

News in Brief

GENERAL

Orthodox in Geneva

Representatives from the Orthodox Churches of Russia, Romania, Bulgaria, Serbia, Poland and Czechoslovakia were among those present at the preparatory meeting of the Pan-Orthodox Synod held in Geneva from 21 November 1976. The only Orthodox Church to be absent was the Church of Georgia. If plans for the proposed Synod are successful this will be the first such meeting for more than 1,000 years. It indicates how concerned Orthodox Churches are to face the issues of the modern world with a united front. As most of the major Orthodox Churches function under communist regimes, their united Christian witness is all the more significant. (*The Times*, 22 November 1976)

Greek Book Attacks Communism

To Lykophos Tou Marxismou (The Twilight of Marxism) by Nikolaos P. Vasileiadis (4th ed. February 1976, no price) is published by the Brotherhood of Theologians O Sotir (The Saviour). It is a solid cloth bound book of 700 pp. with an index and five pages of bibliography which indicates wide reading. This includes *Opium of the People*, *Patriarch and Prophets* and *Religious Ferment in Russia*. I have only glanced at it but it seems to be a bitterly hostile but intelligent attack on communism in general and the Soviet Union in particular. (Note by John Lawrence, 26 November 1976)

SOVIET UNION

Jordanian Minister Visits Soviet Muslims

On 14 May 1976 the Jordanian Minister of Religious Affairs and Holy Places, Abd al-Aziz al-Khayyat, was interviewed on Moscow Radio about his views on the Muslims in the Soviet Union. The Minister was leading a delegation of religious leaders round the Soviet Union at the invitation of the religious board of the Muslims of Central Asia and Kazakhstan. The delegation visited schools, which at one time had been Muslim universities. They took part in the prayer life of the Soviet Muslims. At one place they shared in a Muslim wedding. Tens of thousands were said to have attended the Mosque in Tashkent when the delegation recited prayers one Friday. The officials of the religious board of Muslims talked frankly with the delegates: their function, the former stated, was to supervise the free administration of their religious affairs and to make sure that no one brought pressure to bear on them or prevented them from worshipping. The Jordanian Minister claimed that many of those he met had been to Mecca and that many more would also be allowed to go. (*Radio Moscow*, 14 May 1976)

New Book on Muslims in the USSR

Progress publishing house has published a compendium *Muslims in the USSR*, prepared by the International Relations Department of Islamic Organizations in the Soviet Union, with contributions by prominent Muslim scholars and dignitaries, dealing with the structure of

Islamic organizations in the USSR and the life of Muslims. It is pointed out in the book, which is published in Arabic, that this language was for a long time not only the language of public worship in Islamic areas, but also the language of scholarship and clerical work, in which much literature was published, not only on Muslim public worship and law, but also in many branches of natural science and the humanities. (Tass radio broadcast in English, 9 March 1976).

Putting the Record Straight

In the January 1976 edition of the Soviet *New Times* Alexander Sukharev, the first Minister of Justice of the USSR, said that he "does not know of the existence of a single Soviet law under which citizens could be prosecuted because of their political or religious views". He added that Sergei Kovalev had been convicted for producing and circulating viciously anti-Soviet printed material. "Georgi Vins", he said "was an odious figure whose so-called religious activity boiled down to capitalising on the trust of believers and encouraging the gullible not to recognize the authority of government bodies; he encouraged believers to refuse to fulfil elementary civil obligations, and fabricated and circulated materials which vilified the Soviet State and social system". Further reports in the Soviet press in February were equally keen to put the record straight on the religious situation in the USSR: for example on 20 February 1976 *Pravda* dismissed allegations that freedom of expression is suppressed. (*Index*, Vol. 5, No. 2, p. 76)

Patriarch Pimen Interviewed

In an interview given by Patriarch Pimen of Moscow and All Russia, the Head of the Russian Orthodox Church denied as "tendentious allegations" the reports in Western newspapers that Soviet citizens have been imprisoned for their religious beliefs. He told a correspondent from the Novosti Press Agency that in the Soviet Union the right to believe or not to believe is the private affair of the individual. He included children amongst those freely able to visit the churches and there receive a Christian upbringing. The Patriarch further

asserted that in no way was the issue of passports or the offering of jobs affected by an individual's religious affiliations. "Soviet law envisages strict responsibility for any infringements of civil rights of believers, including clergymen," he added. The occasion of the interview was the Orthodox Christmas festivities. (*Journal of the Moscow Patriarchate* No. 2, 1976, pp. 3-4.)

Metropolitan Nikodim Replies to "Anti-Soviet Clamour"

Metropolitan Nikodim gave a report on the Nairobi Assembly to a Moscow correspondent in January 1976. He mentioned a number of the decisions taken at the Assembly which he considered important: for example, the resolution on the Middle East calling for a Geneva conference; the resolution on arms to South Africa; the evaluation of the documents adopted at the Helsinki Conference. He explained that certain circles, indirectly connected with the WCC staff, tried to create an anti-Soviet atmosphere at the Assembly, by discussing problems of human rights and religious freedom. In conclusion, he said that this was an attempt by reactionary forces in the West to throw a shadow on the Soviet Union's support of peace. These reactionary forces tried to prove that the USSR was not abiding by the Helsinki Declaration's provisions on human rights. This "anti-Soviet clamour" had been prepared beforehand. He affirmed that the Russian Orthodox Church delegation gave a rebuttal to this campaign. (*Tass*, 29 January 1976)

Western Church Leaders Report on Religion in the Soviet Union

Since the stir aroused by events at the WCC's Nairobi meeting in 1975 the Western press has carried conflicting reports about the situation of believers in the Soviet Union. Three recent visitors to the USSR were President Wong of the Baptist World Alliance, Bishop Ian Shevill of Newcastle, Australia, and Bishop Robert Runcie of St. Albans.

President Wong was impressed by the warmth and love of the believers he met in the officially registered churches. He noted the lack of Bibles and hymn books but thought that this could be

remedied by Western donations to such organizations as the Baptist World Alliance. In general, he was encouraged by what he was told: "over 95% of the Baptist churches are registered to operate"; the registered churches hope to hold a world conference of church leaders in 1977 to promote peace; the Tass religious representative considers the Baptist people "good citizens" and has "no complaint about their work". He observed the good relations that existed between Baptist representatives and government officials and, finally, he was impressed by the enthusiastic Christian witness which he saw.

The Rt. Rev. Ian Shevill considered that his "two outstanding impressions are the ways in which the Russian Church has been misunderstood in the Western world, and the glory of worship it is offering to God". He was told by Metropolitan Nikodim that since the so-called underground church received money from its supporters, it must be an organization and thus it could not be underground. Concerning Vins he was told: "He (Vins) was persuading Baptists not to recognize the government's laws. He claimed that because the State is an atheist State, its laws must be annulled and only the laws of the Gospel followed. I think that if there was a Vins in Australia and he violated the laws of the State, he would be sentenced". The Metropolitan convinced him that Regelson and Yakunin "did not represent the opinion of the priests or believers . . ." In short, "nobody is persecuted for their faith. Every citizen has the right to confess a faith or not". He was impressed by the goodwill of his hosts and their hospitality.

Bishop Runcie discovered an unexpected openness in his talks with Metropolitan Yuvenali during his trip to the Soviet Union. He was a member of the delegation which attended the Anglican-Orthodox talks at Zagorsk. Even so the Bishop admitted that little progress was made. The Russian interviewers for a radio programme in which the Bishop participated "were keen for us to say that our own papers and radio had given us a false impression of religion in the USSR". He observed that propaganda was clearly prominent in what his group were shown and heard; but at the same time "the Church in the

Soviet Union was alive and active making proportionately more use of its freedom than churches in the West". (*Baptist Times*, 26 August 1976; *Sydney Morning Herald*, 10 July 1976; *Church Times*, 20 August 1976).

Union Men Plead for Vins

Members of the NALGO trade union branch, at Harrow, Middlesex, have pleaded for Georgi Vins's release from detention in a letter to the Soviet Ambassador in London. The branch secretary, Morris, explained to the Ambassador that it was the intention of his branch to generate concern for the subject of believers' rights in the Soviet Union within the National Association and other trade unions and also within the TUC. He declared in the letter: "We do not appreciate why the provisions of the Soviet Constitution on freedom of speech, freedom of assembly and the separation of Church and State are not worked out in practice. If there is no God why fight against what does not exist?" The petitioning members also assure the Soviet Ambassador that they will continue their action on behalf of Vins, and also for all persecuted believers behind the Iron Curtain, by petitioning Members of Parliament and asking trade delegations and politicians visiting the Soviet Union to demand full religious freedom as a condition for these exchanges. They say that they consider their appeal for Vins's release a reasonable one, as the Soviet government subscribes to the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and the agreements of the Helsinki Conference. (*Baptist Times*, 13 May 1976, p. 6.)

Keston College: Publicity

On 10 August 1976 *The Times* published a report on the post-Nairobi documentation, *Religious Liberty in the Soviet Union*, published by Keston College and other research centres. The newspaper's leader also took up the question of Christians in the Soviet Union with an article entitled: "Helsinki has not helped Russian Christians". It called on the WCC to find ways of supporting Soviet Christians. Keston College's work was assessed differently by an article in a Soviet book, *Religion in the struggle of*

ideas (1975). In a passage discussing the use made of religion by anti-Soviet propagandists, the author cites Michael Bourdeaux as one of three English "Religiologists" who typify the English tradition in this field. The other two are Walter Kolarz and Robert Conquest. All are said to have written important books on the religious situation in the Soviet Union, but the author considers their conclusions rather superficial. Michael Bourdeaux, the article claims, wishes to control the religious communities within the Soviet Union through his propaganda machinery. He seeks to limit the actions of the local religious authorities and also to influence world opinion against the Soviet Union. (*The Times*, 10 August 1976; *Religion in the struggle for ideas*, 18 June 1976).

Mennonite Congregation in the Soviet Union Increases Membership

During 1975 about forty-four persons joined the Mennonite Brethren Church in Novosibirsk, Soviet Union. The pastor of the Church is the leading representative of the Mennonite Brethren in the Soviet Union and is a member of the Presidium of the Russian Baptist Church. The Novosibirsk Mennonite Brethren Church now has a membership of 970. The Russian Evangelical Christian Baptist Union has also announced the opening of nearly 30 churches in the Novosibirsk and Kiev regions. This may have affected Mennonites since many Germans live in the Novosibirsk region. Another Mennonite group called the Church Mennonite group is progressing more slowly. Nevertheless, the Russian Evangelical Christian Baptist Union has announced the registration of a new congregation from this group in Karaganda, Kazakhstan. Sources indicate that this new Church Mennonite group meets in the afternoon in the same building used by the larger 1,000-member Mennonite Church in the city. Other registered Church Mennonite congregations are known to exist in Novosibirsk and in Alma Ata, Kazakhstan, as well as about six others which have a semi-legal status. (*Mennonite Weekly Review* 20 November 1975, p. 1).

Paintings Banned from Moscow Exhibition

Despite giving permission for an exhibition in Moscow of drawings and paintings by seven artists who do not follow the Communist Party's cultural line, the Soviet state authorities excluded several pictures on religious themes. The exhibition was to open on 11 May 1976. In 1975 a similar exhibition was allowed but again no religious paintings were included. Several of these paintings, however, were brought to the West by Alexander Glezer, who had been the principal organizer of unofficial art shows before he left the USSR. Examples from his collection of unofficial Soviet religious art have been exhibited recently in Camden Town, London. The exhibition was organized jointly by Parkway Focus Gallery and Keston College. It was made the subject of the Independent Television programme "Unofficial Images" on 9 June, 1976.

Baptist Pastor Leaves USSR

Janis Smits, the Baptist pastor in Aizpute, Latvia, was eventually allowed to leave the USSR for Germany on 25 May after two years of constant harassment by the authorities. Pastor Smits was deprived of his registration to work as a pastor in March 1974 on the grounds that he had schoolchildren in his choir and that he had asked believers to pray for religious prisoners of conscience. The congregation refused to accept this dismissal and would not accept another pastor in his place. The congregation's leaders now fear that the Council for Religious Affairs may try to impose on them a government appointee as pastor, instead of accepting a pastor elected by the congregation.

Jews in Moldavia Harassed

The authorities of the Moldavian town of Kalarash, in the Soviet Union, have banned the holding of Jewish religious services in the town. A group of religious Jews have regularly held small services in a private home in Kalarash ever since the synagogue was closed in

1961. Six weeks ago, however, town officials interrupted *shacharit* and told the worshippers that the holding of services would no longer be permitted. They confiscated everyone's prayer book, prayer shawl and phylacteries on the spot. Kalarash Jews subsequently petitioned the local Department of Religious Cults for the return of the confiscated religious appurtenances. Officials said they would "look into the matter", but nothing appears to have been done. (*Jewish Chronicle* 18 June 1976, p. 44.)

Lectures at Correspondence Bible Courses in Moscow

At the invitation of the AUCECB in the USSR, the Swiss Baptist Union President, Claus Meister, gave some lectures to students of the Bible correspondence courses of the AUCECB in June. The lectures covered the following subjects: origins of the New Testament; the interpretation of the parables of Christ; baptism by immersion and the Holy Spirit. Dr. Meister and his wife visited Baptist congregations in the cities of Volgograd, Tashkent, Alma-Ata and Issyk. They were warmly welcomed and became acquainted with the spiritual life of these churches. They were accompanied by the Rev. M. Zhidkov, vice-President of the AUCECB. Both Dr. Meister and the Rev. Zhidkov are former Presidents of the European Baptist Federation. (*European Baptist Press Service*, 24 June 1976)

Moroz Renounces Citizenship

Valentin Moroz, a political prisoner and Orthodox believer in the USSR, has renounced his Soviet citizenship and applied for political asylum in the USA. Thus after approaching the end of a six year sentence in the notorious Vladimir prison, to be followed by three years in labour camp and five in internal exile, on 17 May he was sent to the Serbsky Psychiatric Institute in Moscow where he underwent tests to ascertain his mental condition. One staff member at the Institute said that he had been considered mentally ill because he "talks with God" (i.e. prays). After a month of examinations the examining board declared that it did not consider Moroz insane, and he was transferred to

the Butyrki prison, also in Moscow. (*Keston News Service*, 23 June 1976 and *Russkaya Mysl*, 1 July 1976)

VIETNAM

Freedom Plea by Vietnam Buddhists

The executive council of the unified Buddhist Church of Vietnam has written to the revolutionary government demanding that the right to freedom of worship should be respected. In a letter, Ven Thich Tri Thu, president of the executive council, claims that many "grass root level cadres" are abusing the government's policy of freedom of religious belief. The council's protest arises from an incident in November last year when 12 Buddhist monks and nuns burned themselves to death because they felt they could not comply with restrictions placed upon them by local authorities. According to the council, members of the Duoc Su Monastery "chose death as a way of liberation" because of the restrictions, which included an order forbidding them to go into retreat or observe silence. Another order prevented new members joining the community. Immediately after the incident the council claims that the monastery was put under quarantine and the charred remains of the monks and nuns removed. Two Buddhist nuns and a lay woman, who visited the monastery three days later, were arrested and taken to an undisclosed destination.

The council is now demanding the release of those arrested and the return of the monastery to the Buddhist Church. In its letter the executive council says that it has not lost faith in the revolution and is convinced that the abuses it describes are the result simply of the "over-zealousness and error" of local authorities. Nevertheless the council expresses the hope that the government will "deal properly" with those responsible for the Duoc Su incident and instruct all local authorities to respect religious freedom. The council also claims that since taking office the government has on three occasions refused to see its members to discuss the Buddhist Church's position on religious matters. (*Catholic Herald*, 12 November 1976, p. 3)

Mennonite Central Committee Aids Vietnam

The Central Committee of the Mennonite Church approved the sending of materials up to the value of 1 million dollars to Vietnam in January 1976. Some of this will be used to help supply the Lang Giang district hospital in Ha Bac province with medical equipment. The equipment was requested by Dr. Hai, Health Minister for the Ha Bac province, during a visit of delegates from the Mennonite Central Committee in May 1976. Another task of the delegates was to complete final arrangements for shipping wheat to Vietnam. Vegetable seeds, fish nets and scientific research will also be sent. (*Mennonite News Service*, 20 August 1976)

Vietnam Expels Missionaries

Twenty six foreign missionaries, many of them French, arrived in Bangkok on 9 July having been expelled from Vietnam. The missionaries - 9 nuns and 17 priests - were of varying nationalities and orders. Many were in their 60s or older and had been in Vietnam for decades. One of the 11 French priests, Fr. Riou, said that they were all summoned by the Vietnam authorities to a meeting on 5 July and asked to leave the country by the following Friday, 9 July. No reason for the expulsions was given. Fr. Riou said that they were told that if they did not leave by 9 July they would be considered illegal residents and treated accordingly. The missionaries confirmed that there are still some foreign priests and nuns in the country, including the sole remaining Jesuit priest, Fr. Joseph Oudic. He is the last non-Vietnamese Jesuit priest in the country. (*Guardian*, 10 July 1976)

LAOS

Church Closed in Laos

The Laotian government has carried out its threat to close a Baptist church, according to reports received here from

Laos. The church held its final services, including communion, the day before the government's deadline for closing, according to a Baptist reporter, who said that government officials took over the building for other purposes the next day. Laotian church leaders sent word to Thai Christians to take note that such tragedy could easily come to them, and that they should seize the opportunity to witness for their faith while there is freedom to do so, the Baptist Press stated. (*European Baptist Press Service*, 11 October 1976)

ANGOLA

Return of Missionaries to Angola

Archbishop Eduardo Muaca of Luanda has been assured by President Neto that urgent attention will be given to requests for the return to Angola of missionaries who left the country during the recent conflict. This would fill a void which has been severely felt by church authorities. In a recent meeting with Angolan Bishops, President Neto is reported to have said: "I believe that at this moment we can have the utmost faith that the Catholic Church will continue to offer its contribution to the reconstruction of our country". (*Tablet*, 15 May 1976, p. 484)

More Freedom for Protestants

Methodist Bishop, Emilio Julio Miguel de Carvalho, of Angola claims that Protestants in Angola have more freedom under the present Marxist-oriented government than they did under former Portuguese colonial rule. Churches which have been closed since 1961, when a nationalist uprising was followed by the arrest and death of many Protestants, are now being reopened by the Protestants. Though education is being supervised by the State, churches are still able to operate schools, Sunday schools and seminaries. (*Christianity Today*, 16 July 1976)