

A Year of Drift

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On 14 October, 1964, Khrushchev fell from power. The immediate reaction of Soviet citizens was one of uncertainty. Both fears and hopes were kindled. Among religious believers it could only have been hope. Since 1959 they had been subjected to a massive anti-religious onslaught, whose erratic progress cumulatively engendered a "cultural revolution" that more than doubled the institutions propagating atheism and better than halved the number serving religious needs. The sudden change of leadership gave rise to hope for an annulment or even a reversal of this policy. This hope increased with each day that no certain sign came as to what the religious line of the new leadership would be. It took a full year for the uncertainty to resolve itself, and for the "new" religious policy to be unveiled. What follows is a brief essay on the significance of this year in recent Soviet religious history.

The thesis can be briefly stated. 1965 was a special year in the Soviet Union, certainly on the religious front. To embrace this year within the more general periodization of events "since" or "after" Khrushchev's fall is to miss much of value. To view it as a time of thaw, however short-lived, is to move in the right direction, although the metaphor is better applied to the religious landscape than to religious policy. In 1965 there was no overarching religious policy. It was a year of "non-policy"; or perhaps better described as "a year of drift." This drift promoted or permitted the rise of forces which in turn necessitated and shaped the religious policy of the new leadership.

The drift that occurred after October 1964 in Soviet religious policy was not absolute, so inseparably enmeshed is this policy in the overall politics and policies of the Party leadership. Thus, even though the new leaders were from the outset too busy disestablishing Khrushchevism – the Party reorganization, the regional economic councils, the consumer priorities – and too busy establishing their own *bona fides* with power enclaves at home and Communist Parties abroad to concern themselves with so tertiary a matter as religion, the disestablishment process itself had a certain spill-over into religious affairs. Where this was most marked was in the cessation of *administrirovanie*, i.e., the use of administrative measures to close churches, withdraw registration from priests, restrict

religious activity, and harass the lives of believers. Though officially but not publicly condemned in May-June 1964, little seems to have been done to end such coercion until after Khrushchev's removal from power.¹ And even then, that the demise of administrative pressure was slow, and never really complete, is perhaps another sign of its tangential origin. A month after Khrushchev's fall the KGB, militia, and auxiliary police launched a new attack on the Pochayev monastery, and in yet another eight months, "on the night of 15-16 July 1965 the militiamen beat up the Christians who were taking overnight refuge in the cemetery . . .". Not until that autumn does a measure of peace seem to have come to the monastery.² The Orthodox seminary at Lutsk survived into 1965, but no longer.³ Baptist children suffered interrogation at the hands of official investigators in Zhitomir in December 1964 and May 1965, as at Rostov in July 1965. And 1965 is the year Aida Skripnikova of Leningrad was arrested and given the first of her prison sentences.⁴

Nevertheless, the broader testimony of religious *samizdat* points to a substantial decline in administrative pressure after the removal of Khrushchev. This development received sanction and spur with the appearance of an article in the January 1965 issue of *Sovetskoe gosudarstvo i pravo* (The Soviet State and Law), written by the Vice-Chairman of the Supreme Court of the RSFSR, which described such measures as improper and counter-productive. This same viewpoint had as early as June 1964 asserted itself at the government councils responsible for religious affairs. Reasserted in the spring of 1965, by August it had come to prevail, for in that month provincial representatives of the two councils were called to Moscow to hear their respective chiefs, Kuroyedov and Puzin, catalogue the administrative abuses which had been perpetrated against the religious communities, and call for a halt to the practice.⁵ However, with the exception of the rehabilitation of a number of prisoners, chiefly Baptists,⁶ no initiative was taken to make restitution for the institutional and personnel losses, numbering in the 1000's, incurred by the religious citizenry during Khrushchev's campaign. Nor was there any restoration of the legal rights taken away or withdrawal of the harsher penalties introduced in the 1961-1962 overhaul of Soviet religious legislation⁷ (unless one counts the September 1965 liberalization of the "anti-parasite law" which at times had been applied to religious believers).⁸ Partial though the amelioration of religious conditions in 1965 may have been, and however much the result of alien policy changes, the alterations wrought on the religious front were highly significant. The virtual end of *administrirovanie* broke the momentum built up by Khrushchev's anti-religious campaign. This in turn had correlative effects, most

especially within the anti-religious community and among religious dissidents. What occurred in these worlds in this “year of drift” is important not only for the comprehension but for the determination of events in that year, and – as will be suggested – since that year.

The decline of administrative attacks on religion made no dent in the volume of atheist output by the anti-religious community. Some 300 books on atheist themes were published in 1965, the approximate number for the preceding year, and the 738,188 lectures of atheist import, sponsored by the Knowledge Society, represented an increase⁹ of mild proportions. Where change first appeared was in the tone. The January 1965 issue of the atheist monthly, *Nauka i religiya* (Science and Religion), came out in a new format, bright and eye-catching, as if better to advertise its product. The same issue of the Ukrainian language counterpart recorded a more dramatic alteration of tone, changing its name from *Voiovnychiy ateist* (The Militant Atheist) to *Liudyna i svit* (Man and the World). Of greater import, in these journals as well as in the national and provincial press – e.g., *Pravda*, *Izvestia*, *Trud*, *Selskaya zhizn*, *Komsomolskaya pravda*, *Sovetskaya Moldavia*, *Pravda Ukrainy*, *Pravda Vostoka* – a virtual moratorium set in on articles by religious apostates or with slanderous attacks on individual believers. To the moderation of tone, there was soon added more sharply-hued colours and variegated lines. Coinciding with and reinforced by the March 1965 dismissal of L. F. Ilichev as Ideological Secretary and the dissolution of the Central Committee’s Ideological Commission, this latter trend deserves some examination. It affords valuable insights into the hierarchical dependence of Soviet religious policy, and even more into the divergencies of the anti-religious community, which apart from rare years like the “year of drift” find little or no public expression.

The first clear expression of conflict appeared in the March 1965 issue of *Nauka i religiya*. It contained a “Letter from the Editors” attacking Alla Trubnikova, a veteran publicist whose numerous atheist writings included an exposé of life in a convent based on her experiences there in the guise of a pilgrim. It was not simply such methods of investigation that the editors found reprehensible, but also the substance of her writings – the depiction of believers as scoundrels or vagrants, or mental and moral cripples, the argument that religious practice is a form of criminal behaviour and that those who profess faith are politically suspect persons and enemies of Soviet society. Religion, the editors argued, is a false and foolish ideology, but believers in the Soviet Union are loyal citizens who deserve no ill respect. To win them to scientific atheism demands patient dialogue, not the slanderous charges of Trubnikova which are well-

adapted "to encourage those with a fondness for crude administrative measures". The "Letter from the Editors" brought forth numerous reactions from readers, some of which were printed in the September and October issues. Among those siding with the editorial board was A. A. Osipov, who had himself been a *cause célèbre* in 1959 when he resigned his position as professor of Old Testament studies at the Leningrad Theological Academy, renounced his faith through the pages of *Pravda*, and took a position as a professional *antireligioznik* on the staff of the Leningrad Museum of the History of Religion and Atheism. Some readers took issue with the editors, including, as might be expected, Alla Trubnikova herself. What could not be expected was that the journal would print these rejoinders. The editorial board, to be sure, reserved the last word to itself, and in so doing significantly broadened its criticism to include *Izvestia*, where, it was stated, there are obviously some comrades who forget the ideological character of religion and wish to combat it chiefly by means of the Criminal Code.¹⁰

Izvestia did in fact in 1965 continue its generally harsh line on the religious question. The opposing viewpoint was not introduced or allowed in its pages. Others of the Soviet press proved equally monolithic in approach, although the position adopted could as often as not have been a moderate one, as was the case with *Sovetskaya Rossiya*. Thus in this fashion, too, debate was unveiled and furthered. Moreover, *Nauka i religiya* was not alone in permitting discussion inside its own pages. *Komsomolskaya pravda* also chose this path, though less determinedly.¹¹ Still, its issue of 15 August 1965 published what was perhaps the frankest and most fascinating contribution to the entire discussion. It had been idle, said the author, the Lvov atheist G. Kelt, to believe that religion could be abolished in a day, as if it were not "a historical phenomenon that has existed for thousands of years".

And today we are again lulling ourselves (by the thought that) many believers in our country have left the Church and religion. This is self-deception. It is true that in the greater part of the territory of the Soviet Union there are no churches and no servants of the cult. But believers there are; if not Orthodox, then all shades of sectarians . . . The closing of a parish does not make atheists out of believers. On the contrary, it attracts people all the more to religion and in addition embitters their hearts.

A "bare, negative, bookish-oratorical atheism" cannot succeed, for it does not reach the level of aesthetic and emotional needs. What is needed, concluded Kelt much like Comte a century before, is a new shrine "dedicated to the apotheosis of the genius of Man," a new ritual "that would replace the liturgy of the Church".

It is perhaps not surprising that however informative the anti-religious press may have been in 1965, an even clearer glimpse into the make-up of institutional organs, ideological positions, and personality types advancing “scientific atheism” is given in a *samizdat* document. It contains the account of a meeting which the religious writer Anatoli Levitin had in Moscow “with representatives of the anti-religious community”. That the meeting itself occurred in 1965 tells its own story. Those present included “two important officials of the KGB, the managing director of the State Political Publishing House, the assistant director of the monthly, *Nauka i religiya*, the assistant director of the House of Scientific Atheism, representatives of the *Obkom* (regional Party committee), a representative of the Council for the Affairs of the Orthodox Church, and the secretary of the Zhdanov District Soviet Executive Committee.” Quite an institutional mosaic for “the anti-religious community”! Ostensibly brought together to discuss Levitin’s writings, but with the obvious aim of dissuading him from composing or at least disseminating further defences of religion and attacks on atheism, the members of the group – as depicted in Levitin’s brief report – reveal marked differences in sensibility and perspective, only some of which seem to have been conditioned by their respective institutional responsibilities.

Major Shitikov (KGB) was in charge, setting the tone of the meeting: “No one is threatening you. We want to talk to you as a comrade.” But towards the end of the meeting this same police officer took pains to remind Levitin that though no one could forbid him from writing what he wanted, “if you continue to distribute your work in the same way you have been, you will not only run up against us – you will also run up against another public institution which will confront you with Article 162, dealing with the transaction of illegal business.” Among the others present, though Trushin (Council for the Affairs of the Orthodox Church) behaved like a defensive and petty bureaucrat, Romanov (House of Scientific Atheism) and Chertikhin (State Political Publishing House) disclosed a detailed knowledge of Levitin’s writings which gave force to the aggressive stance they took in the verbal sparring. Whereas the Party man (Obkom) revealed himself to be a dull-witted soul who managed only to mouth conventional phrases, the secretary of the executive committee (District Soviet) showed civility towards Levitin and concern for his welfare, promising to find him a job “that will correspond better to your education”. Even more sympathetic was Grigorian (*Nauka i religiya*). He voiced appreciation for Levitin’s writings, though he regretted their one-sided attack on atheism. Remarking that in some respects they were allies, he noted that he had “heard about the shocking things going on in

Pochayev" earlier than Levitin and had done "more to stop them" in that, "right at the time," he had telephoned the Central Committee. And, he reminded Levitin, "our journal has recently attacked that odious person, Alla Trubnikova". It was also during this exchange, in something of an aside, that yet another member of the anti-religious community, a collaborator of Grigorian's at *Nauka i religiya* not at the meeting, was said to be regarded by Levitin "as if he had one foot in Holy Rus".¹²

Divergent as these representatives of the anti-religious community may have presented themselves to Levitin in the spring of 1965, a year later they would close ranks in common action against him. This was initiated in February 1966 when "the KGB summoned a number of people as witnesses, in order to prove" that Levitin "was engaged in a 'specially prohibited trade' ". Soon afterwards all efforts to find him employment corresponding to his qualifications, including his own, came to an end or failed, and even his job as watchman at the Dormition Church became tenuous. By October *Nauka i religiya*, too, had taken up the cudgel against him with an article entitled "Theologian-Provocateur".¹³ The concerted pressure inaugurated against Anatoli Levitin was not the only sign that the "year of drift" was over. Another was the renewed respectability of a tougher tone in anti-religious propaganda, and a corresponding reduction – although not extinction – to the range and texture of publicly voiced atheist *samokritika* (self-criticism).

The reimposition in 1966 of a more uniform line on anti-religious propaganda did not – to borrow a leaf from G. Kelt – make monoliths out of atheists. A useful reminder of this is the public appearance in the "year of drift" of widespread conflict and deep differences within the anti-religious community, even as the existence of such tensions, however submerged, doubtless remains an important element comprising as well as shaping Soviet religious history.

(To be continued)

¹ See Andrew Blane, "Church and State in Soviet Russia: the Rise of a New Era", forthcoming in *Canadian-American Slavic Studies*, March, 1975.

² Michael Bourdeaux, *Patriarch and Prophets*, London, 1969, pp. 113-16.

³ Gerhard Simon, *Church, State, and Opposition in the USSR*, London, 1974, p. 78.

⁴ Rosemary Harris & Xenia Howard-Johnston, *Christian Appeals from Russia*, London, 1969, pp. 46-47 and 57.

⁵ See footnote 1. Also *Problems of Communism*, No. 4, 1968, p. 106; Simon, p. 90; CSRC *samizdat*: Letter of G. Vins of 10 December, 1970, p. 5.

⁶ *Religion in Communist Dominated Areas*, Vol. VII, Nos. 3-4, p. 39: Harris & Howard-Johnston, p. 56.

⁷ I. R. Shafarevich, *Zakonodatelstvo o Religii v SSSR*, Paris, 1973, *passim*, but esp. pp. 67-68 and ft. 4; Harold J. Berman, *Soviet Criminal Law and Procedure*, Cambridge, Mass., 1966, pp. 60 and 63.

⁸ *Vedomosti Verkhovnogo Soveta RSFSR*, No. 38, September 23, 1965, edict 932.

⁹ Bohdan R. Bociurkiw, "Religion in the USSR After Khrushchev," in John Strong, *The Soviet Union under Brezhnev and Kosygin*, New York, 1971, pp. 149-50.

¹⁰ *Nauka i religiya*, No. 3, pp. 23-26, No. 9, pp. 14-15, No. 10, pp. 5-8 and 12-14, all 1965.

¹¹ E.g., *Izvestia*, 6 March, 23 July, 26 November, *Sovetskaya Rossiya*, 23 September, *Komsomolskaya pravda*, 25 March, 29 May, 15 August, 24 September, all 1965.

¹² Anatoli Levitin, *Zashchita very v SSSR*, Paris, 1966, pp. 88-101.

¹³ Bourdeaux, pp. 270-71; *Nauka i religiya*, No. 10, 1966, pp. 25-26. (Later, in 1969, when Levitin was subjected to a prolonged criminal investigation, Grigorian was called in as a hostile witness. *Posev*, Special Issue No. 6, February 1971, pp. 17-18).

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