

Review

The Jewish Religion in the Soviet Union, by Joshua Rothenberg. New York, Ktav (in association with Philip W. Lown Graduate Center for Contemporary Jewish Studies, Brandeis University). 1971. 242pp.

This is one of the most important books on religion in the Soviet Union ever to have been published and it fills a surprising gap on the shelves. Among the millions of words which have been printed over the last five years on the subject of Soviet Jews, there has been almost nothing of penetrating quality on the religious aspect. For example, in the recent book, *The Jews in Soviet Russia since 1917* (ed. Lionel Kochan), Joshua Rothenberg's own chapter on religion was far from satisfactory, because it lacked topical information on the current situation. Clearly since then the author has collected and analysed a colossal amount of new information and now brings it together into what must remain a standard work for many years.

The sheet-anchor of Dr. Rothenberg's work is his encyclopaedic knowledge of Soviet legislation on religion. Earlier in 1971 he contributed an excellent study of this question to *Aspects of Religion in the Soviet Union, 1917-1967* (ed. R. H. Marshall, University of Chicago Press), but other contributors did not always demonstrate the relevance of it to their own analyses. Increasingly, however, the best Western (and Soviet) commentators on religion in Russia are showing that there can be no adequate understanding of the subject without acknowledging the centrality of the law. An even fuller study of this subject has just appeared in Italian, with the publication of Giovanni Codevilla's *Stato e Chiesa nell'Unione Sovietica* (Jaca Books, Milan, 1972), but Dr. Rothenberg's writings are the most accessible authoritative source for the English reader.

In *The Jewish Religion in the Soviet Union*, the author seizes the opportunity of applying his knowledge of the law to every aspect of religious Judaism—synagogue worship, holiday observances, burials and other rituals. He has adduced new evidence about the activities of the government agencies which control religion (pp. 17-18)—despite the constitutional requirement of the separation of church and state—and has usefully tabulated the structure of control in Appendix II. He further correctly states that religion is also hedged in by various oral and local instructions, which are not reflected in the formal legislation, but does not mention that the texts of some written secret laws are known and have been published in the West.¹ From all this a picture emerges: with the

best will in the world, the Soviet believer simply does not know where he stands in relation to the secular authorities. His situation varies from uncertainty through threats to direct persecution.

Clearly all this has the widest relevance to an understanding of religion as a whole in the Soviet Union and in applying it so thoroughly to Judaism, Dr. Rothenberg has established a model which writers on Christianity could well follow.

Perhaps, however, the book would have been even stronger for a clearer statement—preferably in a separate chapter—of the comparative treatment of Judaism and other religions by the Soviet authorities. This is a subject upon which there have been several misguided public statements by Western Jewish leaders in recent years, who have claimed that the Soviet regime shows special favours to the Russian Orthodox Church and some Protestant sects, as compared with the Jews. Dr. Rothenberg's study of the laws shows this at best to be a half-truth, but it would have been excellent to add that the Jewish religion is "more favoured" than some—there are at least some legally-registered synagogues, whereas Eastern-rite Catholics, Pentecostals, some Baptist groups, not to mention Jehovah's Witnesses, are totally debarred from independent legal existence by the regime. This, of course, is nowhere reflected in the published legislation and further illustrates the author's contention that, despite the existence of written laws, Soviet treatment of all religion is, in the last analysis, entirely arbitrary. Despite the especial vulnerability of the synagogue (nests of "Zionist agitators" and "currency speculators") and the alleged affront to other Soviet citizens in the rituals of circumcision and *shechita* (kosher slaughtering), one is constantly struck in reading this book not so much by the special discrimination exercised against Jews as by the way in which Judaism as a religion fits into the general pattern of Soviet anti-religious policies. This could have been more explicitly stated in the book.

Many readers will find Chapter 2 on the synagogues especially valuable. They are important far beyond their purely religious significance, because they are the only legal Jewish institution in the country (the state-controlled publications cannot be called a "Jewish institution"). Yet the literature on them up to now has been both slim and riddled with contradictions. Here at last we have an authoritative picture, with the statement that there were no more than 62 synagogues and 15-20 active rabbis in 1966. This is backed by a table showing geographical distribution (though it is not made clear whether this was compiled in the West or actually printed in a Soviet source—presumably the former, though a footnote implies the opposite).

¹ See document section (No. 6).

In this chapter Dr. Rothenberg tackles the emotional subject of the infiltration of anti-religious activists into the structure of religious life. This is known to be one of the Soviet regime's strongest tactics in weakening general allegiance to the faith and stirring up internal dissension within the religious communities. However, the author could have made his case much stronger if, instead of quoting Walter Kolarz, a Western authority, he had gone straight to the words of Anatoli Levitin, a Soviet writer now in prison, who has extensively analysed this phenomenon.

One interesting method adopted in this book with great success and giving it a particular solidity is the extensive quotation of Soviet press articles relevant to the subject-matter of the individual chapters. The author subjects these to careful analysis—again in the context of published Soviet legislation. The resulting exposé of deep-lying Soviet attitudes is dramatic in every instance and far more worthwhile than the mere agglomeration of extensive footnote references (at the same time the book does of course present a true breadth of documentation).

It would not be fair to expect such a scholarly work to present the spiritual dynamic of contemporary Soviet Judaism in the way that Elie Wiesel impressionistically does in his writings. Best of all, this should be written by a Soviet Jew. Perhaps someone, unknown to us, already has. Nevertheless, the greatest effect of this book should be to demonstrate to the world at large that it is not only emigration to Israel which matters. The fate of the Jews still remaining in the Soviet Union—whether by choice or otherwise—is also important. It deserves much more attention than it has generally received up to now. It merges into the far greater question of the development of human rights and religious liberty in a country which has denied so much to so many millions belonging to different races and creeds. This book goes at least part of the way towards putting the Jewish issue into the broader context where it belongs.²

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² Reprinted from *Soviet Jewish Affairs*, No. 3, 1972, with kind permission.