

Editorial

A new Constitution for the Soviet Union was accepted by the Supreme Soviet of the USSR on 7 October 1977. During the preceding months a Draft Constitution was discussed in the press and in response to an invitation to comment on it, two groups of Soviet Christians addressed *Appeals* to the Constitutional Commission (these are printed on pp. 34-40). These groups claimed that certain aspects of the Draft Constitution would face Christians with the agonising question of whether they could, without prejudice to their religious conscience, remain Soviet citizens.

One of these groups, the Christian Committee for the Defence of Believers' Rights in the USSR, was founded on 27 December 1976 (see document p. 33) by three members of the Russian Orthodox Church, a priest Fr. Gleb Yakunin, a deacon Varsonofi Khaibulin and a layman Viktor Kapitanchuk. The Committee's aims include gathering information about the situation of believers in the USSR, giving legal advice to believers, and clarifying and defending their legal position. When, on 4 June 1977, the Draft of the new Constitution was published in *Pravda*, the Christian Committee drew attention to those parts of it which would affect religious believers. Their *Appeal*, dated 8 June 1977, points out that the Draft's introduction describes the State's highest aim as "the construction of a classless communist society" and in Art. 6 for the first time the "leading role" of the Communist Party is established by law. Art. 6 reads: "The Communist Party armed with Marxism-Leninism determines the general perspectives of the development of society . . ." The Party had previously *de facto* controlled every aspect of Soviet society. nevertheless this was not stated before in the country's fundamental law. An avowed aim of the Communist Party, the Christian Committee objects, is to fight against religion: the Party Rules demand that Party members "lead a resolute struggle against the survivals of religion"; furthermore the Party's anti-religious policy uses not only atheist propaganda to undermine the Christian faith but also legal discrimination against believers. How can believers accept the State's "highest aim", if according to the Communist Party's interpretation of Marxism-Leninism, communism and

religion are incompatible? If national atheism is the State's goal, then, the Christian Committee claims, Soviet Christians will be placed in an impossible position.

The authors of this *Appeal* also object to Art. 52 in the Draft on freedom of conscience. As in the previous Constitution believers are granted the right to "confess" any religion and to "perform religious cults", but they are not granted the right to spread their beliefs, while atheists, according to this article, have the right to organize atheist propaganda. Likewise Art. 25 insists on a communist education for all citizens, but so long as communism defines itself as being against religion, this provision goes against the conscience of Christians. The Christian Committee makes three suggestions in its *Appeal*: first, that the Communist Party relinquish its anti-religious struggle; second, that communism be accepted as compatible with religion; and third, that the possibility of religion existing within a communist society be formulated in the Constitution.

Another group of Christians who criticized the Draft Constitution were the reform Baptists, or the *Initsiativniki*. Their governing body, the Council of Churches of Evangelical Christians and Baptists (CCECB) also sent an *Appeal* (on 14 August 1977) to the Constitutional Commission. Like the Christian Committee they object to Art. 52 with its ban on spreading religious beliefs and Art. 6 on the "leading role" of the Communist Party. They insist that the State and the educational system should be ideologically neutral, that religious as well as atheist societies should be independent of the State and free to propagate their beliefs.

Although Soviet citizens were encouraged to discuss the Draft Constitution and suggest changes, the suggestions made by the Christian Committee and the CCECB were ignored when the final version of the Constitution was formulated. Nonetheless the new Constitution has been highly praised by the head of the Council for Religious Affairs, Kuroedov, in a recent *Izvestiya* article (28 January 1978). Whereas in "bourgeois countries", according to him, religious belief is compulsory, citizens of the Soviet Union are free to be atheists and children are protected from being "forced to embrace religious beliefs". Religious believers in the USSR – so he asserts – are well provided for and have welcomed the new Constitution: "Believing citizens and religious leaders . . . received with warm approval the new Constitution of the USSR, which guarantees freedom of conscience".

The new Constitution puts believers of all religions in a very difficult position. They want to be loyal citizens but cannot accept the goal of atheism as laid down in this Constitution. In the Soviet Union law and practice often differ and it remains to be seen how the Constitution will be applied.

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