

# In Soviet Central Asia

By J. C. POLLOCK

CENTRAL ASIA is generally regarded as a blank on the missionary map. I had always thought that from the Hindu Kush, bastion of Kashmir, northwards until you come to European Russia no Christians were to be found. A visit to Soviet Central Asia proved me wrong. The Christians of Central Asia have, indeed, a good deal to teach the churches of the West, although suffering from a lack of prayer support and understanding from their brethren in other lands.

The city of Tashkent, with a population of over a million, is capital of Uzbekistan—the Uzbek Soviet Socialist Republic. A century ago, like all Central Asia, it was independent, a Moslem sovereignty which the Tsarist Empire overthrew. Russia and Great Britain gradually thrust themselves deeper into the Asian hinterland. Britain has withdrawn, Russia has not. Her Asian colonies, nominally independent, have been absorbed into the monolithic Soviet Empire. Conquest, and emigration either voluntary or forced, as when German-speaking Soviet citizens were deported into Central Asia because of suspect loyalty during the Second World War, have combined with a kindly climate and the absence of sea barrier to create in Central Asia a mixed population of Europeans and indigenous Turkestans.

Down a backstreet of Tashkent, its potholes filled with unexpected rain, we were taken to an unmarked compound which from the outside looked no different from the surrounding small suburban houses, each behind its wall. The Baptist-Evangelical Church must not advertise its whereabouts, though a discreet notice is displayed on the gate in some cities in the "world's first country of mass atheism". The Tashkent church had suffered an accidental fire not long before and had rigged up over the benches a khaki-coloured marquee with open sides through which you could see the vines growing on the wall. The sanctuary or platform had escaped the fire, and so had the vestry, but the whole scene was barely ecclesiastical and had a faint resemblance to some rally of the Caravan Mission to Village Children.

If the setting was casual, the people were not. They knew why they had come and were determined to enjoy themselves and to drink a deep draught from the wells of Salvation. It was a week-night, and the congregation had been depleted somewhat because Fidel Castro had the bad manners to visit Tashkent the same day as ourselves (John Lawrence, the Editor of *Frontier*, my wife, a Russian brother from Moscow, and the Baptist Superintendent of Central Asia) and most of Tashkent was buzzing around him. A very appreciable attendance, however, made the canvas roof echo as they sang. On the right sat the men, the older ones with long beards, on the left the women, all in headscarves, the older in front, the younger behind. There were more women than men, and the average age seemed fairly high until you looked behind you and saw the choir—young men and women whose faces showed the strength of their faith and devotion. Young and old, the members of the congregation were typical Soviet workers.

Several features impressed me especially in this service and similar services elsewhere in Central Asia. One was the singing. Because of

the grave shortage of hymnbooks (and of Bibles: a small indication of Soviet discrimination against Christians) the pastor reads out each verse and the people then sing it, unaccompanied, by heart. The words of the Russian evangelical hymns are always scriptural, often evangelistic, and nearly all centred on the Person of Christ. Some are adapted from Moody and Sankey or other foreign sources, many are indigenous. The congregational singing is slow, in the Orthodox tradition, and may seem dreary until you get attuned. But when the choir begins to sing on its own the slight sense of dreariness is blown away. Those Russian choirs pack verve and sunshine into their anthems and songs. Complicated part-singing, sensitive solos, the look on their faces as they praise their Lord or tell of His mercies in song, leave an indelible impression on a western visitor, especially when he knows something of the difficulties and petty persecutions which are the normal environment of these brethren.

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A second point in Central Asian churches such as Tashkent is the sense of fellowship, both within the local congregation and between one church and another. If a visitor has come from another church he is invited to say a word of greeting. The congregation listens excitedly and springs to its feet spontaneously to shout "Greetings to. . . ." As for ourselves, since foreigners scarcely ever come (we were the first to get right among these churches for very many years) the sense of thrill and interest was almost pathetic. And afterwards, as we ate luscious strawberries and marvellously iced cakes and drank (strictly non-alcoholic !) with the church leaders in the vestry, they plied us with questions ranging from an exact inquiry about the manner of our conversions, to our views on the Second Coming. These Russian evangelicals love to hear and tell testimonies. If a man cannot remember exactly how and when he turned from darkness to light, from the power of Satan unto God, they are a little disturbed as to whether he is a Christian at all.

There is one way that fellowship may be disrupted—through over-zeal in laying down the exact frontiers of "worldiness" and "separation from the world". In another church we visited, some way by plane across the mountains, down near the Afghanistan border, it was obvious from the drift of one of the sermons that this was a pressing problem. They were wonderfully united in one sense, for no less than eleven nationalities were represented of European or Asiatic stock and no discrimination of race or colour obtruded. But they tended to fall out over questions of "sanctification".

Moral discipline is strict. A man must be married before he can be ordained. In the Orthodox Church too a parish priest must be married, but whereas when widowed the Orthodox may not remarry, among the Baptists a presbyter is expected to remarry reasonably promptly unless distinctly aged. It is possible that sensitivity to matters of sex (they were quite surprised to hear that the C.M.S. contains plenty of unmarried missionaries, male and female, and that trouble is rare) may come partly from historical reasons, a reaction against early Soviet licence in the nineteen-twenties, when abortion, divorce, contraception, and pre-marital intercourse were accepted as

perfectly correct revolutionary behaviour. The unbreakable ban on tipping of any kind is certainly derived from history: the record of drunkenness among the Russian peasantry was extremely high, and the first Baptists and Evangelical Christians (the two sects which, with Pentecostalists and Mennonites unite in the present "All Russian Union of Evangelical Christians/Baptists") set their face rigidly against vodka and all alcohol, with striking effect on the kindness and cleanliness of their homes.

The Russian Baptist in the country districts and regional cities is a nineteenth-century Puritan in his estimate of "worldliness" and can be excessively narrow-minded. Younger pastors are a trifle amused. "Some of our country members are very narrow-minded," said one. "Some won't even take a plane." Some of the pastors won't even use a bicycle because of the old tradition that "the Lord's work should be done on foot". A pale-faced youth expressed astonishment when his pastor told him to take up a sport, and in reply quoted, "bodily exercise profiteth little. . . ." The pastor taught him the text's true meaning and told him to do gymnastics.

Cinemas, the theatre, the opera are "worldly". If a westerner is critical of Russian Baptist views on "separation", he should pause before he passes judgment; for were the Soviet way of life less deliberately hostile to Christianity, and the frontier between belief and unbelief less rigidly walled, wired, and mined by atheist hatred of Christians, the extremes might be gently eased away. As it is, this unworldliness binds Christians together and helps their defence against atheist encroachments.

If the price of discipline is a tendency to pharisaism which, as in any country, can spoil churches and frustrate their growth, a sure sign of the basic spiritual health of Russian evangelicals is that the quality of mercy overrides censoriousness, the positive joys of living outweigh differences about behaviour, fraternal love is no mere catchword: the Russian evangelical is essentially a New Testament church and its motto, *God is Love*, displayed in coloured texts on every church wall, is no empty catch-phrase.

This love breeds unity, and it is a unity which at last is crossing denominational barriers. Evangelical Anglicans are naturally interested in the relationship between the Orthodox and the Baptists in the Soviet Union. There used to be a deep gulf; once again the causes lie in history. The early Baptist-Evangelicals suffered severely in Tsarist times from persecution by church and state, closely intertwined with the state dominating the church, which it regarded as an important bulwark of the autocracy and any religious nonconformity as almost tantamount to treason. Unfortunately the majority of Orthodox priests entered wholeheartedly into the policy of repression, and did their utmost to extinguish the Evangelicals. Nevertheless much that was best in Orthodoxy was carried, almost unconsciously and despite mutual antipathy into the Baptist stream. Baptist services are unliturgical yet have a sense of tradition and dignity that used to be lacking in much Western nonconformist worship. And now the suspicions between Orthodox and Baptists, already resolved at higher levels, are everywhere dying. I recall a jovial

Orthodox Archbishop in one Central Asian city, as he sat in his little house plying us with food (and wines by the dozen, almost !) saying of the Baptists, between mouthfuls: " They can go where we with our robes and paraphernalia cannot. Our priests can't go into factories. The Baptists can—they work there ". He took a sip of Georgian champagne, and added, with expressive gestures: " We used to chase them with a pitchfork. Now we draw them to us with a kiss of peace ! "

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One of the most delightful facets of the Russian Baptist services in Central Asia was the time of prayer.

No church may have a " prayer-meeting " as such, it being unlawful to hold any " special service " whatever; even a choir-practice is technically against the law. Confusion is sometimes caused among western readers by the fact that Soviet writing often refers to a Baptist " prayer-meeting ", but that is the phrase used to describe a non-Orthodox service, just as " prayer-house " is the normal word for a Baptist church. The time of prayer takes place within the context of the normal service, and instead of the long meandering extempore solo from the pastor which is often heard in British nonconformity, the Russian pastor leads but the congregation join. The pastor puts a petition and the people echo it, each in his or her own words in a whisper, until the church is filled with a whispering like a quiet sea lapping celestial sands. It is rather like the daily dawn prayer time in Christian longhouses in Borneo, where they all talk to the Lord individually but aloud, each strengthened and encouraged by the sound of his neighbour's voice.

After the pastor had prayed, a short time followed in which any member of the congregation might pray, and I was specially moved to hear a young man in the choir pray briefly in thanksgiving to the Lord for bringing him to Himself. Choir attendance is frequently a road to conversion. A friend is introduced and attends because he loves singing; or the son of a Christian family, who might easily drift away, comes to sing. And in due time his heart opens to the Gospel.

One Church said that scarcely a service goes by without a conversion during the preaching. And that brings me to the heart of the Baptist service—the sermon. Or two sermons rather. Every service has at least two sermons ! And they will not be short. The appetite of these Russian Christians is quite amazing—a standing rebuke to the " ten minutes and don't you go on too long " attitude which our impatience imposes on many an English vicar.

The preaching is tremendously biblical. The atmosphere is prophetic in the sense that there is a note of " Thus saith the Lord ", humming right through the preaching. The Bible is expounded in depth and breadth and the congregation takes the preacher's points. As you speak you notice your points go home, with a nod or a blissful smile or a whispered " Amen ". The *participation* of the congregation in the sermon is all the more remarkable because so few of the people possess Bibles. There is an acute—and artificial—shortage of Bibles. Most evangelical families probably possess one Bible, even if it is a huge old

to me printed before the Revolution. Many people depend on Scripture portions written out by hand; a new convert will find considerable difficulty and will go to great lengths to obtain a copy of the New Testament at least, and will even borrow a friend's in order to learn great stretches by heart.

For all this, speakers and listeners are soaked in the Bible. Scripture illuminates Scripture. Allusions are caught instantly, thoughts may be followed through without involved explanations. Unconsciously it is Wesley and Spurgeon and Moody rolled into one, yet distinctively Russian; traditional yet contemporary, an amalgam of Bible doctrine and stark experience. The Russian examines what the New Testament teaches about man and God, sets it in the unfolding context of the whole Bible as a unity and proclaims it. For him the Bible, as received, is the revealed Word of God, not to be treated mechanically or in isolation, but as the road to and the message from the Lord Jesus. The Russian pastor—and his folk—believe unquestionably that the Holy Spirit applies His word to the minds and hearts of the sincere. The Bible speaks to his condition. He seeks to live by it. It is the means by which the Lord teaches, and the Lord is Risen, is his best Friend. The Russian Baptist does not know the Anglican liturgy, but his attitude could be beautifully expressed by the collect for the Fourth Sunday after Easter, living as he is in the midst of a harsh and alien environment: "O Almighty God, who alone canst order the unruly wills and affections of sinful men; grant unto thy people that they may love the thing which thou commandest, and desire that which thou dost promise; that so, among the sundry and manifold changes of the world, our hearts may surely there be fixed, where true joys are to be found."

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Because the Russian Evangelical is a church imbued with the Word, it is an expanding church. If they had nothing else to teach us (and they have) the Russians are a standing example of the truth that a church loyal to the Bible is an expanding church.

The belief that they are hanging on by the fingernails is wide of the mark. The Church in the Soviet Union is growing; the very increase of discriminatory pressure by the State (which is only a polite way of saying "persecution") in recent years is proof that religion, far from dying, as by Communist dogma it should die, is on the increase, especially among the young. Despite shortage of Bibles, the pulling down of churches, the trapping and tripping of Christians into acts that are technically unlawful and many land them in prison or a fine; despite the constant stream of abuse and misrepresentation which flows from the press, radio, and television, more Soviet men and women are coming into the discovery of Jesus Christ as Saviour, Master, and Friend. Conversions do not depend solely on church buildings or on the work of pastors. As an Orthodox Metropolitan said, "Among the Baptists every old woman is a missionary."

A Christian family moves to a village where there is no church. By the transparent goodness of their lives, by their singing and praying in the home, by their constant zeal for friendly help to neighbours, they succeed in founding a little local church—despite the rigorous

state ban on open persuasion: proselytism or any religious propaganda is a serious infringement of the Soviet's constitutional right to believe or *not* to believe, whereas anti-religious propaganda is permitted and has the whole weight of state aid behind it. The church grows because the laity is instructed, zealous, missionary minded.

Growth in Central Asia is primarily among those of European extraction, though here and there a Moslem or ex-Moslem comes into a congregation, and were true freedom of religion ever to arrive, the growth of Christianity among the indigenous Asians would be phenomenal—and could have enormous repercussions in other parts of Asia, for the basic antipathy of Soviet Moslems for the Christians among their neighbours has been broken down by the state's anti-religious policy; in one city we were told of a group of Moslems who lived far from the only mosque which had been allowed to stay open but near a Baptist church. They asked their mullah if they might attend. He answered, "Yes. The Baptists worship the one God like we do, and not idols like the Orthodox!"

The Russian Baptist Church, growing all the time, is proof that an instructed, virile laity may bring expansion despite hostile environment and lack of pastors; and proof that faithful biblical preaching will result in men and women discovering the open secret of the friendship of Christ. These Russians really do "walk with the Lord", and I am sure I am not the only one who found it easier to "abide in Him" after being among them. Communists may sneer or snarl; the Baptists believe in the sovereign grace of God, read of the exceeding greatness of His power, expect Him to transform men and women—and, whatever detractors may claim, men and women are transformed.

I have said little here about atheist attempts to extinguish Christianity in the Soviet Union, about the growing anti-Christian pressure from the state, or about the tensions generated in the churches by the anti-religious laws. I have gone fully into this grievous subject in my book, *The Christians from Siberia*, to be published in November, and prefer not to recapitulate such painful matters.

Rather would I end these notes by the memory of an incident which seemed to typify the marvellous triumph of Christ in Russia today.

In a city of Central Asia the Baptists had come together to greet us. They had packed the church to the very doors, the men on the right, the women on the left, the young men standing shoulder to shoulder in the aisles for a two hour service, and the choir massed at the back of the platform. I had been asked to preach one of the sermons and an English-speaking presbyter stood by me translating. Knowing that when you preach by interpretation a phrase in your hearers' own language is always appreciated, I had learned the ancient Russian Eastern greeting and, with no idea of what I would set off, closed my sermon by saying: "And let my last words to you, probably pronounced all wrong, be 'Christ is Risen', *Khristos Voskrese!*"

To my amazement the whole congregation rose as one and roared back, 'He is Risen Indeed!' Twice more they roared it until the rafters rang. Then the choir, without forewarning or any hesitation struck up a glorious Easter anthem in which the entire congregation joined: *Christ is Risen Indeed!*