

Trends in Soviet Anti-Religious Policy

KATHLEEN MATCHETT

Soviet policy towards religion since the Revolution has fluctuated. Underlying the many changes is the basic Marxist tenet that religion is the "opium of the people", also the expectation that with the building of socialism religion will die a natural death. At the same time policies have manifested a sometimes remarkable pragmatism. It is the thesis of this article that Soviet policy towards religion is now entering a new, severe period.

On 12 October 1973 the central Ukrainian Party newspaper *Truth of the Ukraine* published an editorial on a local Central Committee meeting. This gathering called upon the Ukrainian press to improve its contribution to the atheist education of the people. *Party Life* No. 22 (November) 1973 reported a meeting of Latvian Party leaders, who also called for more atheist propaganda. On 22 February 1974 *Pravda* published a widely-reported article on atheist education. The writers of this article conceded that religion was still very much alive in the USSR and called for improved atheist work to combat it. Then an article appeared on 21 March which pointed out serious shortcomings in atheist literature; yet another appeared on 24 March which stated that religion debases human dignity. Both articles were also published in *Pravda*, a newspaper which does not normally devote much space to religion.

Before the appearance of these articles a meeting for Secretaries of East European Communist Parties was held during the summer of 1973 in the Crimea (see *Ecumenical Press Service*, 25 October 1973). At this meeting a common policy towards religion was discussed. The *EPS* report stated:

The Czechoslovak situation was regarded as the model for Church-State relations. In that country priests and ministers cannot exercise their office without State permission. The guidelines of the Soviet Union were regarded as the pattern for relations between the Church and youth. There all religious instruction for children under eighteen is forbidden. By applying these two patterns in all countries, it is hoped to make a step forward in the struggle against religion. At the same time there is an awareness that this struggle cannot be carried on everywhere with the same intensity.

Another meeting for East European officials was held at the end of

1973 in Bratislava (see *Kathpress*, Vienna, December 1973). This was a seminar under the auspices of the Slovak Ministry of Culture. Representatives from Czechoslovakia, Poland, Hungary, East Germany and the Soviet Union – but not Romania – were present. The seminar dealt in particular with the effort to introduce new civil ceremonies to replace religious rites. It appeared that participants found much to be desired in the implementation of such new ceremonies.

Recent examples of State interference in the lives of religious citizens provides evidence for the hardening of Soviet policy towards religion. Legally, Church and State have been separate since 1918: a citizen's beliefs should be his private affair. But various methods are being widely used to discover precise details about religious adherence and practice.

One method is that of the questionnaire. The *Chronicle of the Lithuanian Catholic Church* No. 6 published the text of a questionnaire used in a school in Prienai in February 1973. Children had to answer such questions as: "Does a priest visit your home?" "Who prepared you for first communion? For confirmation?" "Are your parents believers?" The same number of the Lithuanian *Chronicle* also published the text of a government instruction to agencies for the collection of material on the subject "Catholicism in Lithuania and the Present". This involved a detailed investigation of Church life. Atheists monitoring sermons were instructed to "behave politely, without participating actively in religious practices". The *Bulletin* of the Council of Prisoners' Relatives, a *samizdat* publication of the reform Baptists, in January 1974 noted that children in Dushanbe (Tadzhikistan), Simferopol (Crimea), Gorky and other towns "had to fill in questionnaires at school about adherence to religion, with specific questions". It also reported that in Shakhty, Rostov region, "in November 1973 there was a special census of Christian children at home". On 24 October 1973 *Izvestia* published a leader discussing the interaction between school and family in educating children. It was reported that a school in Yakutia (Siberia) had circulated questionnaires asking pupils to supply details of their family life. According to *Izvestia* the information gathered was made public and this harmed the school's relations with the parents. It is clear that such information could be used to identify families of religious or of other ideologically objectionable persuasions.

The local Commissions for supervising the observance of legislation on cults (set up in 1963. See *RCL* Vol. 1, No. 1, pp. 30-33), like the questionnaires mentioned above, also serve as instruments for State interference in the lives of believers. In January-February 1974 *Fraternal Leaflet*, the bi-monthly magazine of the reform Baptists, stated:

the illegal character of the activities of these Commissions is evident in many ways, but most of all in the fact that they instruct factories, institutions, accommodation offices, street committees, educational establishments, trade unions and other organizations to keep a systematic check on all believers, wherever they happen to be.

It went on to give the text of an instruction sent in the name of one of these Commissions to factories in Kharkov, Ukraine (this is a city where there is strong reform Baptist activity). The instruction, dated 16 November 1973, demanded the compilation of lists of believers working in these factories. Precise details were required, including information on "violation of the legislation on cults". Lists were to be submitted by 10 December 1973. The report continues:

Thus by the beginning of 1974 there will be special lists of believers, regardless of whether they are in registered or unregistered churches, detailed information will be available and these will in future be amplified and used in the struggle against the church.

The harsher trend in policy towards religion in the USSR has touched the Russian Orthodox Church. For example, earlier this year the Orthodox layman, Daniil Ostapov, was arrested apparently on charges of hoarding valuables. Ostapov was a close family friend of the late Patriarch Alexi and had acted as his personal secretary since Alexi became a bishop. His arrest was unexpected and appeared more typical of the Khrushchevan or even Stalinist era. It was recently reported that Ostapov had been released, but no further details are available at the time of writing. Another arrest (followed by a trial) was that of a priest and his cantor in Belovo, Kemerovo region, on 18 August 1973 reported in *Soviet Russia*. The charge was tax evasion and the local tax inspector was also implicated. The three men were sentenced to three, five and four years respectively.

There has been considerable publicity in the Western press for several church closures in the Soviet Union, notably the Ukraine, where perhaps half of all registered Orthodox (and Baptist) churches are to be found. Last summer news was received about the closure of the Cathedral of the Resurrection in Chernigov, a regional capital in the Ukraine. This cathedral was renovated as recently as 1969. At the beginning of this year there were numerous reports on the closure of the Church of the Epiphany in Zhitomir, also in the Ukraine. The closure actually took place in November 1973, but it was not until January 1974 that a complaint from the parishioners addressed to Mr. Kuroyedov, head of

the government Council for Religious Affairs, reached Western correspondents in Moscow.

Since the early 1960's the Baptist Church in the USSR has been divided into two parts, one recognized by the State, the other not. Members of the latter, often called the reform Baptists, have from the beginning suffered severe persecution. However, a note of new urgency is creeping into their appeals to the outside world. Usually characterized by extreme restraint, the documents emanating from this group now speak more and more frequently of a determined initiative on the part of the Soviet authorities to destroy this movement once and for all.

Many instances might be cited at this point. Perhaps one document should be mentioned that has received relatively little publicity. Katharine Murray's article in the first issue of *RCL* described the work of the Baptist Council of Prisoners' Relatives and its *Bulletin*, which first appeared in 1971. No. 11 of this *Bulletin*, dated March 1973, spoke of attempts on the lives of five Baptist workers. S.T. Yagozinsky, pastor of a congregation in Azerbaidzhan, was murdered with an axe on 21 December 1972. On 9 September the same year N.A. Soldatov, a preacher from Omsk, was found on the road with head injuries and later died in hospital. A.N. Shilo, a pastor in Rovno, was cycling when he was assaulted by two men; he had to spend 37 days in hospital. Late at night on 30 June 1972 V.P. Shevchenko, pastor of the unregistered Baptist church in Shakhty, was attacked and sustained head injuries. He spent four months in hospital and is now unfit for work. B. Issupov of Krasnodar was beaten up on his way home.

One other form of persecution which appears to affect particularly the reform Baptists is the removal of children from parents because of religious upbringing. One case that has been widely reported is that of Mrs. Radygina of Perm, who lost two of her four children in the summer of 1973. Other families are known to have suffered a similar fate in recent times. This practice seems to be increasing.

This journal, as well as the *Keston News Service*, has devoted considerable space to the Lithuanian Catholics. The new stream of information from this corner of the Soviet Union certainly appears to indicate a new freeze in anti-religious policy, here directed against a unique blend of religion and nationalism. This impression is probably due in part to the fresh impact of the new documentation. On the other hand the new manifestation of Catholic consciousness in Lithuania has clearly disturbed the authorities and provoked a sharp reaction. There has been a determined, but so far unsuccessful attempt to stamp out the *Chronicle of the Lithuanian Catholic Church*.

Clearly religion is very much alive in the Soviet Union today and even, as many would now say, undergoing some kind of renaissance. This it appears to be affecting above all the young, and here lies perhaps the crucial point. This is clearly the future of any nation; no society is indifferent to the character and aspirations of its youth, least of all the Soviet leadership. Young Soviet citizens are expected to conform to the "Moral Code of the Builder of Communism", adopted at the 1961 Soviet Party Congress and subsequently by other East European states, which includes: "devotion to the Communist cause . . . intolerance of actions harmful to the public interest . . . an uncompromising attitude to the enemies of Communism". If young people instead begin to show an interest in the Church, or simply in religious history and culture, this is felt as a direct threat to the socialist future. It may well be that the recent events and trends hinted at in this article are a fresh expression of such a concern. If so, it represents a strong tribute to the vitality of religious life in the USSR today.

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