

Religion and Russia.

I.

IT is difficult to discover the truth about the events of the last twenty years in Russia. The country is so vast, the situation is so complex and events have moved so swiftly. There is some justification for saying that almost anything that is reported about Russia is probably true, though not the whole truth. And so to present a balanced picture of any aspect of life there is an ambitious task. The writer claims no first-hand knowledge. He claims only to have read some of the best available books, written from a variety of viewpoints, on the religious situation there. And he ventures to write only because of a strong feeling that a right appraisal of that situation is of first importance for a closer mutual understanding.

Communist doctrine is admittedly atheistic. It is not merely a revolt from the superstition and obscurantism of a great deal that has passed for religion, but is a definite philosophy of life. Communists believe that life has a materialistic basis, and that the idea of God is susceptible of a scientific explanation. They claim that the idea has been exploited by priests and tyrants to subjugate men's minds and make them more amenable to the will of their masters; and that religion has in the main proved reactionary, hostile to science and inert in the face of human exploitation. That it is, in fact, the opium of the people. They therefore not only reject religion, they oppose it.

The philosophic theory upon which their teaching is based is commonly known as dialectical materialism. The name is perhaps unfortunate in that it is apt to create a misleading impression. To many people materialism means sensualism, a belief in the reality and value of material things only as they are experienced by the senses—the life of the flesh, the love of money and the comforts and pleasures money will buy. And they suppose that dialectical materialism is some variant of that belief; which is far from being the case. Indeed, no one opposed this view more resolutely than did Lenin himself. "The process of life is creative, and calls for purposeful activity of man." His belief in personality as something alive and creative is worlds apart from a sensual and self-indulgent materialism. No, the dialectical materialist regards all forms of life as rooted in, evolved from, and conditioned by a material universe in process of perpetual change. Matter is the womb out of which all things, even consciousness, reason and religion, ultimately come. An

inner necessity (or nature of things) governs the particular motions or changes in matter that result in the evolution of life in ever higher and more complex forms, including the evolution of man and of human society. According to this theory the idea of God corresponds to no objective spiritual reality, but is man's mental reaction to his sense of helplessness in face of nature or a tyrannical governing class. His inferiority feeling is compensated by the idea of a Heavenly Father, a Mighty Deliverer, who, while He needs to be propitiated for sin, yet can and will bring succour if He be rightly approached. In this way religion is regarded as a by-product of natural and economic factors which has been exploited by the classes of reaction and autocracy; and the belief arises that if nature be conquered by man, and economic security with social justice in a classless society be attained, religion will die. The cause producing it will have been removed.

Well, the Communists have done service in calling attention to a factor that has undoubtedly operated, and an exploitation of religion that has taken place. But that there is something in true religion that cannot be explained along these lines many people most firmly believe. On the scientific ground, they see the evolution of life as response to environment, and hold that the emergence of the spiritual in man postulates a spiritual factor in his environment, in other words, a God who is Spirit, in whom he lives and moves and has his being. On the historical ground, they hold that there is a stream of pure religion running in part through and in part outside of the great religious communions, which simply is not the reactionary, unscientific exploiting influence of communist theory, and simply is not susceptible to the explanation of it that is offered. This, however, is not the place to argue the issue. The point at the moment is simply that here is an issue to be settled, not by abuse or repression, but by free, frank and friendly discussion. To vilify, to distort, to be violently partisan, to raise bogeys, to persecute, either on the one side or the other, is to do grave disservice to truth, and to copy a gross and characteristic evil of Nazidom which we are fighting to destroy. Let each be free to commend his view of the universe to the judgment and conscience of men, without let or hindrance; and let the truth prevail.

If the Communist really believes that, with the advance of science and the deliverance of the masses from exploitation, religion will disappear, because the need for it will have gone, why should he attempt to suppress it? Why refuse it the right of a condemned man to say what it has to say for itself before it dies? On the other hand, if the Christian is convinced of the essential truth of his religion, there is no need for him to be shocked or scandalised by those who challenge it, much less to

make the unwarrantable assertion that an honest atheist cannot be a good man.

In the matter of morality, as a matter of fact, the Governments of "Christian" Britain and "Atheistic" Russia have things they can profitably learn of each other. We have hitherto been loud in our mutual abuse of each other's immoralities, and there is no need to dwell further on them here. It is with no desire to whitewash what is wrong and ought to be condemned, one pleads the importance of appreciating also what is right and ought to be commended. So shall we make progress in understanding.

From his first-hand experience of Russia the Dean of Canterbury lists a number of the ways in which Soviet Russia seems more Christian to him than the Christendom of the West. He finds a greater zest for life, as if there had been for multitudes a real release of spirit. The sickness of an acquisitive society, from which we suffer in the West, has been largely cured. Mammon is no longer worshipped as it has been for generations here. All work is regarded as honourable. No idle class is tolerated. And none may make personal profits from the labour of another. The work of each enriches all.

Further, the Dean maintains that the fear that haunts and harasses the workers of other lands has largely disappeared. The individual trusts himself to the community. He has not only lost the dread of sickness, unemployment and old age, he no longer fears to have children, lest he be unable to support and educate them. Corroboration of this impression is to be found in the high and rising birth rate; and in the vast and loving provision that has been made for the well-being of childhood. Not possessions, but people, and especially little people, are reckoned the nation's true wealth. They are treasured accordingly.

It does not appear true that, by and large, the sanctity of marriage and the home has been undermined. It is true that divorce is more easily obtained. But prostitution is disappearing. Abortion, after being for a time permitted, is now prohibited. And, according to Sir Bernard Pares' observation, "the amount of crime and moral licentiousness has not increased." The Dean is sure it has diminished.

There is much to be said, of course, on the other side. Much that both in theory and practice is not Christian. The O.G.P.U. is a sinister institution and an undoubted source of terror still. The blood purges, the strict governmental control of the Press, the attempt to stamp out religion, all these are sinister features of the present régime that must not be minimised, and cannot be just explained away. Moreover, Christian leaders who have had access to Russia and have been able to move freely among the

people, miss a certain quality of life in even the best of the Communists and the new order they are setting up. Here, for example, is an American minister, Thomas Harris, who writes after an extensive lecture tour, that what he missed was that rare quality of life called "holiness." "I saw no saints among the Communists. There was no desire to reach out beyond the human." Communism will never produce a St. Francis or a Father Damien or a David Livingstone. The fairer division of the good things of this life is certainly a matter of social justice, about which many Christians have been all too lamentably apathetic, in spite of the thunderings of Amos and the rest of the prophets, and the clear teaching of Jesus Christ. But if and when that is achieved, and all men live in freedom from want and fear, well-housed, well-fed, well-doctored, well-educated, what then? What is to prevent a comfortable, complacent community from becoming a prey to the corruption of all things mortal? In the worship and service of the High and Holy One, who allows no man to be content with the level of his moral attainment, but sets before mankind the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ, there is a salt in the earth purifying it from this corruption. But apart from that what else is there? The Communist may well reply, "But where is the evidence of this salt of the earth? Do you mean the Church? Because, if so, I'm afraid the salt has lost its savour." And we must confess that, as our Lord warned us, it is all too easy for that to happen, and that all too often it *has* happened. But not always, and not everywhere.

II.

The Orthodox Church before the revolution was virtually a Department of State. It accepted state privileges in return for services rendered. Its fate and fortune were largely bound up with that of the Tzar. Its hierarchy supported the Tzarist régime even in its most repressive measures. And its priests were not infrequently in league with the secret police. Resistance was regularly offered to popular education, religious liberty and social reform. There was little living preaching. The liturgy was in old Slavonic, and unintelligible to the masses, who were ignorant and superstitious. Their credulity has been fair game for the Bolsheviks, who have been diligent in exposing the many pious frauds practised on the people, and in exploiting them to discredit religion itself. The genesis of such deplorable parodies as "The blight of the world is Jesus" is not difficult to detect. It appears, however, that the League of Militant Atheists have overdone this negative propaganda through pamphlets and museums. Sir Bernard Pares declares that people are getting bored with it.

Young people are saying, "If there is no God, why bother so much about the subject?"

In the early days of the revolution it was less this aspect of established religion that aroused the hostility of the new government than the relentless opposition of the hierarchy and many of the priests. "No social group was so consistently and uncompromisingly their enemy" (Hecker). It is not surprising that drastic action against the Church was taken, and that many bishops and priests perished. The violence and murder were indeed deplorable. And yet if the pressure of necessary social changes is too long resisted, it seems inevitable that, when the dam at last gives way, the passionate demand for social justice sweeping over a country with angry waves should involve much loss of life. And it may be that, as Sir Bernard Pares says, and I have heard Orthodox Churchmen admit, the best medicine the Church could have had to purge her was a strong dose of persecution.

But this story of reaction and corruption is not the whole truth about the Orthodox Church. There was a group within it, little known to the outside world, that embraced its most creative thinkers and some true saints, "whose sound learning, humility and love gave them an understanding of others and a singular gift of relieving spiritual need" (Zernov). Dostoievsky was among them. It claimed freedom and rejected the way of violence, and its influence was out of all proportion to its numbers. It is said that at the time of the revolution a considerable number of priests, deeply dissatisfied with the subservience of the Church to the State, were leaning towards this position.

Here, then, is a stream of vital spiritual life in a church widely and sadly corrupted, and its influence has been felt of recent years in the creative thinking and writing that has emanated from exiles in Paris and London, many of whom, while deploring its godlessness and violence, are in other ways friendly to the new order in Russia. They see in the Communist faith a burning desire to create what Christians would call "the Kingdom of Heaven on earth." "And we may hope that this will for the future is not displeasing to God, and will not be turned to shame" (Bulgakov).

The Russian Church has been isolated from the rest of Christendom, and has lacked what a wider fellowship might have helped to supply. Her approach to religion has been predominantly through beauty, and her main interest worship. She has found her supreme religious expression through the art of music. The rendering of the liturgy to the accompaniment of a Russian Choir is an act of worship of most moving and haunting beauty. Doctrinal theology and social reform have made comparatively

little appeal. There has been greater emphasis on the merit of enduring suffering than on that of removing its causes. But in the longing for personal holiness, in reverence for the saint above the priest, in the search for the Christian answer to life's personal problems, and in this sense of the value of beauty in worship, the best in the Russian Church is a most precious contribution to the life of Christendom. And, be it said, the Communists have never attacked worship as such.

But alongside the Orthodox Church there have been a number of Evangelical Communions also, most conspicuous among which are the Baptists, "energetic, well-organised, and aflame with prophetic zeal" (Hecker). Theirs is a simple form of Bible Christianity, with a fundamentalist trend and a strong puritan strain, which makes them suspicious of science, but sympathetic to the appeal of social justice. They were on the side of the people in their struggle against oppression by Church and State. Much of their persecution came from the Orthodox Church, for they drew not a few of their converts from it.

In the first ten or twelve years of the revolution they enjoyed religious freedom for the first time, and their numbers increased beyond any computing. Indeed it was probably the rapid expansion of all the Evangelical Churches that led to the formation of the "Union of Militant Atheists," and later to the decree of 1929 designed to hamstring religion. The anti-God campaign was led by Yaroslavsky, a man of considerable intelligence and ability. But he found it difficult to generate and maintain a widespread atheistic enthusiasm sufficient as a counterblast to this religious revival. He complained that the Trades Unions and the Comsomol (League of Young Communists) were ready enough to pass resolutions advocating the extinction of religion, but that they didn't do much more. And by 1929 it became apparent that government action must be taken if the growth of religion was to be checked, as the Communist party ardently desires. So the new decree was promulgated. The main provisions were that while atheistic propaganda might continue, there must be no more religious propaganda, thus ruling out evangelism. While atheism might be taught to children, Christianity must not be taught them outside the family. That while registered persons over eighteen might assemble for worship, there must be no meetings for youth or for women, no prayer meetings or Bible classes, and no social activities of any kind. Nor must preachers officiate outside their own Church. It was hoped thus that, while retaining a façade of religious liberty, the roots of religious life would be cut; and that with no converts or children coming into the churches, they would in due course die. And there is no denying that the new restrictions have had a most damaging effect. A very hard few

years for these churches followed, and no religious leader from the world outside was allowed any more to come in and report what was happening. The administration of the decree varied, but in many cases was very harsh. It was dangerous to preach. Phrases removed from their context were twisted by O.G.P.U. men to have a political significance; and the preacher vanished. Orders would be issued for chapels to be put into repair according to the latest hygienic and other standards. Then a "democratic" vote would be taken of the townsmen as to the use to which this excellent building should be put. And if, as often happened, the vote decided it should become a cinema or a club, the believers lost their place of worship on which their own money had been spent. And, worst of all, there spread the same kind of atmosphere of fear and furtiveness that is characteristic of the situation in Germany under the Gestapo. The churches were not suppressed, they were gradually suffocated.

One other serious blow to religion was the institution of the six-day week. This made the keeping of Sunday by believers extremely difficult. Absence from work means loss of wages and even food, and can be punished in other ways too. The seven-day week, however, has recently been restored.

It has been a hard time. Many pastors have been exiled, many churches closed. The decree did what it was intended to do. It put a check to the visible spread and outward observance of religion. But it has not killed religion itself. The Soviet Government's estimate before the war was that two-thirds of the people in the country and one-third in the towns were still believers.

It will not do, on the basis of the original constitution, to maintain that there is religious liberty in Russia. The facts do not support it. It is true that churches are still open and worship is still carried on. The official report of the Soviet Union gives 8,338 churches and mosques as open, and 30,000 registered religious communities. But these figures cease to be impressive when one remembers that the population of Russia is approaching 200,000,000, and that there is, therefore, less than one church to 25,000 persons, and that, whereas the churches in Moscow before the war numbered (according to Baedeker) 497, there are to-day fewer than forty. This is due not to the decay of religion. It appears impossible to escape the conclusion that it is the result of religious persecution. Attempts to explain away and minimise such facts as these do not help mutual understanding and co-operation. They are better admitted and faced frankly on both sides. For religious freedom is one of the four freedoms defined by President Roosevelt for which the democracies are at war with Hitler. And it matters. That this policy of religious re-

pression is not being a complete success seems to be coming home to the Soviet Government. Lunacharsky, formerly Commissar for education, remarked that, "Religion is like a nail, the harder you hit it the deeper it goes into the wood." There certainly seems to be an easing of the policy of religious suppression of late years, partly perhaps through realisation that it is not wise, and partly because it complicates diplomatic relations with Britain and still more with America. Readers may remember a letter put out by Russian Baptists and published in the *Baptist Times* last July, obviously with the consent of the Soviet Government, and more than possibly at its instigation. It was evidence that it realises the sensitiveness of the Anglo-Saxon world in the matter of religious liberty, and that it is a factor weighing in its policy towards the churches. But if it has eased up on the harshness of administration, it has not yet rescinded the repressive decrees of 1929.

We may hope, as Russia and the Western democracies are welded ever more closely together in the fires of war, that this may eventually happen, and that we may see the day when the scales are held fairly between religion and anti-religion, so that truth, wherever it lies, may have free course and prevail. And it may be, as Dr. Hecker suggests, that eventually Communists and Christians will come to a new and deeper mutual understanding, by the rediscovery of the significance of Jesus for the new age.

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BIBLIOGRAPHY.

The following books, that are cheap and readable, may be recommended :—

- Russia.* Bernard Pares. (Penguin Special, 6d.)
Moscow, The Third Rome. Nicolas Zernov. (S.P.C.K., 1s. 6d.)
Russia and Ourselves. Victor Gollancz. (Gollancz, 2s. 6d.)
The Socialist Sixth of the World. Hewlett Johnson. (Gollancz, 3s. 6d.)

Also, rather more expensive :—

- Religion and Communism.* J. F. Hecker, Ph.D. (Chapman and Hall.)