

Religious Revival Serious Problem for Soviet Reds

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The world's attention is being called to what is a most disturbing fact to the Soviet ruling elite-that God in the USSR is far from dead. Indeed, there exists in the Soviet Union a growing interest in religion and an increasing desire for religious freedom, in a society whose ideology cannot permit religion. Recent events in the Soviet Union bear this out very graphically.

On May 9, in Moscow, 15 Baptist evangelists invaded the American embassy there, seeking the help of the United States in getting the Kremlin to relax its atheistic profile. Coincidentally enough, President Nixon chose to visit the First Baptist Church in Moscow during the summit, rather than the even more rigidly controlled Orthodox Church. As earlier reported in *The Rising Tide*, on May 18, in the Lithuanian city of Kaunas, Roman Catholic and nationalist demonstrators fought a pitched battle with Soviet police, to dramatize their discontent on the eve of President Nixon's arrival.

Indeed, what is being witnessed in the Soviet Union is a growing search for spiritual roots in the past, coupled with the search for a new understanding for the present. Rejecting Marxist "logic," millions of Soviet youth and working people alike are now looking to religion as a viable alternative. The spectrum of religious thought ranges from active participation in the rites of the Orthodox Church to a spiritual search beyond organized religion. But in whatever form religion is being sought in the Soviet Union, the seekers are increasing, to the dismay and bewilderment of the Communist regime.

At present, there are approximately 50 million Orthodox believers of whom 22 million, according to the Moscow patriarch, are regular churchgoers. In addition to these are 3 million Roman Catholics; 12 million Baptists, Lutherans and other Protestants; 1 million practicing Jews; 5-10 million Moslems and about 100,000 Buddhists. These numbers mean about 15-20% of the Russian population, but that is only a small part of the story.

Religion is the one area where dissidents strike a chord with the ordinary people. When intellectuals are arrested, they don't get much popular support. It is quite different for those arrested on religious grounds-they attract a surprising degree of support from all sides, even from those not religiously inclined.

Of particularly growing concern to the Soviet government is the rising number of baptisms and conversion experiences. Much of the credit for such experiences has been linked to several underground Baptist groups, known as "The Initiators." It is the illegal churches in the Soviet Union which are the most active; and the current anti-religious campaign of the government, more subtle and directed at believers rather than the established churches, gives evidence of this. Informers, and probing secret police are common to the underground experience.

But perhaps the most difficult task for the Soviet government is to separate and break the strong ties between nationalism and spirituality in Russian culture. The long history of unity between the church and state has instilled a character in Russia unmistakably Christian in nature; and this, to a large degree, is the real reason for the large base of support that the underground church has maintained.

Almost inevitably, what is traditionally Russian is traditionally Christian, from infant baptism to Christian weddings to funerals. For example, polls and sociological surveys indicate that the majority of newborn children in Russia are baptized. These polls show that more than 60% of the children in the industrial city of Gorky are baptized, while the figures in rural areas rise to 80%. Much of this is simply tradition, with

little awareness of the spiritual significance.

However, there is no doubt that these strong traditions have helped to preserve a germ of spirituality. More and more, Russians are beginning to investigate the real significance of these ceremonies. Church weddings are becoming so popular that the Komsomol, an organization which directs propaganda towards Soviet youth, has found it necessary to wage an all-out campaign against them. Work stoppages on religious holidays are frequent and on the increase, particularly in collective farms and villages.

Unwittingly, the Soviet government, in its campaign of recent years to restore at least physically some of its more historic churches, has increased the religious questioning. Especially Soviet young people, who have never seen images or icons, are questioning the government's claim that they are simply relics of ancient mythological figures. They are initially attracted by the mystique of a taboo, the attractive rituals and Byzantine art; but once there, many are fascinated by the interesting sermons, and Western church music.

However, a recent survey of high school students by the Soviet magazine, *Problems of Scientific Atheism*, suggests that many Soviet youths are going beyond a simple curiosity and enjoyment of ancient ritual. Wrote one Leningrad senior, "Religion gives people hope for something in life. What a man believes may be mythical, but without faith one cannot live." Wrote another student, "Why does religion exist? Obviously because man yearns for something pure and exalted. Religion satisfies this yearning."

That yearning has become a real threat to a society whose existence is based upon the assumption of materialism. Those who have found God in the Soviet Union have gone first to the core of Marxist society, to find it hollow and empty. This discovery is one which the Russian government must prevent at all costs if it is to survive in its Marxist form. But if Marxism is to be seriously challenged in the Soviet Union and around the world, Western Christianity must recognize the anti-Marxist religious struggle and support it. If it does, millions of Russians experiencing perhaps the greatest bondage of the spirit in human history shall surely know hope, and someday even freedom.