

RELIGION

Journal of the KSR



Vol. 25

No. 2

Feb. 1988

Religion: The Wave of the Soviet Future

Author's note: In 1988 the Soviet Union will mark the Thousandth Anniversary of the conversion of Russia. This is not only a religious event celebrated by Moscow Patriarchate and the other churches, it is also a civic, patriotic and national celebration of great significance. The millennial festivities will take place in a context of more than six decades of official hostility to religion. However, there are some indications that this hoary policy may be changing. This article assesses these indices of change in Soviet religious policy.

Bill Fletcher is one of the world's foremost authorities on religion in the USSR. He is the author of 10 books and some dozens of articles dealing with various aspects of the subject — state religious policy, history of the Russian Orthodox Church, Soviet sociology of religion and most recently, the history of the Pentecostals in the USSR. He has taught religious studies and is Professor and Director of Soviet and East European Studies at the University of Kansas. This article was adapted from the 1986 John Shelton Curtiss Memorial Lecture.

There is an ancient Soviet joke, "Boga nyet. No znaet li Bog eto?" "There is no God. But does God know it?" If He doesn't, then He has not been reading the anti-religious propaganda.

Which is no surprise: Nobody reads it. That stuff was boring at best of times. Now it has collapsed entirely. *Nauka i religia*, the main anti-religious journal, is put out by tired old men who haven't had a new idea in 20 years. It's sad, full of reminiscences of the glory days of their youth in the '30s or the '60s.

Problems of Scientific Atheism (Voprosy nauchnogo ateizma), the flagship of Soviet atheist scholarship, was semi-annual from its inception in 1966. In 1983 only one issue, Volume 31, appeared; Volume 32 did not show up until 1985, and if there is a Volume 33, I have not seen it. In all of 1985, only seven items on religion appeared in the national, gen-

eral circulation periodical press. Anti-religious propaganda has fallen apart.

The real problem is cadres. You look in vain for an anti-religious author who was not publishing in the '60s. To a man the younger people have abandoned atheism for other, more promising and more interesting fields. "One of the important problems is highly qualified cadres. It is no secret that some of the scholars who defend doctoral and candidate dissertations on scientific atheism then, because of various circumstances, leave this field."

The message of anti-religion has eroded away. Gone is the militance; gone are the threats. "Even though it renounces religious ideology, our society does not come out against the believer. And we, naturally, will never take up arms against a believing person, 'to fight them.'" There is a despairing note: "Some of our propagandists 'usu-

ally prefer to prove the proven instead of thinking about new phenomena of life.' Now and then lectures lack concreteness and conviction." But the Old Guard of atheism has nothing much to recommend to correct the situation, other than hackneyed calls for more of the same things that haven't worked for 60 years.

Anti-religious propaganda, which is in a complete shambles, is a true reflection of State policy on religion. The policy has all but broken down. It is a mass of contradictions.

The new Constitution of 1977 contained a most Draconian clause threatening condign punishment for anyone whose children were deemed insufficiently patriotic, and believers, especially the Christian pacifists, "ran to the rock to hide their face, the rock cried out 'No hiding place.'" But nothing happened. So far as I know, this clause of the Constitution has never been invoked.

Instead there was a rash of unprecedented, sweeping concessions. Taxes on clergy were reduced. In the mid-'70s the tradition of refusing to register new churches was abandoned and the illegal congregations, some of them at least, were urged by officials to register as legally functioning churches. The orthodox seminaries were enlarged, and new cadres of younger, more highly educated bishops and priests began to infuse the Church with new life. And all of the old religious *samizdat* complaints about restrictions on Sunday schools, open-air services and the like dried up and disappeared. The State began to give believers unprecedented concessions.

But waves of arrests of religious leaders recurred. Father Dimitry Dudko and his colleagues suffered harassment and arrest. Between 1979 and 1984 the number of Baptists known to be in prison grew from 35 to nearly 200, and early in 1985 there was another wave of arrests. There is even documentation from something called "The Committee to Free Russian Hare Krishnas."

What was happening was an entrenchment and intensification of what I call the "Andropov Policy" on dissent. When Yuri Andropov took over as head of the KGB, the Soviet secret police, in 1967, he endorsed a new policy for dealing with dissent, and during his tenure as the nation's leader, this policy became entrenched and enshrined, to such an extent that today, two premiers later the Andropov Policy remains in force.

Essentially, the policy is a two-pronged, carrot and stick approach, combining limited, modest concessions to draw off the rank-and-file dissenters with removal of the leaders. Poets were allowed mass recitals, at which they said some surprising things. Writers saw previously unthinkable works published. Painters were allowed to display something other than muscular workers and hideous buildings. Theaters presented experimental works that were truly amazing.

And at the same time the leaders of the secular dissent began to disappear at an alarming rate. House arrest; the Lubianka; the Gulag, that hoary mainstay of the more brutish approach to social control; the more refined innovation of the psychiatric hospital; internal exile and expulsion abroad. Amalrik, Tarsis, Siniavsky, Soloukhin, Solzhenitsyn — you can continue the list yourself. The object was to remove the leaders of dissent, one way or another, and the efficiency of the KGB was awesome.

The Andropov Policy was a huge success. It completely eradicated the secular dissent movement, destroyed it 100 percent. It was so effective that by the time the Helsinki watch groups came on the scene in the '70s, they had no following at all, and it was the simplest of chores to round up the leaders. Because they had no flock. The Andropov Policy was a complete success. Today there are no movements of secular dissent, none.

But this is not true of the religious dissent. Here the Andropov Policy has not succeeded at all; instead it is a

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dismal failure. It was applied against the churches, with even more consistency than against the secular dissent — in fact, it may have been devised precisely to meet the threat of the religious dissent, which antedated the secular dissent by several years. But it did not work.

Concessions were given to the rank-and-file, sweeping concessions. This first was undertaken as an experiment in 1963, when the legalized Baptist denomination was allowed to make token concessions to the demands of the dissenting Baptists, the Initsiativniki. In '66, more important concessions were made, and the other prong of the Andropov Policy was applied: The Initsiativniki leaders were rolled up and remanded to the camps. By the end of the decade, the Eshliman/Yakunin dissent in the orthodox Church had suffered the same fate, and thereafter the carrot-and-stick policy was applied pretty much across the board.

The concessions did not work to draw off the rank-and-file. There was no mass movement of the Initsiativniki back into the legalized denomination, not after the token concessions of '63, not after the broader concessions of '66, and not after the truly sweeping concessions of '69, which yielded to virtually all of the original Initsiativniki demands of 1961-63. Instead the movement grew, stabilized itself and became an illegal, nationwide denomination. The concessions did not satisfy the rank and file; instead each new round of concessions whetted their appetite for more, and the demands of the religious dissenters continued to escalate, to such a level that the State could scarcely meet their demands if it had wanted to. By 1980 the

Pentecostal "Christian Emigration Movement in the USSR" was claiming 50,000 members.

Nor did the other prong of the Andropov Policy, force, work with the religious dissent. No sooner would one set of leaders be arrested than other leaders, equally dedicated, equally talented, equally courageous, would appear to take its place. Seemingly, the religious dissent had an inexhaustible pool of potential leaders. Even worse, nothing seemed to work to silence those the State intercepted. They would continue to proselyte in the prisons and camps, and exile was not a solution either. Georgii Vins, who was exiled, has formed a U.S. branch of the Initsiativniki organization.

All in all, the Andropov Policy has been an utter failure against the religious dissent. But it still continues in place. Just last fall an official from the Council for Religious Affairs was in New England talking about sweeping new concessions to the churches, and we continue to hear of individual leaders being arrested.

The problem is that the State really has no alternative to this failed policy. No theorist has come up with anything better, and the only options seem to be complete capitulation or a return to the unrestrained force of the Stalin and latter Khrushchev years. But this is not really a live option either, for the State has nobody to implement such a policy. The anti-religious establishment, which used to supply the cadres for State policy, has collapsed. And the bureaucracy is so thoroughly corrupt, so steeped in careerism, bribe-taking and immobility that it is a real question whether the leadership could get them to carry out any policy changes at all, let alone in a field most of them think is so idiotic and unimportant as religion. The present policy is a patent failure; but the State may have no alternative to it.

At this point I'd like to introduce a theory of Soviet governance that I find useful in understanding current Soviet affairs and, especially, predicting the future course of the State. It is my "Theory of Terminal Incompetence." Simply put, the Soviet Union has reached a point of incompetence from which recovery is impossible.

The military provides perhaps the most glaring examples of incompetence. In the Navy, someone steals a Destroyer, the arsenal of the Northern Fleet blows up, and sub-

marines surface and sink all over the world.

So incompetent is the Air Force that it shoots down KAL 007, and then compounds the error by having its first live news conference, at which Ogarkov fulminates about "defending the sacred borders of the motherland." (Ogarkov is the sort that mothers in this country use to frighten naughty children.) Four years later a West German teenager landed his plane on Red Square.

And come to think of it, that Korean plane is just about the only thing the Soviets have succeeded in shooting down. Ask the Syrians about SA-6 missiles or Libya about SU-21 jets.

Nor is the Army any better. Three weeks after the Afghan invasion, the Soviets had to withdraw the entire 80,000 man invasion force that had been deployed from Soviet Central Asia and replace them with Russians and Belorussians. I've heard two explanations why. The first is that the original contingent had the wrong identification numbers — cooks and clerks and such — which signifies incompetence at the top. And Soviet troops are still ripping off equipment and trading it for drugs.

But it isn't just the military. Incompetence permeates the economy. *Vremia*, Moscow's evening TV news, ran an item last year on the four-millionth refrigerator coming off the assembly line; it was to be placed in a museum. Four million? From a production run of 40 years? In a country of two hundred fifty million? But what with bribery, blackmail and *blat*, influence-peddling and under-the-counter goods, and all the rest, I don't have to belabor the incompetence that has vitiated the economy.

It has infected the social realm as well. Alcoholism, for example. Does anyone think Mikhail Gorbachev, the *Mineral'nyi Sekretar*, will succeed in his anti-alcohol campaign? In 1925 it was so bad that there was a huge church in Moscow of the *Trezvenniki*, or teetotalers. The price goes up, and everyone becomes his own brewer — and *samogon* can taste pretty terrible. There was a report, probably spurious, last fall that the Soviets had taken to drinking after-shave lotion and even roach poison.

It isn't just alcohol. The death rates are up, life expectancy is declining, infant mortality is increasing, divorce is

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rampant and the birthrate is drowning in a sea of abortions. These are not the signs of a healthy society. They are the hallmarks of a nation that is far, far gone in incompetence.

The more I think of this, the more a comparison comes to mind: the Ottoman Empire of the 19th century. That "Sick Man of Europe" had also entered into terminal incompetence. For more than a century it was moribund, sliding ever downward into decay. There was no revolution, or any threat of one: The bureaucracy was too well entrenched for that. It was still a danger to peace, with its huge military. But as time went on and the Ottoman Empire sank ever more deeply into the mire, it became less and less of a force in the world, and the West went on its merry way without a moment's consideration of what once had been a major world power.

This is what I see in store for the Soviet Union. It will not go away, not for a century at least. There will be no new revolution. It will continue to be immensely dangerous with its huge standing army and its nuclear arsenal. But its impact in the world will decline and diminish; it will rise up to trouble our sleep less and less as time goes on. I do not think that the Gorbachev government, or any other Soviet regime, can reverse the trend. It is *terminal* incompetence.

And this means that the State will not be able to contain religion. It is not competent to do so. Religion is going to continue to grow.

The signs are everywhere. The intelligentsia are returning to the bosom of the church in droves. Here and there, and little by little, we hear of new churches being opened and old ones expanding. The believers are coming out of the woodwork and their influence is beginning to be felt in any number of ways. Religion is growing.

There is no way to predict what its impact will be. In Poland the State virtually ignored religion for a decade, then awoke in the '70s to find that 96 percent of the population were church members, 70 percent of them were in church on a given Sunday, and Solidarity rose up to trouble the regime. What the impact of religion's expansion will be on the USSR is one of the great imponderables of contemporary Sovietology.

Not least of our difficulties is that we are not well positioned to track this phenomenon. We need scholars. The few stalwarts of a generation ago were so impressive, so meticulous and so exhaustive that they convinced a generation of American scholars that study of religion in the USSR is boring and unimportant. And that is only half right, for it really is vastly important.

During the past 15 or 20 years we have made a beginning to fill this void by developing competent scholarship on religion in the USSR. But it isn't nearly sufficient. The small handful of scholars who attend to things religious are a long way from enough. Great and far-reaching changes are about to take place, whose impact will reach into every area of Soviet life, and unless we have the scholarship prepared and in place, we are going to be helpless to interpret it. We are going to need all the expertise we can get in this field, and sooner, I suspect, than we think.

For religion may well be the last, best, perhaps the only hope for the Soviet peoples. It is just about the only place left where when you work, you work hard; and when you play, you play fair; where your word is your bond and honesty is not a virtue, it's the natural order of things; where a friend is forever and the verb "to love" has *no past tense*.

Religion is the key to what is going to happen in the USSR. Just as Marxism was the wave of the Soviet past, so religion is the wave of future.

What's Going On

KSR Sets Lectures

'What Does it Mean to Monotheize?' is topic

This year's KSR Lectures will feature the president of the Ancient Biblical Manuscript Center for Preservation and Research in Claremont, Calif.

James A. Sanders, a professor of intertestamental and biblical studies at the School of Theology at Claremont and a professor of religion at the Claremont Graduate School, will deliver the lectures April 12 and 13.

The topic of his 6 p.m. lecture April 12 is "What Does it Mean to Monotheize?" Also, Sanders will discuss "One God and World Peace" at a noon luncheon at the Ecumenical Christian Ministries on April 13.

Sanders graduated with a bachelor of arts degree from Vanderbilt University and went on to receive a bachelor of divinity degree from Vanderbilt Divinity School. He received his doctorate from Hebrew Union College.

Sanders has also been the recipient of prestigious awards, including a Fulbright grant, Lefkowitz and Rabinowitz fellowships, a Rockefeller grant, a Guggenheim fellowship and a Lilly Endowment grant.

He has also written many books that study Old Testament topics, archaeology, the Torah and Canon. More than 175 of his articles and reviews have appeared in international journals, encyclopedias and dictionaries.

For more information or to make reservations for the KSR annual banquet and lecture, write the KSR at 1300 Oread Ave., Lawrence, Kan. 66045, or call (913) 843-7257.



James A. Sanders

Conferences Supported

The Department of Religious Studies and the KSR again will bring lectures to the campus for the spring mini-conference presentations.

The theme this year will be "Religion and Authority Issues: Roman Catholicism." Dates and specific speakers are to be announced. Persons interested may contact the department office requesting information. Write the Department of Religious Studies, University of Kansas, 103 Smith Hall, Lawrence, Kan. 66045-2164, or call (913) 864-4663.

Fall Conferences Planned

With the subject "The Role of Faith in Crisis," the KSR conferences are being planned at different locations in Kansas this fall. The one-day events are for those in the medical or clerical professions and for social workers.

Details are forthcoming.

Essay Deadline Nears

Feb. 15 is the deadline for high school students to submit essays to their local ministerial groups.

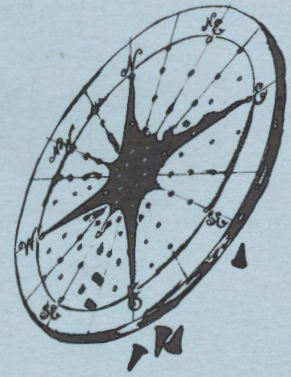
Essays on this year's topic, "Religion and Technology," will then be forwarded to the Kansas School of Religion for final judging March 15.



The KSR will provide \$25 to winners at the county level, which is often augmented by church and civic groups, and prizes of \$300, \$200 and \$100 are given to the first-, second-, and third-place winners respectively at the state level.

Essays should be typed, double-spaced and between 1,000 and 1,500 words long. At the state level, the author's names do not appear on the essay to preserve anonymity in judging. For more information, write the Kansas School of Religion at 1300 Oread Ave., Lawrence, Kan. 66045, or call (913) 843-7257.

Traverse Log



Ethics is cozying up with politics. As a self-appointed Pooh-Bah for morality in civic life, I do not know of a time when people were so fascinated with the morality of political leaders. Furthermore lying, plagiarism, extra-marital sex (before and after) and fooling with public funds, when suggested in the lives of candidates, seem to sound a lot like breaking religion's values.

That "Wall of Separation" we have talked about since 1802, never was very high and now exhibits some holes. Some presidents in the past did not show exemplary private lives. There was not much public horror (if any) about them at the time.

Of course we want the wall; we cannot countenance a fusion of religion and government. And we are not honking up a squeaky pure posse of goody-two-shoes Winnie-the-Pooh candidates doing battle with evil public corruption. But as Martin Marty summarized, "The U.S. Constitution is highly aware of original sin, and I think that is what makes it such a good document." Charles Whitter, Library of Congress expert of religion, reports that lawmakers are seeking information on religious issues now as they frequently affect major public policy decisions.

A short time ago we were nodding approvingly of shooting up drugs and doing free sex. No more. It is not cool or smart, proclaimed *Nightline's* Ted Koppel in a university lecture, not because you might get in jail or die of AIDS, but because it is wrong. We continue with Koppel's case:

"We have spent 5,000 years as a race trying to drag ourselves out of the primeval slime by searching for truth and moral absolutes. Truth is not a polite tap on the shoulder. It is a howling reproach. What Moses brought down from Mount Sinai were not the 'Ten Suggestions.'"

Lest this essay be construed as a general turkey shoot to expose immorality everywhere, let it be stated this is not a homily for anyone's particular code. Some habits, however, should disqualify a candidate, dishonesty, incontinence, cowardice; these are de facto disabling. Society will not stay in business in the face of them. The ongoing progress of society is the key to pertinent morals.

Another caution about the social order's chance to self-destruct involves the detaching of purpose from moral judgment. It seems to be more interesting to spend heated breath on personal gossip than to think through the ability of a candidate to perform the job or make the policies that the office needs.

If we get through the mire of this gossipy episode, casualties notwithstanding, we could be on a step in the proper direction.

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RELIGION
(USPS 480-280)
Kansas School of Religion, 1300
Oread, The University of Kansas,
Lawrence, Kansas 66045.
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