

Documents

Soviet Official Lectures on Religion

An official lecture (reported below) on religion in the USSR was given in May 1976 by a deputy chairman of the USSR's Council for Religious Affairs. The Russian text appeared in Khronika tekushchikh sobytii (A Chronicle of Current Events) No. 41, New York, 1976, pp. 6-9.

At the end of May 1976 the staff members working on the *Large Soviet Encyclopaedia* heard a lecture by a visiting speaker, Furov, deputy chairman of the Council for Religious Affairs attached to the USSR Council of Ministers, on the situation of religion in the Soviet Union.

The lecturer stated that in general religious life in the USSR was in decline and was dying out. In support of this view he reported that over the last five years about 700 religious congregations had ceased to exist and that, out of the Orthodox churches registered, about 1,000 were formally listed but were not in use.

During the years of Soviet power, the number of Orthodox churches was about ten times lower than it had been (out of 77,676 which existed before the Revolution, there were now 7,500). Out of the 4,200 Catholic churches which existed in the Baltic area at the moment of its integration into the USSR, 1,000 were left, while in areas where Islam was widespread, 1,000 mosques were left out of 24,000, although only 300 of these were registered, the rest only "half existed". Out of 1,500 Old Believer churches of the pre-revolutionary period, only 300

were left; out of 5,000 synagogues - 200 (of these only 92 were registered), but as there were only 50 rabbis in the country, the remaining synagogues only functioned from time to time. The chief rabbi had been found by the Council for Religious Affairs itself - he was a former janitor at the Likhachev factory, who had graduated from the Moscow *yeshiva*. It was not only among the Jews that there were not enough people to fill the ranks of the clergy. Orthodox teaching institutions, too, could not supply the needs of the Church, and were not even managing to replenish the clergy's ranks. They had two applicants for each place, but the selection committee rejected many of these - on grounds of health, for example, or because they were "religious fanatics". As a result, there were only 5,900 priests for the 7,500 Orthodox churches in the country. Lutheran prayer-houses only had pastors for 50 per cent of them.

There were only 15 theological institutions in the country, moreover the Higher Theological School in Tashkent had been founded by the Council for Religious Affairs itself (chiefly in order to supply the personnel necessary for foreign relations, the lecturer explained). In Ulan-Ude a theological school for Buddhists had been opened (there were only two Buddhist monasteries in the country). In the years 1945-1965 the theological academies of Moscow and Leningrad had produced 700 Masters, Candidates and Doctors of Theology.

The lecturer noted with satisfaction a fall in the number of Soviet citizens

who observed religious rituals: according to his figures, in 1965 over 30 per cent of all children born were christened (or took part in corresponding rituals for the newly-born in other religions), while in 1975 only 19 per cent were; in 1975 only 2.5 per cent of marriages took place in church, while 40 per cent of funerals were religious.

About 10–15 per cent of all urban residents and 20–25 per cent of rural inhabitants were religious believers. The fading of religious consciousness was observable also in the prevalence of "Sunday religiosity" among those going to church.

There were 48 religions and religious tendencies in the USSR. Among these were sects which had arisen after the Revolution, such as the True Orthodox Christians, who were openly hostile to Soviet power. "There are now 16,000 congregations of all religious cults, but in print we make the number 20,000", said Furov, "so that the anti-Sovietists won't shout 'they're stamping out religion'."

Furov described the relations between Church and State as "normal", noting that modernist, reforming tendencies were penetrating ever deeper into parish life, actively supporting the home and foreign policy of the USSR. The clergy spoke to their flock not merely of patriotism, but of Soviet patriotism; they upheld Soviet power and called on the believers to observe strictly all legal norms. In this the moral and political unity of the Soviet people was revealed. The Soviet clergy of various denominations had links with 82 countries in the

world, to which they sent their representatives – and not one had failed to return, Furov remarked proudly. For this reason the government considered it possible to give the Church its political support, but, of course, it would not end its ideological struggles against it.

Furov complained that individual servants of the Church and believers allowed themselves to make anti-Soviet statements. Hiero-deacon Varsonofi Khaibulin had suggested that as the Church was separated from the State, atheism should also be separated from it. Active opposition to the church policy of the Soviet Government was being carried on by Regelson, and also by Shafarevich, who had published a book on religious legislation in the USSR.*

Among the 4,000 sectarian congregations which now existed, numbering some 400,000 people, only 60 per cent were loyal to Soviet power; 1,200 congregations of sectarians led an illegal existence, and the majority of these had "an anti-Soviet attitude" – these were the schismatic Baptists, the Adventists, the Innokentians (in Moldavia), the Murashkovites and the True Orthodox Christians.

At the conclusion of his lecture Furov emphasised that the Council was doing a great deal of work on strengthening legality in church-state relations and was disciplining over-zealous officials in the localities.

* I. R. Shafarevich: *Zakonodatelstvo o religii v SSSR*, YMCA-Press, Paris, 1973, 80 pp. Ed.

Committee to Defend Believers Founded

On 27 December 1976 the Christian Committee for the Defence of Believers' Rights (CCDBR) in the USSR was founded by three members of the Russian Orthodox Church – Fr Gleb Yakunin, hiero-deacon Varsonofi Khaibulin and Viktor Kapitanchuk. The following Declaration, issued by the founding members of the CCDBR, describes the aims of this Committee.

It is the inalienable natural right of every man to believe in God and to live

in accordance with his belief. In principle, this right is acknowledged in the Basic Legislation of the USSR Soviet State Constitution. However, in practice, the principle of freedom of conscience proclaimed in the Constitution comes up against considerable difficulties as regards the attitude to religion of a government which is constructing a non-religious society. This attitude is expressed not only in the character of existing legislation, but also in the violation by the state administrative