renovationists and revealed to what extent they were dupes and puppets of the régime. In a celebrated scandal, the Metropolitan of Petrograd, Venyamin, was tried and executed on charges of 'anti-Soviet activities', and by the end of 1923, 66 bishops had been deposed, while 2,691 priests, 1,962 monks and 3,447 nuns

had simply disappeared.⁶ The reign of terror continued for some time, but the Living Church was soon on the way out. In June 1923 the patriarch was released after promising to co-operate with the Soviet authorities, and support for the Renovationists quickly collapsed. They continued to exist for another twenty years or so, but after 1926 their influence was minimal.

A very different, and in some respects more dangerous problem, appeared at the same time on the church's extreme right. To understand this we must go back to the patriarchal election, which the leftists had boycotted. The electoral system used in 1917 had two stages. In the first stage, the three houses of the Sobor (bishops, clergy and laity) chose three candidates for the patriarchate. Then, following what was believed to be the precedent set by the election of Matthias to replace Judas as one of the Apostles (Acts 1:23-6), lots were drawn to determine which of the three was to be patriarch. As it happened, Tikhon became patriarch, even though most of the votes in the Sobor had gone to Metropolitan Antony Khrapovitsky of Kiev, who was the acknowledged leader of the right.

In this difficult situation Tikhon did what he could to please the right, but his every move in their direction was regarded with the deepest suspicion by the Bolsheviks, as well as being treated as a series of half-measures by the rightists themselves. On 25 September 1919 Tikhon ordered the clergy to stand aloof from politics, and freed the laity of political obligations, on the ground that the Bolsheviks had separated church and state. This move was intended to protect the church from the civil war, but it was generally interpreted as covert support for the Whites. It was remembered that just over a year earlier Tikhon had sent his blessings to the imprisoned tsar and his family, shortly before they were executed (16 July 1918). The Bolsheviks made great play of this as evidence of where Tikhon's political sympathies lay, and the patriarch was no match for their political machine. In 1921 Tikhon appointed Metropolitan Yevlogii, formerly Archbishop of Volhynia, as his exarch in Western Europe, and established separate dioceses for the Russian churches there and in America, where most of the Russian right had by then fled.

Meanwhile, Metropolitan Antony had escaped to Constantinople, where Russian émigrés were numerous. He was welcomed by the Ecumenical Patriarch and allowed to set up a Russian *metochion* (administration) for the exiles there. Antony wanted to attract Greek support but it was not forthcoming, partly on ethnic grounds and partly because the Greeks had already jumped into the debate—loudly, of course—on the wrong side. A request to settle on Mount Athos was refused, and Antony had to make do with Yugoslavia, where he established himself at Karlovci in 1921. There he convened a Sobor of exiles, which passed a resolution calling for the restoration of the Romanovs. (This same group would eventually canonize the

last tsar and tsarina, but not until 1983). Surprisingly, even Yevlogii was persuaded to agree to this. Tikhon was gravely embarrassed, and withdrew his recognition of the Karlovci synod on 5 May 1922, the day before he was arrested. Antony was not particularly worried by this because he thought he had the backing of Constantinople, and even Yevlogii did not break with him until 1926, when he (Yevlogii) attempted to renew contact with Moscow. By that time it was clear that Antony was the wrong horse to back, and his synod was isolated by a general withdrawal of recognition by the other Orthodox churches. However, his activities continued to be of immense value to the Soviet régime, which used them as the true indicator of what the church inside the Soviet Union really thought about it.

Tikhon died on 7 April 1925, and three hundred thousand people marched in his funeral procession. With the patriarch gone, the Soviet government apparently thought the time was ripe to begin a new persecution. There was no question of electing a successor to Tikhon, and the *locum tenens* of the patriarchate, Peter of Krutitsky, was exiled to Siberia in December 1925. His successor, Sergii of Nizhniy Novgorod, was not allowed to move to Moscow, and had to govern the church from where he was. In December 1926 he was arrested, but in July 1927 he was released, having announced his complete support for the Soviet government. This declaration split the church down the middle. Many bishops, clergy and laymen, led by Metropolitan Joasaph of Leningrad, preferred to suffer exile or death rather than submit to Sergii, whom they saw as a puppet of the Soviet régime. In exile, poor Metropolitan Yevlogii, who had just found his way back to Moscow, broke with it again (in 1930), and in 1931 he placed his diocese under the Ecumenical Patriarch, where it remained until 1965, when Soviet pressure apparently forced the patriarch to disown it. Yevlogii himself was reconciled with Moscow in 1945 but his diocese would not follow suit, and another schism in the church became permanently established.

Many Russians believe that Sergii was an ambitious cynic who hoped to benefit from his total subservience to Soviet power, but if so, he gained nothing from this attitude. Already in 1925 a League of Militant Atheists had been formed, which although it was technically a private organization, was given every encouragement by the state. At its height in 1928, the League had over six million members, though by no means all of these could be called volunteers. After that it declined in strength, partly because its propaganda was too crude. The League thought it could turn peasants into atheists by taking them for trips above the clouds in airplanes—an exercise which was supposed to show that God did not exist. (A similar statement was made by Yuri Gagarin, after his first space flight in 1961). This activity ceased when one of the planes crashed, and many people wondered whether God had not had the last word after all. The

league also promoted blasphemous carnivals (banned in 1935) and destroyed any number of churches and icons. It soon became apparent that its purely negative activities were the work of people trying to work off their own psychological problems, and were having no real effect. The League declined considerably after 1934, and it was eventually suppressed in 1943, when Stalin made his peace with the church. It is not known how many citizens protested at the suppression of what was, after all, a voluntary society promoting official state policy, but an estimate of atheist martyrs in round figures produces the generally accepted figure 0—another indication of the true popularity of the League and its ideas.

On 8 April 1929 it became a criminal offence to preach the Gospel, to argue against materialism or to try to make converts, while anti-religious propaganda was officially licensed for the first time. This law was the first to hit all religious confessions equally, and it therefore marks the beginning of a new stage in the history of religious persecution. Protestants, who until this time had been able to publish newspapers, operate theological colleges and hold annual conferences, were suppressed along with the rest. Roman Catholicism, never very strong, vanished almost entirely. Jews and Muslims also suffered, though it is difficult to know how much this was the result of Stalin's determination to reverse the previously liberal nationalities policy, and how much it was a direct attack on their religions.

During the period of rapid collectivization which followed, persecution of the church was intense, because it was thought to be the major bulwark of the rural order. In 1934 there was a respite, during which priests were enfranchized and other restrictions were lifted, but the church suffered as much as the army and the party in the great purges which began in 1937. The only comfort was that now it was suffering as one social institution among others, not just as a religious body. In 1939–40 the Soviet Union recovered large portions of western territory lost in 1918, and attempts were made to suppress religious activity there as well. These however had only begun when the Germans invaded (22 June 1941). After two years of fighting in which the church supported the state, and religious activity revived on German-held territory, Stalin finally acknowledged Sergii as patriarch (18 September 1943) and allowed the church to establish some sort of independent existence.

Conclusion

The attempt to destroy religion in the Soviet Union was an effort which engaged Bolshevik energies from the end of the civil war until 1941, with only a few short periods of respite. It was ideologically motivated and promoted by urban-based rationalists who saw religion as a hangover from the days of tsarism and a major obstacle to the progress of revolution among the peasantry. The approach which

they adopted to the problem was basically sociological, and they had little understanding of the theological and spiritual roots which nourished religious feelings among all sections of the population alike. The success of their efforts must therefore be judged by their intentions, which were to remove religion from Soviet society. By 1934 the state had virtually destroyed all forms of religious activity and severely curtailed what remained of the different church organizations. The exceptions and anomalies which had abounded in the early stages of the revolution had mostly been ironed out, and a uniform policy been adopted. The forced collectivization of the early 1930s had dislocated the rural sector, which was regarded as the chief support of the clergy. Statistics compiled from Soviet sources indicate that although there was a modest revival of religious activity up to 1928, which other sources suggest may have continued until 1930 or even later,⁷ this had been severely curtailed by 1933 and virtually wiped out by 1940.

Of course, this is the situation as it appears on paper, and Soviet statistics cease to be reliable after 1929. The statement that there was only a handful of churches operating at the outbreak of war has to be treated cautiously, especially as the revival of religious activity which followed the German invasion was so dramatic.⁸ There must have been a good deal of underground activity in different places, of which we hear in *samizdat* publications and oral reports, whose accuracy remains unverifiable. Certainly it is true that at the outbreak of war the Soviet government could congratulate itself on the enormous amount of progress which had been made in eradicating the vestiges of religion, even if their propagandists were prone to exaggeration.

In its own way, the church also had some reason to feel satisfied. It had endured a maelstrom in which almost all the remains of pre-revolutionary society had been swept away. It had lived to see the Communist party start to devour itself. In spite of tremendous external pressure and internal schism, it had retained an organization intact in the capital. There was no patriarch, but there was still a patriarchate, and the principle had not been surrendered. Sergii might not have been to everyone's liking, but by 1941 he was indisputably accepted as the church's leader inside the Soviet Union, and many of those abroad who could not make their peace with him would do so with his successor. When the time came to reopen seminaries and churches, the money and the personnel were found, as were the students and congregations. Despite all its efforts, the party had not destroyed the oldest Russian institution, and by 1941 it was clear that it would not be able to do so.

The church could also feel some satisfaction that the neo-Byzantine, Non-Possessor tradition, which had prompted the reforms of the Sobor in 1917–8, remained official church teaching in so far as this was possible, and gained adherents even in the emigration, where

the Possessor tradition was also very strong. There was thus a theological and spiritual unity between the church at home and the churches abroad, which has enabled Russian Christianity to maintain a living theological tradition in spite of political persecution inside the Soviet Union.

It is obviously much more difficult to measure the spiritual health of the Russian churches during the period 1917–41, but today few people would question that it was at this level that the battle for survival was won. The corruptions of the old régime were swept away in a brutal manner, and many good things perished with them, but the long-term effects of this cleansing were beneficial to the church. Soon the picture of the priest-oppressor, which until very recently loomed large in anti-religious propaganda, was not just out-of-date; it was contradicted by the sufferings which the clergy and faithful laity were forced to endure. After 1917 the churches could be fairly sure that those recruited to their ministry would be men with an authentic vocation, who were made of sterner stuff than the pre-revolutionary norm. Martyrdom now became a real possibility, at times even a probability, for anyone who openly identified himself with the church. But what the Soviet authorities never understood was that the blood of martyrs is the seed of the church, not just because some people are stubborn fanatics, but because suffering, death and resurrection lie at the very heart of the Christian faith. By reintroducing these things into the lives of believers, the Soviet government was actually bringing them back to the fundamentals of their faith. The result can be seen in a thousand testimonials of personal suffering and triumph, which continue to pour out of the Soviet Union.

Most extraordinary of all though, is the way in which the Bolshevik revolution promoted the rapprochement between the Russian intelligentsia and the church, which was beginning to bear fruit on the eve of the First World War. After 1917 there was a marked drift towards the church among Soviet intellectuals, of whom the philosopher Pavel Florensky (1882–1943) and the extraordinary Metropolitan Luke of Tashkent, V. F. Voyno-Yasenetsky (1877–1961), who received a Stalin prize for his contribution to medical research, are the most outstanding examples. Both men suffered persecution, but their example was not forgotten, and the trend was maintained even in the following generation. It is difficult to assess the statements of Russian dissidents, but even if the appeal of Christianity among them is tinged with a number of other motives, it is possible to say with certainty that the free-thinking dissident atheist of the nineteenth century has passed into history. The overall pattern is very uneven, but the general trend is undeniable, and surely it must stand as the final verdict on the success of religious persecution. It is not without cause that the members and sympathizers of the Russian churches can claim that they have again demonstrated to the world the truth of Christ's

promise to Peter, that on the rock of his faith He would build His church, and the gates of hell would not prevail against it (Matthew 16:18). (*To be continued.*)

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NOTES

- 1 E. H. Carr, *The Bolshevik Revolution*, I, pp.162–3, London, 1950.
- 2 Letter of Metropolitan Simon to his clergy, cited by Sir Steven Runciman, *The Great Church in Captivity*, Cambridge, 1968, p.323.
- 3 V. D. Bonch-Bruевич, *Iz mira sektantov*, Moskva, 1922.
- 4 D. Pospelovski, *The Russian Church under the Soviet Régime*, I, Crestwood, New York, 1984, p.20.
- 5 J. W. Cunningham, *A Vanquished Hope*, Crestwood, New York, 1981, tells the full story.
- 6 N. Struve, *Christians in Contemporary Russia*, London, 1967, pp.35–8.
- 7 A. P. Mariinsky, *Protiv popov i sektantov*, Moskva-Leningrad, 1929, p.75.
- 8 D. Pospelovsky, *op. cit.*, pp.221–48.

APPENDIX: THE PATRIARCHS OF MOSCOW SINCE 1589

- 1 Job 1589–1605
- 2 Ignatius 1605–1606
- 3 Hermogenes 1606–1612
- 4 Philaret 1618–1633
- 5 Joasaph I 1634–1640
- 6 Joseph 1642–1652
- 7 Nikon 1652–1666
- 8 Joasaph II 1667–1672
- 9 Pitirim 1672–1673
- 10 Joachim 1673–1690
- 11 Adrian 1690–1700
- 12 Tikhon 1917–1925
- 13 Sergii 1943–1944
- 14 Alexii 1945–1970
- 15 Pimen 1971–1990.