

Reviews

Letters from Moscow: Religion and Human Rights in the USSR
by Father Gleb Yakunin and Lev Regelson, edited by Jane Ellis,
co-published by Keston College, Keston, Kent and
H. S. Dakin Company, San Francisco, 1978, vi + 148 pp., £2.25.

In a prophetic press statement dated 23 April 1977 and included in this collection, four Russian Orthodox laymen, commenting on two slanderous articles published in the official journal *Literaturnaya gazeta* on 13 and 20 April of that year, expressed the opinion that the authorities had “begun preparations for a new wave of the coming terror. This time the chosen victims [were] activists of the Christian movement—Father Dimitri Dudko, Father Gleb Yakunin and Lev Regelson” (p. 109).

Since the 1917 Revolution the Soviet State, reflecting communist ideology and ignoring the beliefs of a large proportion of its citizens, has pursued a policy designed to eradicate any form of religion from the USSR. The methods employed have varied, but all are documented in this volume: the murder during the Stalinist onslaught of thousands of Orthodox hierarchs, priests and religious along with hundreds of thousands of the faithful; the more recent closure of as many as 10,000 churches by Khrushchev; and at all times the harassment of those who dare to oppose the regime and to champion the concept of freedom of conscience, which is theoretically guaranteed by the Constitution and by the Soviet Union's participation in the Helsinki Agreement.

In the forefront of the movement have been Alexander Ogorodnikov, already sentenced for his “crimes” (November 1978), and Fr Dimitri Dudko, Fr Gleb Yakunin and Lev Regelson. The predicted arrests of these three (mentioned above) were surprisingly delayed when one realizes the vexation they must have caused the Soviet authorities, and have taken place only recently, starting with Fr Gleb on 1 November 1979.

These witnesses of the Christian faith were aware that martyrdom could face them. The “true pastor” Fr Dudko said at a press conference in April

1977: "I take the danger on myself, knowing from the Gospel that the shepherd must lay down his life for the sheep" (p. 92). In the opening paragraphs of their famous March 1976 appeal to the World Council of Churches, there is also an implicit willingness on the part of Fr Yakunin and Lev Regelson to suffer further for their faith (p. 53). Those Christians who have co-operated with the enemies of the Church in its dismemberment are condemned in the same document.

The barbaric and atheistic Soviet regime is also unequivocally condemned by these courageous confessors. In the earliest letter printed (p. 12) Lev Regelson denounces the callous and inept government and the Communist Party machine: "Irresponsible rulers of a great country!" Regelson's brilliantly soaring style has echoes of *The Gulag Archipelago* in such phrases as "they have forgotten nothing and they have learned nothing" (p. 25), and he is at his best in the dynamic and biting "Reply to a Libeller" (p. 101). One longs to have available in English his book *The Tragedy of the Russian Church 1917-1945*.

The collection is by its nature rather disjointed, but this is more than made up for by the immediacy of its appeal. The reader is given some idea of what it must be like to be a Christian in the Soviet Union, and there are several particularly poignant passages, such as the accounts of the hounding by the authorities of Alexander Ogorodnikov and Georgi Fedotov (p. 105), and of the treatment in prison of Gabriel Superfin (p. 67) and Boris Zalivako (p. 68).

A Christian in the free world must wonder how it has been possible for the Church to survive at all in a climate which at best is unfavourable since Soviet legislation is designed to destroy the morale of believers and to prevent the faith being passed on to coming generations. The ways in which the law discriminates against religion are well documented (p. 55 and pp. 119-27).

A tragic story is told in these pages, but courage, faith and optimism shine through, and at the end of their letter to the World Council of Churches Fr Yakunin and Lev Regelson quote John 16:33: "Be of good cheer, I have overcome the world!"

If Christians in the free world were to read only one book about the condition of their fellow-believers in the Soviet Union, this is the one I would recommend. Having read it, can we fail to respond to their cry for help?