

The Russian Orthodox Church 1965–1980¹

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This period, which began with the waning of Khrushchev's anti-religious campaign,² is marked by the growth of new trends within the life of the Russian Orthodox Church. The most important of these are: the movement among clergy and laity in defence of religious rights; the religious revival; and the crisis in the 'imperial' mentality of the Russian Orthodox Church which accompanied a growth of interest in ecumenism and a growth of missionary concern for the spread of Orthodoxy in the free world.

The Movement for Religious Freedom

The fall of Khrushchev which halted the administrative destruction of church life did not alter the regime's general anti-religious policy. Although the mass closure of churches ceased, the churches, monasteries and seminaries which had been confiscated were not returned to believers, and the anti-religious legislation remained in force and continued to promote further centralization of government supervision over religious life. Evidence of the latter trend can be seen in the merging on 8 December 1965 of two government agencies, the Council for the Affairs of the Russian Orthodox Church and the Council for the Affairs of Religious Cults, to form one Council for Religious Affairs attached to the USSR Council of Ministers.

At the same time a new phenomenon made its appearance in the Church: the movement for religious freedom. On 21 November 1965 Fr Eshliman and Fr Yakunin, two priests from the Moscow Diocese, sent an open letter to the Patriarch about the situation of the Russian Orthodox Church.³ Before this letter was sent a section of the episcopate, without resorting to publicity, had pressed for an amelioration in the Church's position. In the summer of 1965 a delegation of eight bishops led by Archbishop Yermogen (Golubev) of Kaluga addressed the Patriarch criticizing the decision made by the Bishops' Council of 1961 which to all intents and purposes paralysed the clergy and gave com-

plete power over parish life to the Council for Religious Affairs.⁴ The secret nature of this move (church circles only heard of it later thanks to the open letter of the two priests) achieved nothing and did not prevent government reprisals. Archbishop Yermogen had to retire to the remote and isolated monastery at Zhirovitsy in Belorussia. This amounted to virtual house arrest. His life of hardship during which he served the Church without compromise came to an end 13 years later on 7 April 1978 when he was 83.⁵

The two priests decided to put pressure on church and government authorities through publicity: using the medium of the open letter they told the whole world that the Church in the USSR had no rights.⁶ Their appeal was the first public statement by a church member and as such set in motion the movement for religious freedom within the Orthodox Church. It is characteristic that this movement developed spontaneously at the same time as the human rights movement, or, as it is sometimes called, the “Democratic Movement”—another attempt to achieve free speech and break through the wall of Soviet propaganda. The human rights movement began only ten days before the two priests’ open letter appeared—on 5 December, the anniversary of the Stalin Constitution, when the first demonstration was held in Moscow under the slogan “Respect your own Constitution”. From the outset this movement stood for free speech and legality within the framework of the Soviet Constitution. The church movement for religious freedom was based on the same principles: free speech and law. In their letter to the Patriarch the priests accused the church authorities of breaking canon law. In their letter to the chairman of the Presidium of the Supreme Soviet they accused the Council for the Affairs of the Russian Orthodox Church of breaking Soviet law on the separation of Church and State and of interfering in the Church’s internal affairs.

An ecclesiastical ban was placed on the two priests. Nevertheless their appeal aroused almost unanimous sympathy among the clergy and episcopate, and was interpreted by church circles as a signal for the start of resistance among believers on a mass scale. However, such action did not follow, since the clergy were too frightened, disorganized and powerless, deprived as they were of all the machinery for social action—such as the press and an organization—and totally dependent on the Moscow Patriarchate which in its turn functioned under the constant supervision of the State.

The laity, however, did react to the letter. In June 1966 a group of believers from Kirov, headed by Boris Talantov, sent an open letter to the Patriarch and “all believers” complaining about the harassing of the Church in their town.⁷ Boris Talantov actively campaigned for religious freedom for a number of years right up to his arrest and death in a labour camp.⁸

In the 1960s Anatoli Levitin–Krasnov, the church historian, essayist and publicist, was at his most prolific. His *samizdat* articles, books and appeals dealt with current questions of belief, with human rights and religious freedom; they defended the Church from slander in the Soviet press and called upon the hierarchs to overcome their indecision and fear. Levitin's writings were widely circulated in *samizdat* and attracted young people and members of the intelligentsia to the Church.⁹ At the end of the 1960s Fr Sergi Zheludkov, a priest from Pskov, also took up the cause of religious freedom and human rights.¹⁰ "Open letters" and "appeals" were becoming a channel for protest for the Orthodox Church, and helped form public opinion in an atomized society where clergy and believers were isolated and defenceless.

Anatoli Levitin–Krasnov added his signature to a series of appeals signed by the liberal communist intelligentsia (in particular the "Letter to the Budapest Conference of Communist Parties") and joined the "Initiative Group for the Defence of Human Rights" in May 1969. He thus became the link between the church resistance movement and the human rights movement. He again began to be arrested and imprisoned and was forced to emigrate in 1974.

The young human rights movement, organized and led by representatives of the scientific intelligentsia who had been brought up within Marxism and far from the Orthodox Church, began to take an interest in the legal position of religion. In 1972 Igor Shafarevich, a corresponding member of the Academy of Sciences and a member of the Human Rights Committee headed by Academician Andrei Sakharov, presented to the Committee a report on religious legislation in the USSR.¹¹ From that moment the human rights movement included religious rights and the defence of believers within its sphere of constant concern.

At the end of the 1960s a Russian nationalist movement appeared and grew in strength: at one extreme—great Russian chauvinism—this movement was associated with Soviet imperialism and had supporters among high Party and *Komsomol* circles and the KGB; and at the other extreme—the liberal Russian national cultural renaissance—it was associated with Orthodoxy and the human rights movement. The leader of this liberal nationalist trend was Vladimir Osipov, the editor of the *samizdat* journal *Veche*. He was arrested in 1974.¹² Nevertheless, the movement for the revival of Russian nationalism and Orthodoxy which Osipov had led continued to grow and after his arrest acquired as adherents such influential thinkers as Alexander Solzhenitsyn and Igor Shafarevich.¹³

Fr Yakunin, one of the authors of the letter to the Patriarch, was close to the *Veche* movement. After a long silence he again began to make public statements about the situation within the Russian Orthodox Church. In 1975 he and the layman Lev Regelson—a physicist and

historian of the Church in the Soviet period—wrote an appeal to the Fifth Assembly of the World Council of Churches (WCC) in Nairobi.¹⁴ The appeal called on western Christians to return to the early Christian tradition of honouring confessors of the faith and to defend religious freedom throughout the world.

The other important piece of writing by Fr Yakunin and Lev Regelson was their report (in the form of an open letter) to Dr Philip Potter, the WCC General Secretary, on the legal discrimination against religion in Soviet legislation on religious associations.¹⁵

The activity of Fr Yakunin and Lev Regelson developed against the background of a growing human rights movement within other Christian denominations in the USSR. In June 1976 Fr Zheludkov, Fr Yakunin, Fr Dimitri Dudko and a group of Orthodox laymen (including Regelson) who were already well known for their public pronouncements joined forces with the clergy and believers of other Christian denominations—Roman Catholics, Pentecostals, Adventists and Baptists—and signed an ecumenical appeal to the Presidium of the USSR Supreme Soviet which called upon the government to cease persecuting believers and to grant religious associations *de facto* the religious freedom which is contained in the Constitution's article on the separation of Church and State.¹⁶ This appeal, signed by 28 Christians—members of six different denominations—was the first step in the creation of a Christian ecumenical front in defence of religious rights in the USSR.

At the end of 1976, three Orthodox Christians led by Fr Yakunin founded the "Christian Committee for the Defence of Believers' Rights in the USSR".¹⁷ This was the first human rights organization functioning on the basis of free speech and constitutional law in the name of the whole Russian Orthodox Church and with the silent connivance of the church hierarchy. Through its exercise of free speech and appeal to the law, the Christian Committee has had an educative influence on wide circles of Orthodox believers and clergy, having introduced into the Russian Orthodox Church the methods of the human rights movement.

Fr Yakunin was arrested in November 1979 at the height of the most severe series of arrests of dissidents in post-Stalin times. Lev Regelson, his part co-author, and Viktor Kapitanchuk, who helped found the Christian Committee, were also subsequently arrested. These latter two have since been released with suspended sentences after repenting of their activities. It remains to be seen what the significance and repercussions of these recantations will be on the Russian Orthodox Church and on the human rights movement in general in the USSR.

The Religious Revival

The term "religious revival" describes the conversion to Christianity of tens of thousands of young people who belong to the second and third generation of Soviet citizens and who have received atheist education. As a mass movement it began at the end of the 1960s in the capitals, Moscow and Leningrad, and in the mid-1970s spread to the provinces.¹⁸ However, it would be incorrect to confine the religious revival to this period alone. One can also talk about a religious revival, or miraculous resurrection of the Church, in the post-war years when the Russian Orthodox Church, taking advantage of a short period of relative freedom, built up its strength despite the total destruction of the Church before the War. Such rapid restoration can be explained only by the support given to the Church by the population in general.¹⁹ It was the Church's miraculous return to life and her influence on society which evoked fear in the regime and led to renewed persecution under Khrushchev, who aimed to disable the Church and tear it away from the people. That is why the religious revival of the 1960s and 1970s can be considered as a new form of the continuing religious resistance of the population to the atheist regime.²⁰ There is nothing surprising in the fact that it began simultaneously with the Orthodox movement for religious freedom and the human rights movement.

There is, it is true, a significant difference between today's religious revival and the restoration of the Church after the War: today those who attend Church belong to the generations for whom the Christian tradition is totally alien, who were brought up within a communist ideology, who were torn away from a sense of historical continuity which those returning to the Church in the 1940s still possessed. The post-war restoration of the Church was accomplished basically by those who had always remained believers but who had hidden their faith during times of persecution. The new generation has discovered faith for the first time and its members are coming to Church as a result of personal conversion. That is why one can talk about a new religious consciousness among young Orthodox Christians. Their discovery of faith is coloured to a significant degree by a reaction against communism. For them communism is a historical dead-end and the most reliable way out is return to Christianity in its thousand-year-old national form—Orthodoxy. That is why their religious consciousness is often coloured by conservatism, a militant rejection of the present, and an idealization of the pre-Revolutionary past. This can all be explained by the absence of religious education in the USSR, by ignorance of church history, by the interruption of historical tradition and by a general disbelief in Soviet historiography which has been compromised by endless falsification.

Finally, the present revival differs from the post-war restoration of the Church because of its non-legal nature, its dissident character. The post-war restoration was permitted by the regime which tolerated for a number of years the success of Orthodoxy among the Soviet people. That restoration was not characterized by political conflict, whereas the present religious revival is becoming so more and more as it opposes the will of the regime and its restrictions. From the start the religious revival has taken a semi-underground form. From the mid-1960s unofficial circles of young people gathered in private flats to study theology and Holy Scripture, Orthodox history and culture; "working" churches were filled with young people; and adults began to be baptized *en masse*. Religious *samizdat* began to be produced and included a wide variety of literature—from theology, religious journalism, foreign literature in translation and re-typed material from emigre and pre-Revolutionary editions to human rights documents. By the mid-1970s almost 50 per cent of all *samizdat* was written by religious believers. From the 1960s the work of Russian émigré authors, religious philosophers and theologians began to reach the Soviet Union. Religious *samizdat* published in the West also returned to Russia in printed form. People with a university education and holding academic posts began coming to Orthodoxy. This influx into the Church of members of the intelligentsia revived Orthodox intellectual life. The 1970s saw the birth of various intellectual trends, various theological, social and political strands of thought within the new Orthodox intelligentsia. All this was, however, spontaneous and not organized. The regime shut society off from the Church with a wall of police surveillance, supervision and administrative pressure.

One of the religious circles of young people, the "Christian Seminar" organized in 1974 by Alexander Ogorodnikov, became very well known because it functioned openly. As the Seminar grew in popularity, the regime's struggle against it increased. Arrests began in 1978, and the seminar has temporarily ceased functioning.²¹

The recent arrests of a number of active priests and laymen do not, however, signal the end of the Orthodox revival, but rather indicate the growing concern of the regime. Although the authorities can suppress the organized forms of the religious revival, and can hamper it by various methods of supervision over churches and clergy and by arresting its most active members, they are powerless to crush this elemental force which has already become a mass movement.

The Russian Orthodox Church within the Ecumenical Movement and World Orthodoxy

Over the last 15 years there have been some significant shifts in the political consciousness of the Russian Orthodox Church and in its rela-

tions with other national churches and Christian denominations. The new experience of persecution which began under Khrushchev and marked the end of the relatively peaceful period which followed the concordat with the government in 1943 undermined even among the most optimistic of churchmen any faith in the possibility of complete and mutual reconciliation with a communist state. The persecution showed that the Church has no guarantee against sudden attack, that it cannot rely on the regime's good will and that, finally, under the present regime it is impossible to hope for a radical improvement in the Church's position.

After the War had been won, the Moscow Patriarchate, restored and tolerated by the government, was able for the first time to bask in the rays of the political triumph of the Stalin empire. The Church experienced a miraculous resurrection. Once again it had the chance to minister to the people. The use which the Soviet government made of the Church in its imperialist foreign policy exploited church channels and at once flattered the Moscow Patriarchate's own ecclesiastical ambitions and helped strengthen its prestige in the world religious arena. All these factors caused temporary blindness in the Church. It forgot the bloody history of communist persecution during the first decade; it reverted to triumphalism and hoped that it might become established once more as the state church within a super-power, the political ambitions of which far outdid those of the tsarist empire. Against the background of general liberalization the new persecution under Khrushchev took the Church by surprise and destroyed any illusions of "peaceful coexistence" with communism. Although the theology of "peaceful coexistence", owing to inertia and necessity, has for almost 20 years continued to fill the pages of the only printed organ of the Russian Orthodox Church (the *Journal of the Moscow Patriarchate*) while the State wages war against the Church, the Church's own consciousness is evolving, or rather it is being changed radically. That a theology of "peaceful coexistence" has to be produced of necessity while churches continue to be closed and priests arrested only emphasizes the humiliation of a Church without rights. The triumphalism of the Russian Orthodox Church in the world arena is only a pose maintained of necessity by a few dozen members of the Church's diplomatic corps. The Church is on the defensive: her diplomatic role in Soviet foreign policy is only a means of self-defence against the regime and, moreover, her only channel of communication with other Orthodox Churches and Christians in the free world. It was no accident that the late Metropolitan Nikodim of Leningrad, one of the Church's most distinguished diplomats in recent years, who so convincingly served Soviet foreign policy, was at one and the same time the most independent of administrators in the Church,

the creator of a whole system of ecumenical relations which strengthened even the internal position of the Church, and an energetic apostle of Orthodoxy who managed to gain autocephaly for the American Orthodox Church and autonomy for the Japanese Orthodox Church.

Impressive as the Russian Orthodox Church is in its diplomatic role representing the foreign policy ambitions of the Soviet Union, the Church is also riddled with a sense of its own inner weakness, its lack of rights and dependence on the arbitrary rule of an atheist regime. This split between its external diplomatic role and inner humiliation has forced it to reject the imperialist triumphalism which has been inculcated into it over the centuries. The Orthodox hierarchy, while admitting its inability to carry out any apostolic work within the Soviet Union, is ready to help spread Orthodoxy in the free world. This no doubt explains why in 1970, after almost half a century of litigation, the Russian Orthodox Church agreed to grant autocephaly (complete ecclesiastical autonomy) to the American Orthodox Church and, in the same year, autonomy to the Japanese Church—two of the largest Orthodox Churches in the developed countries of the free world to have grown out of the Russian mission.

The 1960s were also a period when the Church turned to genuine ecumenism. Khrushchev's persecution dispelled any illusions about the restoration of an Orthodox State and helped develop within the Church the sense that salvation must be found within Christian unity and the solidarity of Christians in defence of their beliefs in the face of totalitarian atheism. Among theologians and some of the clergy and religious intelligentsia there are moves to draw closer to other Churches—to Roman Catholicism in particular. Parallel to the limited relations developed along official channels between the Russian Orthodox and the Roman Catholic Churches, unofficial relations and cooperation have been developing between Russian Orthodox clergy and believers and Roman Catholics both in the USSR and abroad.²²

The Moscow Patriarchate's ecumenical policy, it seems, is partly dictated by genuine religious interests. The Russian Orthodox Church has come closer than any other national Orthodox Church to reconciliation and the restoration of Eucharistic communion with Rome. It seems likely that the concern for Christian unity is a genuine moving force within the Moscow Patriarchate: it has begun to hold an ecumenical service each year, attended by non-Orthodox, to pray for unity, and has encouraged Orthodox believers to take part in similar services organized by other denominations.

The *Sobor* (Council) of 1971 not only encouraged the ecumenical activity of the Russian Orthodox Church²³ but also took decisive steps towards reconciliation with the Old Believers by removing the anathema on them and towards an improvement in relations with the

Eastern (non-Chalcedonian) Churches²⁴—all matters which were clearly of little interest to the Soviet regime.

Despite the increasing persecution of active defenders of religious freedom and of those who preach Christianity, the Russian Orthodox Church as a whole has visibly grown stronger over the last 15 years: the intake of students into theological seminaries and academies and the number of clergy in parishes have both increased. The Church sees much of the younger generation behind it and is beginning to feel confident, speaking of itself as the guide of the Russian people and emphasizing the significance of Christianity in the life both of individuals and of the whole nation. Although the hierarchs are still afraid to break their silence and continue to acquiesce in the regime, they are no longer quite so willing to condemn those priests and Orthodox laymen who through their Christian missionary and human rights activity express the sacred aspiration of the whole Church, including its episcopate.

¹This article is the last in a series of RCL articles covering the history of the Russian Orthodox Church from 1917 to 1980. The previous articles in the series appeared in RCLs Vol. 6, No. 1; Vol. 6, No. 4; Vol. 7, No. 1; Vol. 8, No. 3; Vol. 9, Nos. 1-2.

²See Michael Bourdeaux, "The Black Quinquennium: The Russian Orthodox Church 1959-1964", RCL Vol. 9, Nos. 1-2, pp. 18-27.

³See Fr Eshliman and Fr Yakunin, "An Open Letter to His Holiness Patriarch Alexei . . .", *Religion in Communist Dominated Areas* Vol. 5, Nos. 10-11, 15/30 June 1966.

⁴For further information on the Bishops' Council of 1961 see the document in RCL Vol. 9, Nos. 1-2, pp. 24-7.

⁵James Moss, "The Russian Orthodox Church 1977-1978", *Religion in Communist Dominated Areas* Vol. 18, Nos. 1,2 and 3, 1979, p. 37.

⁶The biography of the two priests and the history of the composition of the letters are given in an article by Arkadev, "Neskolko slov o dele dvukh moskovskikh svyashchennikov", *Vestnik RSKhD*, Nos. 95-96, 1970, pp. 99-106.

⁷"Bedstvennoye polozheniye pravoslavnoi tserkvi v Kirovskoi oblasti i rol Moskovskoi Patriarkhii", *Vestnik RSKhD*, No. 83, 1967, pp. 29-64.

⁸Boris Vladimirovich Talantov (1903-71) was brought to trial in Vyatka in September 1969 and sentenced to two years in a labour camp under Art. 190-1 of the Criminal Code of the RSFSR. He died in prison of a heart attack. See Gleb Rar, "Sovest russkoi tserkvi", *Possev*, No. 3, 1971, pp. 49-52.

⁹See M. Aksenoff, "Anatole Levitine, chrétien russe, n'a jamais cessé de lutter pour les droits de l'homme", *Informations Catholiques internationales*, No. 443, 1 Nov. 1973, pp. 21-3.

¹⁰See Sergi Zheludkov, "K razmyshleniyam ob intellektualnoi svobode: otvet akademik A. D. Sakharovu", *Vestnik RSKhD*, No. 94, 1969, pp. 46-57; *id.*, "Pismo A. Solzhenitsynu", *ibid.*, No. 103, 1972, pp. 156-8.

¹¹I. R. Shafarevich, *Zakonodatelstvo o religii v SSSR*, YMCA-Press, Paris, 1973. It should be remembered that Shafarevich is himself an Orthodox Christian.

¹²For the idea of the Russian nationalists and of Osipov, see the articles by Philip Walters in RCL Vol. 4, No. 3, pp. 20-31; Vol. 5, No. 4, pp. 229-34.

¹³See the symposium by Solzhenitsyn and others *From Under the Rubble*, Collins, 1975.

¹⁴"Appeal to the Delegates of the 5th Assembly of the World Council of Churches, Nairobi, Kenya, 1975", in Jane Ellis (ed.), *Letters from Moscow: Religion and Human Rights in the USSR*, Keston Book No. 15, 1978, pp. 41-6.

¹⁵*ibid.*, pp. 53-66.

¹⁶"Obrashcheniye chlenov khristianskikh tserkvei SSSR", *Arkhiv samizdata*, No. 2575.

¹⁷See the article by Jane Ellis, RCL Vol. 8, No. 4, pp. 279-98.

¹⁸See M. Meerson-Aksenov, "Religious Renaissance in the USSR", *Diakonia* Vol. 11, No. 1, 1976, pp. 6-16; Christel Lane, *Christian Religion in the Soviet Union: A Sociological Study*, London, 1978, pp. 43-50.

¹⁹See Prot. Dimitri Konstantinov, *Gonimaya tserkov*, Vseslavyanskoye izdatelstvo, 1967, chap. "Posle voiny", pp. 38-62; Philip Walters, "The Russian Orthodox Church 1945-1959", RCL Vol. 8, No. 3, pp. 218-24.

²⁰Prot. Dimitri Konstantinov, *op. cit.*, pp. 279-81, 286-96.

²¹See the article by Jane Ellis in RCL Vol. 8, No. 2, pp. 92-112; and the article by Philip Walters in this issue of RCL, pp. 111-22. The popular preacher Fr Dimitri Dudko, who was arrested in January 1980 and released in June 1980 after public repentance, had been the Seminar's spiritual guide.

²²See the article by Philip Walters in this issue of RCL, pp. 111-22.

²³Well-justified doubts arise, however, about the sincerity of the resolutions of this *Sobor* in view of the Soviet government's interest in the ecumenical relations of the Russian Orthodox Church and the lack of genuine freedom of the *Sobor*.

²⁴See the pastoral letter and report from Patriarch Pimen of Moscow and All Russia *60-letiyе vosstanovleniya patriarshestva*, Moscow Patriarchate, Moscow, 1979, pp. 1-9.

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