

GLASNOST, PERESTROIKA, AND RELIGION

What Role for the Churches in Changing Soviet Society?

By Walter Sawatsky

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Two Russian words have entered American English since March 11, 1985, when Mikhail Gorbachev became General Secretary: glasnost and perestroika. Glasnost - openness is a statement about style. Perestroika - restructuring refers to major reforms of administrative structure. Both words are positive slogans and would be rather tame and boring, were it not for the implicit acknowledgement of the terrible presence of their opposite. The new rhetoric, now so closely identified with the new breed of sophisticated, educated managers with Gorbachev at their head, has brought hope to many in Soviet society. Many now choose to hope, to cooperate in working for gradual change. But there are many others who have had their hopes dashed too often in the past, and who are unable to do anything now but wait with ambivalent feelings for the likely toppling of the new leadership.

I shall limit my focus to the subject of religion. As has been shown frequently, religion may not seem to be of manifest interest to the Soviet authorities but it is indeed a complex and vital factor in both domestic and foreign policy. And for observers abroad, especially in North America, attitudes to religion serve as a measuring device for reviewing one's attitude toward the Soviet Union. Indeed, fate has decreed that at precisely the time when the new Soviet state is celebrating its seventieth anniversary and feels confident enough to talk about perestroika, it also has to recognize that Christianity can now celebrate a millenium since its beginning in Rus. This means that topics of the day had better be anchored in a longer chronological perspective, if they are to be properly understood.

Where do glasnost, perestroika and religion fit into the history of the Soviet Union?

RETHINKING THE SOVIET EXPERIENCE

Scholars are still earning doctorates by explaining what happened in 1917, the Great October Revolution that brought the Bolsheviks to power. Was it the story of a tsarist ruling system so rotten to the core, that it simply collapsed in World War I, and a very shrewd tactician, named Lenin whose force of personality persuaded other members of his small Social Democratic party to seize power in contradiction to their major ideological claims? Or was it a wide-spread movement, with extended support in the emerging urban working class? Or was it, as more detailed studies are showing now, a wide variety of factors and an extended process in which October 1917 is a key event but the positive goals for the future state were evolving in response to events?

Soviet scholars have turned 1917 into the major watershed in history. Their fawning citation of Lenin's writings has given them a quality of canonicity that now requires reformers to find the source of their wisdom in the later or more real Lenin, in contrast to the quotations from Lenin used to justify Stalinism. Dare we imagine a time when glasnost could even apply to what one truly thinks about Lenin's opinions? A restructuring of ideology?

For the sake of simplicity, Western scholarship on the Soviet Union could be reduced to basic approaches, namely the totalitarian and the historical approaches. Each has its own spectrum of diversity and revisionism, but the fundamental starting assumptions of each approach have continued to shape the nature of the debate. The one approach gives credence to the drive to power and what that leads to, as well as to the totality of vision that has been characteristic of Marxist philosophy. The historical approach is more pre-occupied with the question of historical continuity and with examining the developments after 1917 in terms of the viability of alternate theories of modernization or development.

The totalitarian school, more dominant in the universities in America, and especially so in the corridors of power in Washington, has tended to view the Soviet regime as lacking in legitimacy, expansionist in foreign policy aims, which, especially under Stalin, created a dictatorial regime similar to that of Nazi Germany. Emigre scholars developed the totalitarian analytical model, and it has retained its usefulness for political scientists as a theoretical model to apply to both left and right wing dictatorships.

The totalitarian approach has shaped much of the common wisdom, attitudes and language about the Soviet Union. It utilizes "Iron Curtain" language and thinks in terms of falling dominoes in South East Asia and Central America. Much of the scholarly writing on religion in the Soviet Union has also relied on this framework. The later revisionist group was influenced by the social sciences, especially sociology, and by techniques for quantification. When scholarly exchanges with the Soviet Union became possible (under detente), archival research produced a much more differentiated approach to Russian and Soviet history. It has become more common to speak of continuities and contrasts in Russian and Soviet history. The revisionists may not dwell as long on the specific atrocities of Stalin and his henchmen as do the theoreticians of totalitarianism, but by asking broader questions of pattern and function, they help us to understand what was going on under Stalinism and the later efforts at De-Stalinization. Perestroika as De-Stalinization is quite relevant to our topic, for the last time there was a De-Stalinization drive, it coincided with a campaign to eliminate religion.

There were alternatives to the Stalinist approach to modernizing Soviet society in the ultimate direction of full communism. Stalin had eliminated other prominent Bolsheviks and then launched an unprecedented ideological and administrative campaign to force rapid industrialization, collectivization of agriculture, and doctrinal conformity. Propaganda techniques were important but terror was surely the primary method to suppress opposing ideas. That included the elimination of such persons as Nikolai Bukharin who had advocated a more gradualist approach to change. Bukharin had authored the New Economic Policy that represented an accommodation to small capitalists,

and which preferred regional decentralization to the 'democratic centralism' that became the euphemism for total planning in Moscow. As Leonard Schapiro, one of the most respected representatives of the Totalitarian school, wrote in 1985, if the rehabilitation of Bukharin ever comes, "it will be a sure sign that real and substantial changes have taken place in the essential nature of the Soviet system of rule".

In November 1987 the rehabilitation of Bukharin began, followed in 1988 by frank reports from a very high level commission "On the Repressions of the 1930s, 40s and 50s", where his trial was declared a sham. Not only are the writings of Bukharin being republished and Stephen Cohen's masterful biography will appear in Moscow in Russian translation, but the party newspaper Pravda, on October 1, 1988 reported positively on a centennial conference in honor of Bukharin, concluding with the statement that "the name of N. I. Bukharin ... stands on the same line as the Leninist Guard of Bolsheviks, with those who were the first to lay out a path to socialism in our country." In short, alternate approaches to socialism are now widely debated.

What about ideology itself? How is glasnost showing through there? Might the ideology be restructured? Soviet Marxist ideology underwent a development which most serious Marxists outside of the Soviet Union labelled 'vulgar Marxism' or 'bureaucratic statism'. Svetozar Stojanovic, a prominent Yugoslav humanistic Marxist from the "Praxis" movement recently discussed Gorbachev's glasnost in terms of ideology. Stojanovic identified three major phases in Soviet ideology: socialist realism, real socialism, and what he chose to label "mendacious consciousness". During the first phase, there were constant references to a future reality, a worker's utopia, toward which society was developing. Writers were expected to write within the guidelines of socialist realism, emphasizing those factors in reality that were in conformity with the coming reality. Socialist realism might well serve as label for the entire era from 1917 to 1953.

But the excesses of Stalinism produced a philosophical revisionism in other East European countries that came to be known as Marxism with a human face (Stalin's Marxism being inhuman) or as humanistic Marxism. The Soviet authorities rejected this challenge and instead began talking of Real Socialism. Soviet Marxists now claimed that they alone had attained the real socialism, Brezhnev later speaking also of Developed Socialism as a further step toward the attainment of full communism. Yet this claim to Real Socialism was not merely a doubtful counter claim to that of the Marxist-Humanists, it was embarrassing to claim as truly socialist a state of existence that millions of workers across Eastern Europe opposed. Indeed, under the conservatism of the Brezhnev era, ideology had become so explicitly conservative, that reality was declared to be the norm, almost the ideal. That reality boiled down to the aging bureaucrats clinging to powers.

Hence, according to Stojanovic, the past decade represented the stage of 'mendacious consciousness', where consciousness no longer is merely distorted or false, everyone now knows that the operating ideology does not conform to reality, either to a present reality or a likely future reality. Nevertheless the ideology is maintained for the sake of preserving the statist regime. Ideology now becomes a set of messages or signals,

adherence to which is justified on the grounds of this being the lesser evil, and as a requirement for the ruling statist class to stick together.

It was at this point that Gorbachev found himself confronting the question: 'Can contradictions in socialism become antagonistic to socialism'. There was indeed a crisis, a massive loss of belief plus such a widespread shift in social and economic functions away from Marxist tenets to living on the unofficial sphere, na levo, i.e. in the gray and black market, that state control was in danger. In his new book, Gorbachev stated the nature of this stultification of ideology baldly:

The presentation of a 'problem free' reality backfired: A breach had formed between word and deed, which bred public passivity and a credibility gap. Everything that was proclaimed from the rostrums and printed in newspapers and textbooks was put in question...Eulogizing and servility were encouraged; the needs and opinions of ordinary working people were ignored.

How major a change does perestroika under Gorbachev's leadership represent? Is Gorbachev merely trying to pluralize the market place without the ruling elite losing control? Will the end result be a statism with a human face, as Stojanovic projected it in October 1987, not the socialism with a human face of the Marxist-Humanists? Since the astonishing openness of the special Party Conference of June 1988 that approved the wide-sweeping ten point program to transform Soviet society, and the first attempts at reviewing early Soviet history that are now appearing in Soviet newspapers and journals, plus the changes in the Kremlin leadership team on September 30, 1988, expectations for a fundamental transformation of the Soviet state and society have increased considerably. We are witnessing a period as important as the revolution of 1917.

RETHINKING CHRISTIANITY IN THE RUSSIAN LANDS

The millenium of the baptism of Rus in 988 became the occasion for offering the world a new image of the role of the church in Russian and Soviet history. It is a time for critical reflection on the role of Christianity in the Russian lands.

Christianity spread rather quickly throughout the Roman empire, but for several centuries its adherents led a rather precarious existence, many of their number seeking protection in the catacombs under the city. Then it became suitable to combine the secular power of the emperor with the moral and spiritual power of the church, especially of its bishop in Rome. Since the conversion of Constantine, this marriage of church and state where the church served the emperor in this world has been known as Constantinianism.

Thus Christianized Rome was identified with God's reign on earth. But the empire that was Rome fell. The memory was never quite forgotten, revived more vividly during the time of the Renaissance and Reformation as a Holy Roman Empire in which the vast Hapsburg lands were under the spiritual control of the Roman pope. Even when that collapsed, new European empires still envisioned a union of throne and altar, a Christian

empire, a Corpus Christianum where the church assumed responsibility for civic culture. Marxism then arose as one secular alternative to the patent falsity of Christendom.

In the Eastern world during the years of Roman eclipse, the Bishop of Constantinople came to be known as a Patriarch, indeed as the Ecumenical Patriarch with rights of precedence over other patriarchs. Unable to assert the temporal trappings of power in the fashion of Rome, the arrangement between emperor and patriarch came to be described as a symphony, parallel but separate obligations in the temporal and spiritual realms, yet acting together in harmony. Westerners have labelled it Caesaro-papism because they saw the emperor as the dominant partner, or misunderstood the theory behind it.

Beginning as early as the end of the 4th century, Constantinople already claimed to be the "New Rome". As one approached that city the largest cathedral in Christendom, the Hagia Sophia, dominated the skyline. It was long considered one of the wonders of the world. Indeed, in 987 when emissaries of Prince Vladimir of Kievan Rus visited the Hagia Sophia in Constantinople (or Tsargrad as the Slavs referred to it), they reported being overwhelmed by their senses. "We knew not whether we were in heaven or on earth. For there is no such splendor or beauty, and we are at a loss how to describe it. We only know that God dwells there among men, and their service is fairer than the ceremonies of other nations. For we cannot forget that beauty".

The stories of the conversion of Kievan Rus highlight that beauty. It is as if esthetic considerations were primary. Beauty is truth, and truth beauty, which is a different approach to truth than the criteria of logical coherence or consistency that often explains our western, rational approach to truth and our preoccupation with theological formulae. But did that beauty remain? Today when one approaches the city of Istanbul, virtually every village has a mosque, from whose minaret a voice calls to prayer five times daily. Hagia Sophia itself long ago became a mosque, and is now a museum, surrounded by still more impressive mosques built by Suleiman the Magnificent. It is the Muslim religion in control, a religion that Prince Vladimir's agents had quickly rejected because they found it ugly, there was no happiness, "only sorrow and a dreadful stench".

Yet Byzantium lasted long enough to influence the shaping of Russian Christianity for 500 years. It served as source of inspiration during the centuries under Mongol dominance, when the church held together whatever unity remained, and it was the church that rallied the princes under the new prince of Muscovy. That came when Byzantium finally fell to the Muslim Turks in 1453. Metropolitan Zosimus of Moscow in a charter of 1492 (the year 7000 of the Byzantine calendar no less) already declared the Muscovite Prince Ivan III the "new emperor Constantine of the new Constantinople-Moscow". By the 16th century, a monk named Philotheus had developed a full-blown doctrine of the Third Rome, thus assigning Moscow a major mission on behalf of Christendom. Two other dates round out the picture: After 1547 Tsar Ivan IV was recognized as Basileus (Emperor) and in 1589, the Metropolitan of the Russian Orthodox Church in Moscow was given the title of Patriarch of Moscow and All Russia.

To celebrate the millenium of Christianity in Russia in 1988 is surely meaningful because we know that the most intense anti-religious campaign of recent memory has not succeeded in eradicating the church. Nevertheless, this millenium can have many meanings, and the officially orchestrated celebrations are threatening to foster renewed Constantinianism. That is where the 1000 year sweep of Russian Christianity is instructive. There was a 250 year interlude when Russian Orthodoxy did not have a Patriarch, but rather a committee of clergy presided over by an official who was the eyes and ears of the Tsar. Peter I abolished the Patriarchate, and sought to subordinate the church to the requirements of a multi-confessional empire. At times this tolerance of other confessions actually came into effect - to the benefit of the wider empire - but at other times, especially in the half century before the revolution, the Orthodox church subordinated itself to the state in exchange for state suppression or at least geographical restrictions, on other Christian bodies.

From the perspective of the non-Orthodox Christians, the advent of the Bolsheviks in 1917 was good news. It meant the abolition of the marriage of Russian Orthodoxy with the state, giving the other churches equal, even if increasingly limited, rights. To celebrate the millenium as a victory for Orthodoxy is to reawaken their anxieties. Nor is it necessarily the perspective of all Orthodox believers.

The symbols of power are not the central symbols of that church. Very early the de facto conversion of the population, rather than the forced baptism, was achieved through the influence of monks who witnessed by their renunciation of power, and who soon were engaged in charitable activities. Russian church history can be organized rather well around the ongoing struggle between a hierarchical institution supporting imperial pretensions and a spiritual leadership exemplifying servanthood. If the churches and the liturgy draw attention to the Pantocrator image of Christ, the mystical and monastic tradition are closer to that of the Kenotic Christ, the Christ who emptied himself of all trappings of power and glory and became a human. Sometimes believers went into schism with the dominant church (Old Believers, for example), others emphasized a more relational, less institutional church. Indeed, the long sectarian tradition can also claim the millenium.

Today, as in the 19th century, it is often the ascetic startsy (Elders) who are the chief source of inspiration for the faithful. Drawing much more on the reform tradition of Orthodoxy, on a kind of restitutionism, they are providing a prophetic and healing ministry that may say more about why Christianity has persisted in the Russian lands for a thousand years of often violent history, than does the history of an obedient church leadership.

WHAT FUTURE FOR RELIGIOUS FREEDOM?

This longer memory of seventy years and one thousand years allows us to assess the current situation with a clearer eye for the future. When we speak of signs of increasing religious liberty, or note signs to the contrary, it is important to note the relative nature of these observations. If during the Stalinist repressions of the 1930s the churches as

institutions very nearly collapsed completely, then the existence of functioning bishops and churches today seems liberal, even if the number of clergy and working churches are much too low to meet demand, and the numbers have been declining during the past decade. If imprisoning even one person for acting on his beliefs is perceived as a violation of a fundamental, universal religious right, then the current Soviet situation can obviously not be a liberal one. But again, the numbers of prisoners of conscience is nowhere near what it was under Stalin. The relationship that has persisted as a state of normalcy since about 1970 is one of unfriendly state supremacy over the church, official legal claims about separation of church from the state notwithstanding.

Most Soviet church leaders will acknowledge the hostility of interests, and will differ primarily on whether they think that they can find a modus vivendi or not. We must therefore take note of some indicators that point to change for the church in a positive sense, as well as those indicators of continuity, of aspects that still need to change before the churches will feel fully accepted in Gorbachev's new society. Some of the indicators for change emerge directly out of glasnost and the millenium, others are part of a broader shift during the past decade. That points to the fact that the situation of the churches changes as much by what they are able to do about it (that is, earning the goodwill of society) as by what the state chooses to grant them. There has indeed been a renewal of interest by Soviet society in religion over the past decade.

Let us begin with matters related to the millenium. The most frequently cited gain was the permission received to restore and use the Danilov Monastery in Moscow. It has a few monks once again (less than a dozen), but more important, it allows Archbishop Pitirim to develop a more modernized publication department. And most important, the seat of the Patriarchate was moved from Zagorsk (40 miles outside Moscow) to Moscow, thus giving it much greater symbolic visibility and more adequate facilities for administration of the church.

In connection with the millenium, the Orthodox Church received permission to publish 100,000 Russian Bibles, and to import 160,000 copies of a recent reprint of the three volume Lopukhin Study Bible. Later in 1988 permission was granted to import one million copies of the New Testament. The Soviet Baptists received permission to import a further 100,000 Russian Bibles, plus an additional 100,000 Ukrainian Bibles, 10,000 German and 8,000 Estonian Bibles. These numbers are unprecedented. In one year official importation of Bibles more than equalled the total official printing and importation from 1945-1987. After new postal directives were announced in March 1988, it became possible for individual believers to receive up to five kilogram packages of religious literature by mail. The volume that was sent by thousands of friends in the West is unknown, but by mid-summer most stocks of Bibles were depleted.

In early 1987 Soviet authorities announced the release of 140 prisoners of conscience. Careful monitoring by Keston College shows that the number of religious prisoners dropped from 450 in early 1985 to 230 in August of 1988. An amnesty promised for others on November 7, 1987, did not appear to have affected many religious prisoners. By November 1988, all Baptist prisoners, except for eight doing forced labor, had been

released. Some revisions to the criminal code have been promised, especially article 70 on anti-Soviet agitation, Central Committee spokesperson Vadim Zagladin giving the impression that religious activism would not be so viewed.

Since the basic legislation on religious cults was revised in 1975, there has been a more consistent treatment of the legally permitted religious bodies. Harrassment of worshippers during services has virtually ceased, although fines for violations such as pastors permitting unauthorized visiting evangelists to preach, or youth groups to present programs in another district, or to hold a retreat were still common. Indeed, even for the illegal groups, only a dozen persons have been newly imprisoned, though there has been an increase in fines. Since the advent of Gorbachev, rumors about a change in the legislation on religion became more frequent until during the millenium celebrations in June state leaders indicated publicly that new legislation was in preparation. They also made clear, however, that it was a complex issue. After March 1988, official religious leaders were invited to offer counsel on the drafting of a new law on religion, although there is no official acknowledgement that numerous written proposals submitted by churches and activists are being taken seriously. In October 1988, Konstantin Kharchev of the Council of Religious Affairs told a visiting delegation that his office now regards the existing legislation as a dead letter.

There has been a slow increase in the number of evangelical congregations receiving legal registration, a process that began to include independent Mennonites, Pentecostals and Adventists during the past decade. Recent claims by state officials show that the total number of registrations declined by 34% between 1961 and 1986. Between April 1985 and January 1988, 173 registrations over against 107 closures produced a net gain of 64. During the millenium year, the Russian Orthodox Church was able to open 340 additional churches.

The key state office charged with responsibility for religious matters, the Council of Religious Affairs, underwent a major personnel change. In November 1984, Vladimir Kuroedov who had been the head of this office since 1960 and was known for a most unfriendly attitude to religion, went into retirement and was succeeded by Konstantin Kharchev. Kharchev soon impressed everyone with his polished manner and openness to change. For the first time in the history of the Soviet Union, this official for religious affairs travelled abroad to the USA, in fact doing so twice thus far, as well as visiting the World Council of Churches offices in Geneva. Several staff members of the Council of Religious Affairs, who were deeply entrenched in old ways of issuing directives to church leaders, have been retired. One churchman, after a long visit with Kharchev, came away feeling extremely optimistic about the future, anticipating almost no restrictions to registration and increased access to literature - two persistent church complaints.

There was occasion for optimism when Mr. Kharchev's office approved the importation of 5000 copies in Russian translation of each of the 15 volume Daily Study Bible by William Barclay. To import 75,000 volumes which are technically not sacred books, as are a Bible and hymnbook usually deemed necessary for ritual, was unprecedented. It was also unprecedented in that the nine years of preparation had involved close

partnership with the Soviet All-Union Council of Evangelical Christian-Baptists (AUCECB). A second shipment of 5000 sets was approved in October 1988. Mennonites have also noted the rapid expansion of church life in the former Orenburg colonies where earlier there had been a reign of fear.

Seventh Day Adventists had a rather negative experience under the Soviets, including a major internal division on pacifism and attitudes to the state, and with key spokespersons in prison for decades. During the eighties, the world Adventist body began making overtures, having decided to support the more moderate group, and soon secured more local registrations and rights to renovate buildings. Following Kharchev's visit to their Washington D.C. offices in August 1987, the Adventists produced a glossy magazine in English and Russian, a joint publication, and circulated 35,000 copies in the Soviet Union. They opened a small seminary in Tula in 1988, to be followed by a publishing house (as a venture capital endeavor) and the official recognition of a central Soviet Adventist office, a privilege now reserved for two denominations alone - the Russian Orthodox and the AUCECB. Whether this was achieved at the cost of suppressing part of their history and rejecting their martyrs such as Vladimir Shelkov, remains to be seen.

Other visitors and residents have reported that a Pentecostal preacher remained undisturbed when he preached on Arbat street and when a Baptist in Leningrad handed out Gospel tracts. Perhaps that is due to voices such as Evgenii Evtushenko declaring in Komsomolskaia Pravda that writers should be allowed to write about religion, and that the Bible should be freely available as a significant work of historical culture. Popular too was the recent novel by Chinghiz Aitmatov in which a Christian seminarian was featured.

Enterprising evangelicals found their own way to celebrate the millenium of Christianity in Rus. In numerous cities large public services with baptisms were held. Visiting evangelists preached to crowds numbering in the thousands with many making public conversion commitments. Widely known radio preachers Earl Poysti and Viktor Hamm made officially approved preaching missions. Hamm participated as speaker at rallies in the Ukraine and the Baltic republics, where local independent Baptists were able to rent large public halls, including an ice arena seating more than 10,000. This too is reminiscent of the early revolutionary years.

Indications that little has really changed for believers are still overwhelming, however. There are at least eight institutionalized instruments for carrying out the state's policy on religion. First there is the Communist Party that remains committed to atheism. Second is the state constitution which since 1936 has given preferential treatment to atheists, by giving them the right of anti-religious propaganda. The new constitution of 1977, which is still in effect, retains that arrangement, in spite of many voices urging that the state stop supporting atheism and become consciously pluralist and secular. Then there is the Law on Cults from the Stalinist era (1929) which continues to restrict religious practice to ritual, forbidding all social aspects of religion. The major hope currently is that a redrafted law will eliminate many restrictions on social activity, and at a minimum, finally give religious bodies the right of juridical personhood. As noted earlier, some changes in Criminal law affecting religious persons are expected, but it is still not only

possible, but standard practice to sentence believers for violation of a criminal code which forbade them organizing a youth conference, or circulating religious literature. The existence of these laws allows spokespersons for state and church to claim that persons are in prison for violating the law, not for their religion. At the time of writing it is too early to determine the implication of former KGB head Chebrikov becoming responsible (October 1988) for managing perestroika in the legal sphere.

The Council of Religious Affairs remains an all powerful state body that was officially intended to serve merely as liaison between the state and the religious groups. In point of fact, it has exercised extensive supervisory functions, often initiating peace related activities, and interfering extensively in the appointment of clergy. Added to that are social organizations charged with mediating the views of the party to the society - the Octobrists, Young Pioneers, Komsomol and the unions. Active in fostering an atheist worldview are the entire mass media and in particular the Znania (knowledge) society. Indeed, an atheistic approach to education is compulsory, and to graduate from university one must take several units in 'scientific atheism'. There is also a broad network of Institutes of Scientific Atheism engaged in study, interviews, and lectures. Indeed, were official atheism to be abandoned, several hundred thousand workers would be unemployed. This also illustrates the fact that applying perestroika to religion brings with it its own set of wide-ranging complexities.

Finally, all the reports in samizdat literature about interrogations, harrassments, and surveillance point to the very evident role of the security police, the KGB. During the period when the KGB was under Yuri Andropov's control, this man, who wrote sentimental poetry to his wife, bore responsibility for placing a notable number of religious and political dissidents in psychiatric prison hospitals, which included extensive use of drugs for behaviour modification. Fortunately, early in 1988 it was announced that the administration of such hospitals would be transferred from the Ministry of the Interior (of which the KGB is officially a subordinate part) to the Ministry of Health. Nevertheless, the pervasiveness of the KGB, whether direct or indirect, is a major institutional restraint on official church leadership. Till now the KGB has not featured in the perestroika reforms. When will that change?

WHAT MIGHT GLASNOST PROMISE FOR RELIGION?

Fr. Teska, A Roman Catholic priest from Minnesota participated in the NCC sponsored delegation to the USSR in June of 1987. He, together with Harley Wagler, a Mennonite, had an interview with Mr. Konstantin Kharchev, the new Chairman of the Council of Religious Affairs. Kharchev's comments turned out to be somewhat startling. For example, he remarked that "there is no need for Soviet power to struggle against religion. In fact, such a struggle is a deviation from Marxist principles." Kharchev went on to observe that Soviet power was only able to triumph because of the support of the workers and peasants, the majority of whom were believers. The Communist Party then sought to put into practice the ideals of these workers and peasants, ideals that were also expressed in church teaching. "These ideals include a decent life for everybody, an eradication of disparities between rich and poor, a common fight against alcoholism and drug abuse,

and disapproval of sexual licence." Naturally, Mr. Kharchev acknowledged that there had been errors, deviations from pure Leninist doctrine, as he put it, in this case attributing the errors not only to Stalin, but also to Khrushchev, and as has been customary by persons from his office over the past decade, to attribute abuses to overzealous local officials insufficiently grounded in Leninism. As Fr. Teska reported it, Kharchev stated that "There were great mistakes on the part of the Soviet bureaucracy, and the government now wants to admit this openly." In this connection Kharchev used the word perestroika, saying that they wished to reconstruct the relationship along genuinely Leninist lines.

What will perestroika of the church-state relationship involve? For one, it is to result in a de-emphasis of the contradiction between official state atheism and religion. Pure communism, the stage when religious consciousness, as a false consciousness, will have disappeared, won't come that soon. Kharchev suggested that it might take hundreds of years, perhaps even a millenium. Hence, "it is a mistake to rush things by creating artificial difficulties for religious institutions." Further, he went on, "at the present stage of history, these institutions can play a positive role in society."

What role might that be? One indicator might be that during the first week after Kharchev took office, he personally called on the offices of the AUCECB in Moscow, something that had never happened before. Normally Baptist leaders were called into his office. This time he came to find out what they were about, what their main concerns were. When they started listing several items that required state permission, he countered by asking about their five year plan. 'Why don't you include such requests in your annual and long term planning, so we can see how it fits into your overall needs, and we can decide accordingly'. That is a different style but it also implies an integration of religious matters into the overall planning for society which is not without danger. Fr. Teska is certainly not alone in noting that under Gorbachev, "the Party line on religion seems to be a Communist version of the ancient Byzantine doctrine of Symphony of Church and State."

There are some new tones, or shall we say less ancient ones, coming from specialists on atheism, ethics and philosophy. A recent book contains a most unusual collection of interviews with prominent Soviet scholars of atheism and Christianity. The newly appointed editor of Nauka i religija [Science and Religion], a monthly magazine which now has a circulation of half a million and is devoted to helping "the person overcome religious illusions", accounts for the persistence of religion in terms of unsolved problems in sociology, epistemology and philosophy. Several other scholars interviewed offer the standard answers about a scientific world view eliminating the need for religion, and also claiming that believers are not discriminated against, or stating that the charge of believers having been put in prison or in psychiatric hospitals "is just meaningless repetition, propagandistic invention, and nonsense." That has been the standard literature which no one takes seriously, certainly not self-respecting intellectuals whom one meets in the Soviet Union.

Yet other scholars interviewed, such as the social theorist D.M. Ugrinovich, declare freely that "the main social causes for religiosity in our country are social problems that

we are now trying to solve." Among other things, that includes many psychological and spiritual needs of the people, needs for consolation, esthetic needs, and moral needs, especially the problem of alcoholism. Ugrinovich stated quite simply that "we must do very great work to improve our society, and in the field of the satisfying of spiritual or psychological needs there is very much to be done." Dr. V. I. Garadzha, director of the Institute for the Scientific Study of Scientific Atheism, asked rhetorically: "What does the very fact of the existence of religion in the Soviet Union and in socialist society tell us? Is it a fact that religion is decreasing, or is it a permanent phenomenon in human society? - because the world has changed but religion is still here."

As one reads more interviews, the tone shifts still further and begins to invite serious dialogue. Dr. Vladimir N. Sherdakov, for example, a Moscow specialist on ethics stated quite simply that "the thesis of the incompatibility of religion and socialism is untrue You cannot find anything in the Koran or the Bible that is contradictory to the idea of common ownership of property, which is the main foundation of socialist society." Commenting at some length on the vulgarization of religious interpretation "that we had in the past" he asserted that "the time has come for a deeper philosophical understanding and ethical analysis of religion." And still another scholar started his remarks by pointing out that religious consciousness is very complicated involving notions of transcendence, moral standards and ideological claims. At the end of the interview he indicated some openness to exploring aspects of transcendence such as the infinity of ideas and even of consciousness.

What does one make of this? Most writing in the field of religious studies in the Soviet Union has been unimaginative, anti-intellectual, and filled with deliberate distortions. Might it be worth one's time now, to seek more deliberate dialogue?

That has indeed been a personal question for many Soviet religious leaders in 1988. In several cities in Soviet Central Asia local government leaders invited church representatives in for dialogue. Instead of another session of verbal abuse where churchmen were derided for their pernicious, socially harmful influence on the people, especially the youth, this time the atmosphere was totally different. Local officials asked the church leaders to explain to them why it was that believers had fewer marriage breakups, why their young people stayed away from drugs and alcohol and were known to have paid friendly social visits to the elderly. In effect, they were asking the churches to help them in returning Soviet society to a higher morality. Similar reports of dialogue between atheists and believers came from Baptists in Leningrad recently.

EXPECTATIONS FOR THE NEXT MILLENIUM - A CHURCH IN SOVIET SOCIALISM

There is indeed a new way of thinking in place in Moscow. That includes a recognition that an arms race is futile, that a new more pluralist approach is necessary if the nations of the world are to share the 21st century together. This new thinking was bound to come, for it is that of an entire generation of managers in the Soviet Union who, like Gorbachev, did not serve in the war nor share the guilt for Stalin's crimes. Nevertheless, there is no

reason to expect that the final goal of perestroika will be an American form of government and economic system. There are too many points of attraction in socialism when it is functioning reasonably well, and Gorbachev's apparent goal is "to perfect socialism, not dismantle it". Given the deep memory of war and revolution in Soviet society, change will likely avoid revolution. None of the dissidents ever envisioned a violent approach to change. Thus the new Soviet society will likely develop into some modified, less corrupted socialism, with a more democratic climate of discourse.

Believers in the Soviet Union may be living as second class citizens but they have lived there long enough to regard the Soviet system as normal. Indeed, as one scholar has pointed out, a new breed of bishops is gradually gaining influence in Russian Orthodoxy. These are younger men who grew up in secular families, were educated in universities, and then came to faith. As new leaders of the church they have no memory of the old church and state symphony, but consider some degree of hostility as the norm. They represent a hope for the future of Orthodoxy in the modern world. In a recent speech, Father Vitali Borovoi, an internationally esteemed Russian Orthodox theologian, drew attention to the need for a serious re-examination of the ideas and strategies for church renewal and involvement in society, for a Christian socialism, that had been advocated by highly respected leaders between 1905 and 1917.

Similarly in the evangelical circles, the responsible leaders expect to be integrated into Soviet society. For them, talk of glasnost and perestroika generates hope that their disadvantaged status will improve. They wish to be good citizens, most are deeply patriotic, but there are barriers. Many believers have already accepted the restrictive Soviet definition of religion as a privatized gratification of religious need, thus avoiding the ethical, social and political implications of the Gospel as do so many of their counterparts in the West. But there are also many who still expect an acknowledgement of Christian faith as a way of life that enables them to make a constructive contribution to citizenship, a contribution that includes access to all the social services jobs such as teaching and social work administration which are still denied them. Possible portents for the future came in 1988 when volunteers from an Orthodox parish in Moscow began assisting in care for chronically ill in a nearby hospital, and the Moscow Baptist church was invited to provide voluntary care at a veterans' hospital.

The prospects after seventy years are improving. Where religion was in popular disrepute in 1917 and the masses expressed their anti-clericalism with excesses, we now have a situation where a quiet suffering church, whose members lead exemplary moral lives and are reliable members of the work force, now enjoys popular goodwill while it is the party that needs to recover prestige. But for a more inclusive practice of religion to happen, church members and their leaders will need to seize the initiative, to simply begin to do more, without waiting to be asked or getting permission.

That poses a special dilemma for the dissident religious groups, such as the Council of Churches of Evangelical Christian-Baptists (CCECB) who have placed a premium on no accommodation to the regime. At what point will their effort to remain pure of any entanglements become irrelevant? At what point will their stance of courage become one

of self-righteous stubbornness? Those points tend to be fluid, which may account for the growing disagreement within their ranks on the appropriate stance to take toward other churches and toward government.

TIME TO RESTRUCTURE OUR MENTALITY?

Westerners watching these developments with a mixture of appreciation and anxiety, are certainly asking themselves how they can help. Simple answers such as pressuring for a greater volume of literature shipments, sending money to build seminaries, etc. are not wrong, but they may not be that central. One helps when one tries to understand what is happening, to recognize what the options are, and what the dangers are. One helps when one personally shares in the global shift in attitudes that is needed for the next century. And we do indeed have to start changing our own attitudes.

In his highly sensitive essay in Time Magazine (Oct. 26/1987) Roger Rosenblatt describes entering a house in Leningrad where the fictional character Raskolnikov, of Dostoevsky's Crime and Punishment, had lived. The graffiti on the wall included the obscure comment: 'Enter this house and let the ice melt'. It prompted Rosenblatt to observe:

A first-time visitor brings an ice-chip the size of a continent on his shoulder to the house of the Soviet Union. Disapproval mounts on memory, and there in the airport upon landing is all that political, historical ice at one's side: collectivism, adventurism, dissidents, Gulags, murders, anti-books, anti-church, anti-Semitism, psychological torture, denial of rights, property, humanity. You were not even aware you bore such a grudge-freight with you, but flying into Moscow, circling the sudden, pleasing greenery, you understood that no Westerner can enter here, however eagerly, without a glacier in his heart. So when the ice of hostile opinion melts, which happens over time, it melts almost in spite of itself, and it never melts entirely... One feels either an odd sort of guilt for harboring one's chilly matter, or a fool for laying it aside."

In his most recent book, Perestroika: New Thinking for Our Country and the World Mikhail Gorbachev stressed the need for a new mentality with great eloquence and amazing frankness: "The greatest difficulty in our restructuring lies in our thinking, which has been molded over the past years . . . We have to overcome our own conservatism. In politics and ideology we are seeking to revive the living spirit of Leninism." Gorbachev even went so far as to say:

There is no reasonable alternative to a dynamic, revolutionary perestroika. Its alternative is continued stagnation. We will not retreat from perestroika but will carry it through.

This society is ripe for change. It has long been yearning for it . . . we have set about changing the moral and psychological situation in society . . . We still lack political culture. We do not even have the patience to hear out our friends.

We have come to the conclusion that unless we activate the human factor it will be impossible for us to change the situation in the country.

There is major resistance, quite freely acknowledged. It may well be that the conservatives will stop the momentum. But there have been actions, and things have been said in public that will not easily be erased. One thinks here of the thaw of 1956, the debates of 1965 that stimulated the dissident movement, or the euphoric days of detente, all of which were stopped, but Soviet society was no longer the same. Can we take heart from the personal confession of Mr. Kharchev of the Council of Religious Affairs when he told his visitors: "I used to treat believers in the old way. I was accustomed to thinking of them as low characters, riff-raff, backward types on a level with criminals. I had to develop a new mentality."

Let us assume this is a true confession. Let us assume that a new mentality does not develop merely when you are ordered to change your thinking. Might his confession not mean that as he came to know believers, he found them to be persons with the habits of thought needed to play a positive role in society? Is it then foolish to dare to think, that to move from a new mentality to a spiritual metanoia is really only a short step? Was not a currently popular film on the Stalin era entitled "Repentance"? Perhaps the long term future of religious restructuring in the Soviet Union has less to do with specific, measurable violations of religious rights than it has to do with the soul of a people, a people struggling out 'from under the rubble' when breathing and thinking return, as Solzhenitsyn once put it when he still lived there.