

been declared innocent of the charges brought against them. As Baptist Janis Rožkalns was told: "You have not been amnestied, you have not been pardoned. You were released on instructions from the top. When instructions come to imprison you again, we shall do so."

Despite persistent rumours of change, the civil laws affecting religion have not been amended either. Since 1929 the activities of religious associations have been regulated by the Law on Religious Associations (amended in 1975). This law makes it extremely difficult in practice to open new places of worship and yet facilitates the closure of existing ones — this despite the present shortage of places of worship in the USSR. Other activities traditionally undertaken by religious communities — charitable and educational work, for example — are expressly prohibited.

There have as yet been no signs of any readiness on the part of the régime to meet many of the demands made by religious activists over the last two decades: the amendment or abolition of much of existing legislation; the freedom to open churches as and where required; an end to discrimination in all spheres of social

life; the right to pass on one's faith freely and to give children organised religious instruction; the right to carry out charitable activities. These rights may come, but at the time of writing they have not been given any formal recognition in the USSR, and thus any "liberalisation" in the application of the laws can only be described as conditional.

We would conclude, then, by welcoming those changes which have taken place under Gorbachev, recognising that he may wish to go further in reducing the constraints on Soviet citizens but has to move cautiously if he is not to arouse political opposition. At the same time we would not overestimate the significance of these changes. Gorbachev is not a dictator and is not above the system. He might fall tomorrow and, as some Soviet citizens believe, his fall could be followed by a level of repression tougher than has been seen for many years. Should he survive and continue to push his policies forward, Gorbachev has made no secret of his aim: "We intend to make socialism stronger and not replace it with another system." For the time being we must take him at his word.

JOHN ANDERSON

## Amnesty to Mark the 70th Anniversary of the October Revolution.

On 18 June 1987, the Presidium of the USSR Supreme Soviet decreed an amnesty to mark the 70th anniversary of the October Revolution. The following day *Izvestiya* published the full text of the decree, which took effect from its date of publication and is to be executed within six months. The declaration of the amnesty more than four months

before the anniversary date which it is intended to mark is one of several innovative features of this amnesty decree. Previous practice has been to announce an amnesty on the day of celebration. The early execution of this decree may be an indication of a desire to accelerate the process of reducing the numbers of prisoners of conscience held in Soviet labour

camps or in exile.

The principal categories of prisoners eligible for release under the terms of the decree are: expectant mothers and women with children under the age of majority; those over retirement age (55 for women and sixty for men); first and second category invalids; women who have served at least one-third of a sentence of up to five years' duration. Prisoners sentenced to terms of up to three years, other than those who fall into the aforementioned categories, are also eligible for release from labour camp, on condition that they complete their sentences by doing compulsory labour.

Certain restrictions are contained within the decree. Ineligible for release or transfer to compulsory labour are prisoners who have been sentenced for "especially dangerous crimes against the state", or for premeditated murder and a number of offences recognised as serious crimes under any legal system; those who are recognised as "especially dangerous recidivists" or who are persistent offenders; prisoners who have been released from punishment as a result of pardon or amnesty and have re-offended; prisoners who have not completed a course of treatment for alcoholism, drug addiction or venereal disease, and those who have "maliciously violated the regulations" during their internment.

However, as far as prisoners of conscience are concerned, this amnesty is less restrictive than those of recent years. Prisoners sentenced under Russian Criminal Code articles 190-1 (circulation of deliberately false concoctions slandering the Soviet state and social order), 190-3 (organisation of, or active participation in, group actions which disrupt public order), 227 (infringement of the person and rights of citizens under the guise of performing religious rituals, and 142 (violation of

the laws on the separation of church and state and school and church) are not specifically excluded from the benefits of the amnesty. The majority of religious prisoners known to Keston College have been sentenced under one or more of the above articles. Initial confusion as to whether or not prisoners of conscience were to gain from this amnesty was cleared up by government spokesman Gennadi Gerasimov, who told Western journalists in Moscow that prisoners sentenced under articles 142, 190 and 227 could be eligible for release, whilst those sentenced under article 70 (anti-Soviet agitation and propaganda), an article frequently invoked to convict dissidents, could receive only a reduction in sentence. This is presumably because "anti-Soviet agitation and propaganda" is considered an "especially dangerous crime against the state".

Another innovative feature in this decree is a clause to the effect that prisoners eligible neither for release nor transfer to compulsory labour are to have their sentences reduced. Prisoners who have served at least one-third of a labour camp sentence are to have the remainder of their term halved if they are first or second-time offenders. More persistent offenders will have the remainder of their term reduced by one-third. Those sentenced to compulsory labour or already transferred there from labour camp will also have the remainder of their terms halved. There is no mention of a reduction in term for those serving sentences in exile. The only prisoners mentioned specifically as ineligible for a reduction in sentence are "violators of camp regulations" and those who have re-offended after being amnestied or pardoned. Therefore, prisoners sentenced for "especially dangerous crimes against the state" and held in special regime labour camp can benefit from this

section of the decree.

Provided that the charge of "violation of camp regulations" is not brought against them, 28 of the 298 religious prisoners of conscience known by name to Keston College should be released. This figure includes most of the known women prisoners with the exception of Lidiya Tsiorka, a Baptist who has not yet served one-third of her sentence, and two women serving exile sentences (Yelena Sannikova and Tat'yana Velikanova), who were charged under article 70 of the Russian Criminal Code. Most of the other religious prisoners should be transferred to compulsory labour or have their sentences reduced.

In early August 1987, Keston College knew of one prisoner whose early release is thought to have been a result of this amnesty. Zinaida Vil'chinskaya, a prominent member of the Council of Prisoners' Relatives (an organ of the Council of Evangelical Christian-Baptists), was released from labour camp on 30 June. She is 56.

A number of religious prisoners will not benefit in any way under the terms of the amnesty. They include exiles over retirement age who have two or more previous convictions (for example Baptist

pastor Ivan Antonov), and those who have not yet completed one-third of their terms. Several Baptists arrested within the last year fall into this category, as does Orthodox deacon Vladimir Rusak. A number of prisoners under retirement age who have completed their camp sentences and are now in exile (for example Pentecostal Pavel Pavlyuk and Lithuanian Catholics Balys Gajauskas, Gintautas Iešmantas, and Povilas Pečeliunas) will not have their sentences reduced. One sizeable group of religious prisoners unaffected by the amnesty are those in psychiatric hospital. Under Soviet law these prisoners are not serving sentences, but undergoing treatment until they are fit to be released.

Although this amnesty should affect far more prisoners of conscience than did the two decrees of February 1987, it will not bring about nearly so many releases. By August 1987 the February decrees had resulted in the release of over sixty religious prisoners of conscience, whereas no more than thirty such releases are expected under the new decree. The benefits of this amnesty lie more in transfer to compulsory labour or in reduction of sentence.

*Compiled by members of  
Keston College staff*

## Atheism in the Eighties: A New Look

Since the early 1980s, atheist propaganda in the Soviet Union has been undergoing a facelift. Atheist doctrine is being freshened up, and promotional methods are being closely scrutinised: the emphasis is on getting the message across in a way which is undogmatic, persuasive, inoffensive, and, above all, effective.

Although *glasnost*' has undoubt-

edly helped to rejuvenate the faded image of Soviet atheism, change was in the air even before Yuri Andropov came to power in November 1982. A seminar on the role played by the media in propagating atheism was held in September 1982 as a follow-up to the 26th Communist Party Congress. A report on it, published in the journal *Nauka i religiya*