

Religion and Soviet Youth

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Religion in Russia seemed to have been extinguished by the early '40s. Hardly any churches were left. True, in Moscow services were still held in some 30 or 40 churches, and in Petersburg five churches remained open. But in the provinces the situation was much worse: practically no churches were open. There was one cemetery chapel in Ryazan, the next nearest being in Astrakhan. One could travel enormous distances without finding a single church. Towns with populations of a million had no prayer house at all. Baku, with its million or so inhabitants, had neither church nor mosque. The towns Kuibyshev, Gorky, Saratov, Odessa, and Rostov-on-Don did not have a church between them. Kiev possessed two churches, but Novosibirsk, a large town, had only one tiny church in the suburbs, whilst Tomsk, Irkutsk and Omsk had no church at all.

Religion was a taboo subject among the Soviet intelligentsia, who considered it bad form even to reveal a nodding acquaintance with it. Throughout the country a plethora of institutes for anti-religious propaganda sprang up; anti-religious newspapers and journals were published and thousands earned their living as anti-religious activists, teachers or museum guides. But they might have been beating the air for all the opposition they encountered. Religion, it seemed, was dead. True, the Easter vigil was attended by vast numbers (including young people), but the return journey from the vigil was a sad one. There was dead silence in the streets and not a single light in the windows. For the majority Easter did not exist.

Yet, despite all this, religion has broken through, like a blade of grass through the cobble stones of a town thoroughfare. Before the war I was teaching literature in a school on the outskirts of Petersburg, beyond the Moscow Gates on Zastav Street (No. 4 School of the Moscow area – now 356 School, Leningrad). Russian Symbolist literature was included in the syllabus of class 10 and four hours were devoted to it each week. I taught 12 of these lessons and remember how well the children, workers' children, received all the religious parts of the 20th century poetry we studied. I can see before me now those 30 children, pale dishevelled little boys and urchin-like girls with pigtails, all of them with their eyes fixed

on me. And I, then only 23, wearing the same cheap jackets as they, was leaning on the ink-stained teacher's table and reading :

When the rowanberry reddens,
 Clustered moist in autumn leaves,
 When the executioner silently
 Drives through my palms the final nails,
 Then, through the blur of tears
 With which I greet approaching death
 A far land opens wide before me,
 And on a river Christ t'ward me sails.
 In his eyes my hopes and dreams,
 He wears my tattered clothes,
 And on his hands, as rowanberries red,
 He bears the pitiful mark of nails.
 Christ, my country stretches out in sadness,
 Upon this cross I am growing tired.
 Will your small boat come and moor beside me,
 Where on high I languish, crucified?

I made no secret of my religious beliefs. Once I told a young acquaintance, a student at the Herzen Institute, that I was a believer and that I went to the Easter vigil each year. He laughed at me ironically, thinking I was just eccentric. Thirty-five years later, however, I met him again unexpectedly in Vienna, where he had come as a result of the war and he told me: "I often remember you: you were the first person to speak to me of religion". And then I discovered that, after hearing my account of the Easter vigil and smiling ironically, he had nonetheless gone to the vigil at the Nikolsky Cathedral. He arrived late, the church was full, so he stood outside in the crowd. He was astounded when the believers sang "Christ has risen" in the church-porch. They all lit candles and started singing. My friend also bought a candle and tried to make out what they were singing. It was this experience which eventually led him to accept the Christian faith ten years later. I also remember two cousins from a Jewish family belonging to the Moscow intelligentsia. One of them had heard of a monk, a *starets* from the Optina monastery, who was in hiding in a Moscow flat. So she and her cousin decided to go and see him, and after several talks they decided to become Christians. One of the cousins even christened her one-year-old son. This child is now one of the most respected and well-known priests in the Russian Orthodox Church – Fr Alexander Men. At the same time in the Bryansk region (deep in the heart of the countryside) a little country lad, Dmitri Dudko, was reading the Gospels; he used to go from house to house, reading them out loud. Dmitri Dudko was also later ordained and is now widely known abroad as a gifted preacher.

With the war came a religious revival in the USSR. In areas occupied by the Germans churches were re-opened on a large scale because of the deep religious devotion of the population. I remember the winter of the Leningrad siege. One day when I was on my way towards Vasilevsky Island I met a middle-aged woman whom I had known as a child. She had at one time been a member of the congregation at the Andreev Cathedral which had been closed long before the war. Now she was seriously ill and swollen from hunger, and complained about the cold and the infirmities of old age. In passing I asked: "And what if the Germans capture Leningrad?" At once she became a different person: her eyes sparkled, she straightened up, and for a moment was young again. "I would throw myself at their feet. 'Sirs, open the Andreev Cathedral!' And I would go there at once to wash and clean everything."

The importance of the religious revival for the war effort was recognized by the Kremlin politicians and on 4 September 1943, Stalin received Metropolitans Sergi, Alexi and Nikolai and authorized the reconstruction of the Russian Orthodox Church. As a result of the "September Concordat" the Patriarchate and hierarchy were reinstated and on the one hand, a restricted number of churches were re-opened, but on the other, the Church was subjected to the cruel political control of the Soviet government. According to the Soviet Constitution then in force, churches were allowed to perform religious ceremonies, but were categorically forbidden to spread "religious propaganda". Nevertheless, the sudden movement towards religion was so strong that in practice it proved impossible to suppress evangelism. When the religious seminaries were re-opened they were literally flooded with young people from all over the country.

Young people today in the USSR continue to be drawn to religion. Why is this? General disillusionment with Marxism-Leninism is one important factor. The infallibility of Soviet ideology received a fatal blow in 1956 when Stalin was dethroned. Now young people no longer take Marxism-Leninism seriously, so there is an ideological vacuum. How is this vacuum usually filled? Mostly, sad to say, with alcohol. But some young people with intellectual interests turn to politics and embark on the road of open opposition to the regime. (They form the main reservoir for the Russian democratic movement.) Then there is a significant proportion of young people who turn to religion. Young intellectuals in the towns find their way to religion through conscious and prolonged searching, whereas workers and peasants in the provinces are drawn to faith because of an elemental impulse, which comes from the subconscious and is inspired. The urban intellectual youth usually join the Orthodox Church, but in the provinces young people usually turn to one of the many different religious sects which exist outside the Orthodox Church.

The Russian Orthodox Church attracts both the most educated and

the most backward sections of the population. Those who fall between these two groups have mostly left the Church. Religious faith (at least openly expressed) is rare amongst the middle-aged (30–50). The highest proportion of church-goers are so-called “old grannies” (*babushki*) – the old women. In the 1920s I used to be told that the old folk were dying off and that the Church would also die. Twenty years then passed, and in 1947 a deacon, who was a superficial and ignorant man, said: “Whatever will happen when the old people die and no one is left in Church?” But since then another 30 years have passed and not only are there no fewer church-goers, there are more. Once again old women predominate. Most of them have had little education; they are cleaning women, domestic workers and women who work in collective farms. Unlike the 1920s, it cannot now be claimed that religion is a survival of the past, since 75 per cent of the old women who go to church today were the Komsomol members of the past and went to Soviet schools. It cannot now be asserted that religion is the prop of the ruling classes of the past, since most of these old women come from worker or peasant backgrounds and can remember nothing of pre-revolutionary ways. After all, those who are in their 70s today were only ten at the time of the Revolution, and so have lived most of their lives under Soviet rule. But apart from the old women, it is the young people aged between 18 and 30 who are now going to church. As a rule, they are members of the intelligentsia, students, young specialists, sometimes young artists and writers. They start by being disillusioned with the ruling ideology, and begin seeking for “the truth”. 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. Two and a half years ago in Leningrad I remember talking to a young man who became interested in religion after reading an article by Lenin, “Lev Tolstoy as a mirror of the Russian Revolution”, which had been part of his syllabus at school. Lenin described Tolstoy as “a prince, become a fool in Christ”, and this caught his attention. So he determined to read all the religious works of Tolstoy, which was no easy task since these books cannot be found in most libraries. Then he became interested in the theology of Metropolitan Makarius and various other Orthodox theological works. As a result, when I met this young man he had become an Orthodox believer who went to church every day and had applied for a place at a seminary. He is by no means unique. I have met several hundred like him.

Fr Dmitri Dudko's discussions in the Church of St Nicholas on Preobrazhenka in Moscow [see *RCL* Vol. 4, No. 2, 1976, pp. 21–7 for a description of one of these. *Ed.*] were a unique event. They took place in the first half of 1974, and on the way there you could see at the tram stop a group of youngsters in modern-looking clothes asking how to find the church.

When you got there the church would be packed with such a strange crowd that it was hard to believe this was not a youth club. There was no sign of the "old women of God". Here there were almost only young people.

Young people like this formed the group who were the constant companions of Fr Dudko and other popular Moscow priests, and many of them were guests at my home too. As a rule, they rarely went to church: Church Slavonic was alien to them and their atheist education; and religious rituals confused them. They would start by reading religious literature, and would often meet other religious people to argue and talk about religion. Gradually, however, they would be overwhelmed by a desire to pray, and would begin turning to prayer more and more as life threw up difficulties in their path. Gradually they would get used to the atmosphere in church; and communion would become a spiritual necessity to them.

The turning of young educated people to the Orthodox Church is a phenomenon of large towns and intellectual circles, but in the provinces it is the sects which are growing. The Soviet government is mortally afraid of sectarianism, because it is difficult to control and impossible to tame. Moreover, the sects in Russia have a huge membership and are deeply rooted in the people. In the 1920s members of sects waged war on the Orthodox Church, tearing from it a sizeable proportion of the people, but now they face the same enemy as the Orthodox – atheism. The sects operate mainly among the broad masses leaving the intelligentsia practically untouched. The Baptists are the most widespread of the sectarian movements. Baptist converts are often young lads from the country or from a small town, they are collective-farm or factory workers, metal-smiths, carpenters or unskilled labourers. They might be white-collar workers, draughtsmen, accountants or technicians. They have been deeply offended by the unrelieved vulgarity of Soviet life – by the all-pervading deception, disgusting fawning, cowardice and unrestrained drunkenness among the young, the debauchery, careerism and the totally selfish search for personal gain. Such young converts know no literature or only what they were taught at school; they are not used to reading. An Orthodox church service is incomprehensible to them with its unfamiliar language, rituals, strange clothes, and wailing old women. After five or ten minutes such a person shrugs his shoulders and leaves. Then he meets a simple fellow like himself who gives him a book containing the following words on the title page: "The Holy Gospel of Our Lord Jesus Christ". He starts reading; much of it is beyond him, much surprises him; but then he begins to read the Sermon on the Mount. Simple, clear words, something concerned with living today. He is soon introduced to Evangelical Christians and meets people as simple as himself,

but people who do not drink alcohol, do not smoke, who reject debauchery and foul language. This is so unlike everything that surrounds him that these people seem to him to have come from another planet.

Whilst in a camp during the Stalin era I made friends with a Romanian Jew who had been sentenced under the same article as myself. He was a committed communist and atheist, although he opposed Stalin's practices. After a while, when he had sized up life in the camp, he said: "I am horrified. I have the impression that the only decent people in your country are members of sects." "How is that?" "Well, you see, they are the only ones who don't drink, don't swear or fight." In camp, where thousands of people are concentrated within a tiny space and everyone's personal life is visible to all, the difference between the sectarians and the other prisoners is accentuated.

Sectarians are set apart by their selflessness. Those interested in financial gain do not join sects; it is not a lucrative occupation. Neither does the careerist join them: there are no golden hats or bishoprics to be earned. Mutual aid is very well-developed among them; you will find neither needy nor idle people among them; all work and help each other. The young lad who is seeking the truth will, therefore, quickly join a sect rather than the Orthodox Church. True, on closer acquaintance the Baptist way will not by any means satisfy everyone. The man who has a need for the mystical will not be satisfied. A meeting of Baptists always reminds me of a house-management committee meeting: first comes the sermon, sometimes original, deep, talented, but more often rather stereotyped; then several hymns and a discussion on current concerns. There is no depth, mystery, nothing reaching beyond the bounds of this world, no ardent prayer. Therefore, many who come to the Baptists do not stay. They are looking for a more deeply mystical experience, for richer religious food. For this reason, mystical sects such as the Pentecostals, Seventh-Day Adventists and Jehovah's Witnesses are growing, despite cruel persecution. These ecstatic sects are gaining most of their converts from amongst young workers and peasants.

All this indicates that Russian youth, awakening from its long sleep, is searching, that it has set out upon a journey. As a child I loved to walk to the early Liturgy in the winter. The Petersburg winter was cold and dark. Life had not yet awoken. The rare person in the street would be hurrying to work; he would slip, get up and start off again. And there, in the distance, would be the church which had only just been opened. The church would still be empty; only the odd pilgrim would be there, placing candles before the icons. One could feel the silence and expectation everywhere. I often feel that Russia is going through such a time of expectation now. The night is over. The sleepers are waking up. Life is beginning to stir. What will the day be like?