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New Soviet Policy on Religion

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So far, the reforms carried out in the Soviet Union under the slogans of *glasnost’* and *perestroika* have had a positive impact. If current fears of a restoration of a dictatorship are realized, a new system of repression will inevitably have far-reaching consequences for the churches. Whereas in earlier years churches were constantly being closed, since 1988 over 3,000 churches have been reopened. Priests no longer have to register baptisms and marriages with the state authorities. As a result, the number of adult baptisms has shown an enormous increase. To a limited extent, the churches are now permitted to carry out charitable activity. A great number of informal associations linked to the churches have been established. The state-controlled media report on church events. Church leaders have been elected to the Congresses of People's Deputies. The changed attitude toward the church and religion became evident to the world in connection with the celebration of the 1000th anniversary of the baptism of Kievan Rus' in 1988.

A vast experiment appears to be coming to an end. For 70 years, one-sixth of the earth's surface and its entire population were officially in the course of being transformed in accordance with the "best model" supplied by Marxist-Leninist theory. A small group of communist party leaders set the course that the country followed. With titanic determination, a new people, a new society, and a new man were to be created. For this, Lenin—even before Stalin—was prepared to pay any price. "Use force mercilessly in the interest of the final goal of achieving a society in which there will no longer be any need for coercion"(1) Lenin's successors carried out this demand inexorably, but the final goal moved ever farther away. Since the ideology could point to
very few convincing achievements, the planned future acquired more and more importance for the justification of the sacrifices required of society. Technological and scientific progress became a concept that was revered with religious passion. As a result, the catastrophe of Chernobyl meant far more than just a technological disaster. It represented the demythologization of a profound eschatological belief. Nuclear power, the symbol of a promising future, became an ominous threat.

Lenin had always seen the church as one of his main enemies, opposed to his aims. For this reason, he gave orders that the church was to be treated ruthlessly. "The greater the number of representatives of the reactionary bourgeoisie and clergy we succeed in shooting, the better." (2) Now after 70 years of fury directed against religion as the opium of the people and alleged obstacle to progress, the realization is growing that: 1) religion cannot be killed; and 2) the Christian religion by virtue of its own self-perception is an incentive rather than an opiate for the development of society. The former chairman of the Council for Religious Affairs, Konstantin Kharchev, declared at a Moscow meeting with representatives of the Russian Orthodox Church on January 12, 1989, "One must enable human beings and the church to come closer to God. One must fill the church with a new spirit, so that it can become a moral and ethical example for the people."(3)

No other country possesses as many varieties of Christian practice as the Soviet Union. All the four great Christian traditions are represented with their particular cultures: the Oriental (the Armenian Apostolic Church), the Orthodox (the Russian Orthodox Church and the Georgian Orthodox Church), the Catholic (both the Latin and the Byzantine Rites), and the Reformed Churches (Lutherans, Evangelic Christians, Baptists, etc.).

About two-thirds of all Christians in the Soviet Union belong to the Russian Orthodox Church, i.e., 50 million out of 75 million believers. Because of the number of its adherents, but also because of its organic connection with the Russian people, the principal nation of the multinational Soviet state, the Russian Orthodox claims for itself a leading role among Soviet Christians. From the beginning, the Russian Orthodox
Church bore the main burden of Soviet persecution, but at the same time it was the most deeply involved in collaboration with the regime. Russian Orthodox dissidents like Father Gleb Yakunin are calling for the church to search its conscience and work to overcome the legacy of the past. The Russian Orthodox hierarchy let itself be harnessed too uncritically and submissively to the policies of the totalitarian state.

After the Russian Orthodox Church, the Catholic Church with its eight million believers is the second largest denomination in the Soviet Union. It is divided into two approximately equal parts: 1) Catholics of the Latin Rite centered in the Baltic states; and 2) Catholics of the Byzantine-Slavonic Rite centered in the Western Ukraine. As a result of its history and worldwide importance, the Catholic Church enjoys a significance in the eyes of the Soviet regime that is greater than the number of its adherents alone would justify. The Catholic Church is the only religious denomination in the Soviet Union that requires the Soviet government to enter into international negotiations.

The Ukrainian Catholic Church occupies a special place in the mosaic of church life in the Soviet Union. Legally, it should have had no existence between 1946 and 1989. Going back to the Union of Brest (1596), under which the Orthodox dioceses of the Polish Lithuanian Empire came under the jurisdiction of Rome while preserving the Byzantine-Slavonic Rite, the church remained through the centuries the backbone of Ukrainian-Ruthenian popular tradition. While the Byzantine Rite protected the Ukrainians from polonization, their belonging to the Catholic Church protected them from russification.

A synod held in L'vov in March 1946, organized by the Soviet authorities and the Russian Orthodox Church, decided to break the connection with Rome and to seek union with the Russian Orthodox Church. The year before, the Catholic bishops, headed by Metropolitan Josif Slipij, and a large number of priests had been arrested. Since that time the Russian Orthodox Church has led an existence outside the law. Many bishops and priests perished in the camps. Despite these losses—or precisely because of them—the illegally operating Ukrainian Catholic Church exercised a great
power of attraction on nationally conscious Ukrainians because of its steadfastness. Through secret consecrations it was able constantly to renew its leadership, so that today with 10 bishops and about 1,000 priests it represents a significant religious force.

Since Gorbachev's first visit to the Vatican in December 1989, Ukrainian Catholic parishes have been able to obtain official registration and thus exist legally. However, the status of the church's bishops and the entire leadership of the church remains unclear. By the end of 1990, about 1,000 Ukrainian Catholic parishes had been registered. A conflict with the Moscow Patriarchate has flared up over church buildings. In many places, the elected local soviets have transferred the right of use of the churches to the Ukrainian Catholic Church. Protests against alleged or actual use of force during this process have had no effect.

An additional source of tension has been created by the establishment of the Ukrainian Autocephalic Orthodox Church, which has resulted in a reduction of the number of churches dependent upon Moscow in the whole of the Ukraine, not only its western portion. As a protest against the russification of the Russian Orthodox Church—which just last year for reasons of opportunism decided to change its name to the Ukrainian Orthodox Church—many Orthodox priests are turning away from the Moscow Patriarchate. Meanwhile the newly constituted synod has elected the head of the Ukrainian Autocephalic Orthodox Church Abroad, Metropolitan Mstislav (Skrybnik) of Philadelphia, as Patriarch. The Ukrainian authorities have displayed a cooperative attitude toward his activity and toward him personally since his arrival in the Ukraine in October 1990.

The New Law on Religion

On October 1, 1990, the USSR Supreme Soviet approved the Law on Freedom of Conscience and Religious Organizations by a vote of 341 against 2 rooms. This meant that the 1929 Law on Religion that had served for decades as the basis for the persecution of Christian believers was finally abolished. The new law was adopted after
having been shuffled between different ministries over a period of two years. At the insistence of the Russian Orthodox Church, the following points were included in the final text:

- Atheism and religion to be treated on an equal basis;
- Status of a legal person for all religious communities and right to the possession of property;
- Right of religious education; and
- Foundation of religious publishing houses and publications.

Although there had also been a demand for optional religious instruction in schools, this right was not included in the law. However, since the USSR law can be supplemented by republican laws in the individual union republics, optional school instruction in religion remains possible. In the Western Ukraine and Georgia, such instruction is already being conducted in classrooms where the necessary teachers are available.

The new law represents a very substantial improvement in the situation of the church and ensures the continuation of the increased freedom that the churches have come to enjoy over the last two years.

Nevertheless, it must be made clear that despite the new legal basis, the situation of the churches in practice will depend on the fate of democratization in the Soviet Union. If, in particular the reintroduction of a dictatorial regime occurs under the aegis of Russian chauvinism, it is possible that some churches will be given unequal treatment compared with others. In the light of experience hitherto, it cannot be expected that the Russian Orthodox Church would protest vigorously against the persecution of other churches if it were to be granted a privileged position.

Notes:
2 Secret letter from Lenin to Politburo members, March 19, 1922.


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