

"We have heard sermons in many Soviet churches and are convinced that the Christian virtues, love to one's neighbour, desire for peace and good relations between people are preached in them. We have become acquainted with the training of priests in the USSR and have found that it is well founded. We have not only met with brothers in Christ, but also with leaders of the Jewish communities. We are convinced of their well-being" was the opinion of Dr. Robert Marshall, head of the delegation of the National Council of Churches in the USA.

In an interview with a correspondent of the Novosti Press Agency, the general secretary of the People's Council for Islamic Affairs, Malaizii Dato Khadzhi Ismail Bin Pandhag Arisa said, in particular: "We are convinced that freedom of religion exists in your country. Believers perform their rituals in complete freedom. Holy places are kept in good order. We have met believers and talked to them. They express their opinions freely." After Friday prayers in the mosque "Khadzhi Alambardar", Malaizii, at the head of a delegation, announced: "Propaganda has not told us the truth. Our opinion about the Muslims of the Soviet Union has changed. We have realized that to hear is one thing, but to see is another."

Such are the testimonies of people from East and West who have observed religious life in the Soviet Union with their own eyes. Therefore, the assertion by the Catholic Cardinal König, Archbishop of Vienna, in an article* published by him in the *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* (October 1975), that the Soviet Union is a society consisting of two classes, believers and atheists, between whom a bitter struggle is in progress, seems very strange. By the way, Cardinal König has not been to the USSR once, but none the less he was able to expose our two struggling "classes" of atheists and believers. Such are the absurd jungles of fabrication into which even a Cardinal may wander if he is blinded by hostility to the land of socialism.

In the history of humanity no social structure has been distinguished by such unity as socialism. In the cohesive Soviet society there is no division of people into believers and unbelievers. Both labour hand in hand for the good of their Motherland.**

* An English translation of this article was published in *The Tablet* 3 January 1976, pp. 4-7. Ed.

** A commentary on this article by Kuroedov appeared in *Keston News Service* No. 21. Ed.

Children and Atheism in the Soviet Union

As a background to the review article on pp. 32-34 of this issue, we print the text of an atheist article published in the newspaper Soviet Belorussia on 31 January 1976. It is written by a lecturer at a pedagogical institute in Minsk, and is entitled "Save the Children". In theory parents in the Soviet Union are free to bring their children up in a Christian spirit. In fact atheist education is obligatory in schools and makes nonsense of the parents' legal right. The writer's reference to "split consciousness" is painfully relevant, for the children of believing parents can be pulled apart by the conflicting teaching of home and school.

The mind of a child is, figuratively speaking, a blank sheet of paper. And we are by no means indifferent as to what is written there: whether it is "Man" with a capital letter, or "slave of the flock of Christ" with a small one. As we think about the future of our children, we strive to bring them up as individuals who will be strong, bold, cultured, educated and useful to society.

But sometimes it happens otherwise: religion, which we sometimes think has already disappeared, gradually gets hold of a child's soul, and makes it into a meek "slave of god", a passive observer, expecting mercies from heaven and liv-

ing on prayers and selfish preoccupations with personal "salvation".

Using persuasion, bribes, and sometimes threats, the spiritual pastors command believing parents not to forget to "educate their children for God". The ministers of cult know very well that it is very difficult to make an adult, with settled convictions, into a believer, whereas the ideological corruption of minors is a much easier matter. Disregarding not only moral but even legal standards, they make every effort to draw children into religion.

The mechanics of this are not too complicated. At first glance, it seems inoffensive. What child has not bombarded its parents with a thousand "Whys"? Taking advantage of a child's thirst for knowledge and its faith in adults, many believers tell their children and grandchildren that the sunshine, the clouds in the sky, the chirping birds, the rain and the snow were all created by God.

In the wake of its first unconscious religious feeling (and with the help of adult believers) come religious acts—the child hangs a cross around its neck, goes to church, takes communion, fasts, and so on. Gradually the first seeds of faith begin to take root in its mind. Believing parents rarely stop and think what a harmful effect religious education has on the mind and health of a child. Thus unwittingly or unwittingly they begin to destroy the child morally (and sometimes even physically).

When parents threaten their children with divine punishments, and day after day repeat that: "God sees everything, He knows everything, and forgives nothing", the children lose their normal joy in life, they become withdrawn, uncommunicative and unsociable. Bringing them up in the fear of God produces in them cowardice, apathy, pretence and hypocrisy. It represses the child's active spirit and teaches it to lead a double life: at home it is prayers for every event in life, going to church, wearing a cross, while outside the home it tries to be "like everybody else".

When the idea of guilt and sinfulness is implanted in the receptive soul of a child, it can produce pernicious fruit, it can become the cause of traumatic experiences. It has long been observed

that children in religious families are ill more often than children in atheist families. This can be explained chiefly by their mental disorder. The destruction of a healthy mind often evokes nervous problems, and weakens the resistance of the organism to other diseases. The health of children in fanatically religious families is also affected by the fact that they take less or no part in normal games, they do not go on excursions or play football and hockey, they spend less time in the open air.

The things that are taught in a believing family and the things that the children cannot help coming in contact with outside, represent two different worlds. The world outside the home is immeasurably wider, more interesting and more attractive. If the parents were the only authority for the child before it started school, in school the child places implicit trust in the teacher. And suddenly she declares that there is no God. It is only a brief sentence, but what confusion it introduces into the child's soul! An impossible burden is laid upon the child's mind: it must choose whom it will believe, mummy or the teacher. A split consciousness is a terrible thing. If the religious feelings which have sunk into a child's soul are not shaken at school, they will become his convictions as he grows up.

It is mainly sectarian families which give religious education to children today. Members of the Adventist and Pentecostal sects exercise a particularly pernicious influence upon children. They often resort to savage, fanatical methods in order to draw them into religion. Here is an account by Lyudmila G., daughter of a Pentecostal sectarian, former pupil at intermediate school No. 1 in Pinsk: "In school I came to understand the harmful character of religion and I tried in every way to avoid the religious influence of my parents and other believers, but they forced me to go with them to the prayer house. They even beat me brutally—with a rubber hose, an electric cable, anything that came to hand. They dragged me by the hair and tore my clothes. My father was particularly zealous at this. I often went about with bruises, and even now I get headaches. I was not allowed to

read literature, to join the Komsomol, to go to the cinema or to dances. My mother and father used to tear up the books I borrowed from the library and throw them in the stove."

A neighbour reported on the inhuman way these religious fanatics were treating Lyudmila. After this a commission was held which decided to protect Lyudmila from her fanatical parents, who were deprived of parental rights. Lyudmila has now finished technical college and is working; she recalls the past as a nightmare.

A correct and effective education of children is possible only when parents and school reinforce each other's authority. When parents oppose the school, the consequences of such a mutual struggle primarily affect the child. Any religious coercion exercised upon a schoolchild evokes bewilderment and confusion. Such children are withdrawn and silent when in school.

Freedom of conscience is guaranteed by the Constitution of the USSR. Every adult has the right to believe in God or not. But no-one can be allowed to cripple children spiritually—we cannot remain indifferent to the fate of such children.

The struggle against religious prejudices and against them penetrating the growing generation must not be understood in a narrow sense. It is very important to arrange systematic talks and lectures on atheist topics, both for the children and for their parents, to hold thematic evenings led by people with

a good knowledge of the subject. Drawing the children into the collective work of the school, developing their interest in sport and artistic creativity, well-prepared meetings with interesting people, festivals, ceremonial occasions and gatherings—all these things need to be part of the arsenal in the atheist education of schoolchildren.

A particularly important aspect of atheist education, which must never be forgotten, is work. From its earliest years, the child must see and understand, from its own experience, that everything on earth—factories, machines, towns, clothing, food—have been created by man's labour, by his own mind, energy and talent, and are not a "gift from god".

The ideological struggle with religion among children and adolescents cannot be built solely upon various kinds of mass "measures". The main aspect of the education of the growing generation is their lessons in school; all school subjects must be utilized for the formation of a genuine scientific worldview. Atheist education is particularly successful when the teacher knows his pupils and their families well.

Winning the confidence of a child or adolescent from a believing family is not easy. But the educator's reward is to see the child's soul open up; the pupil will then grow up happy, he will be able to taste all the joys of life, he will grow up as a builder of communist society with his own spiritual riches.