

Documents

Roy Medvedev Interviewed

Fr. Gleb Yakunin, a member of the Committee for the Defence of Believers' Rights in the USSR, decided recently to interview members of the Soviet human rights movement. He asked them to express their views on the position of believers in the USSR and on the human rights movement. Those interviewed included the well-known Soviet historian Roy Medvedev, author of Let History Judge. He is an exponent of Marxism "with a human face", and bases his vision for the future of the USSR on the development of so-called "socialist democracy". Fr. Yakunin stated when introducing these interviews: "we hope that our interviews will receive wide publicity".

Yakunin: We are particularly interested in your views about believers in the USSR and the human rights movement. The founders of Marxism, beginning with Marx himself, showed extreme intolerance towards religion, considering it to be socially and politically reactionary. What is your attitude to religion and to believers?

Medvedev: I must say that the founders of practically any political or religious ideology are usually intolerant towards those who hold different religious or political convictions. This would seem to be a natural attitude when any new political or religious ideology is set in motion. However, it is certainly not an example to be followed by those who later adopt this ideology or teaching. I know that both Marx and Engels

showed extreme intolerance towards religion, but this certainly does not mean that Marxists should follow their example in our own time. At present Marxists and representatives of any religion could establish an entirely new relationship and understanding between themselves, including mutual co-operation and tolerance in certain fields.

Yakunin: What is your opinion about the present state of religion in the USSR?

Medvedev: Of course I think that the present state of religion and the Church in the USSR is not normal. I will not go into the first years of Soviet rule, when the persecution of the Church and religion was extensive and ruthless. As an historian I have not been particularly interested in this period, but I know that the Church too showed considerable intolerance towards the first steps and measures taken by the Soviet government. The Soviet government, in its turn, was extremely hostile to the Church, possibly much more so than was justified. But after this it would have been perfectly possible to establish normal relations between the State and the Church. However, our Church and religion were frequently subjected to severe persecution, which could not be justified from any point of view. This persecution took place at the end of the 1920s and at the beginning of the 1930s, especially during the years of Stalin's repressive measures, when practically all the churches in the Soviet

Union were closed, except for those in some larger towns. During the war the situation changed, and after the war it continued to change. But in the early '60s Khrushchev started a new severe campaign against the Church and believers, which was quite unjustifiable. I believe, therefore, that the present situation is unsatisfactory.

According to the Constitution of the USSR, we are guaranteed freedom of conscience and the Church is separated from the State. In reality, however, freedom of conscience in our country is violated in many different ways, and the separation of the Church from the State gets one-sided treatment: the Church has no right to interfere in the affairs of the State, while the State frequently interferes in the affairs of the Church, even in unimportant matters. This is wrong. Freedom of speech does, of course, include anti-religious propaganda but this propaganda is one-sided. Its general emphasis is on the dark side of religion and the history of religion — the Inquisition, persecution of non-believers, intolerance and so on. At the same time our propaganda and historical science does not emphasize the positive role which religion has often played in the past. Since believers exist, religion must of course not only be tolerated, but must occupy a definite place in our public life.

Yakunin: What part in your opinion does the fight for religious freedom play within the human rights movement?

Medvedev: This clearly follows from my answer to the previous question. The rights of man obviously include first of all his right to hold his own convictions, and these convictions do not have to be necessarily only political convictions. They may be religious convictions. And therefore the rights of man, and the struggle for the rights of man, must include the struggle for freedom of conscience, for the right of man to hold religious convictions, or not to hold them. There are some societies where it is the atheists, the non-believers, who are persecuted, and in such societies the rights of man are also violated. I repeat, therefore, that in the context of the human rights struggle,

the right to hold religious convictions is a very important element in this struggle.

Yakunin: What about mutual understanding between the non-believers and the believers who are engaged in the struggle for human rights?

Medvedev: As far as I can observe in our country practically all the known campaigners for human rights are showing great tolerance, sympathy and understanding towards those who are engaged in the struggle for the rights of believers and for the rights of the Church. Among the human rights campaigners there are many who are non-believers — atheists, scientists who hold no religious convictions — but, as a rule, they fully respect the believers as men who fight for the rights of the Church. I don't know of any exception to this rule, at least not among those human rights campaigners in the Soviet Union whom I know.

Yakunin: You have frequently emphasized that you have excellent relations with your neighbour Fr. Dmitri Dudko. [...] Evidently such relations between dissidents, believers and non-believers alike, should exist everywhere in the Soviet Union and in any socialist society.

Medvedev: Yes, my relations with Fr. Dmitri Dudko are indeed very good. We often meet and talk. But I cannot be considered a specialist in these matters — he is the only priest I know. Fr. Dmitri is a somewhat unusual priest, but as I said, I do not know any others. He is interested not only in questions of faith, not only in the performance of religious rituals; he has a huge philosophical library, he takes an interest in philosophy, in history, in the struggle between idealism and materialism, and it is therefore interesting to talk to him. [...]

Yakunin: Isn't your relationship [with Fr. Dudko] a symbol of what normal relations should be between people of different views?

Medvedev: This may be so, but certain traits of character are also required. Fr. Dmitri is a very good-natured man and very tolerant towards the views of others. He knows how to listen attentively, he can argue without anger, without bitterness. I do not regard myself as either a bitter or intolerant man. I am always prepared to listen to his arguments and to his point of view, and I never condemn what I regard as a sincere error. Unfortunately there are people, both believers and Marxists, who are extremely intolerant towards any criticism or any expression of differing views. One only has to tell them that a man is a believer and they don't want to hear him, or one only has to say that a man is an atheist, a non-believer, and any possibility of finding a common meeting-ground disappears. Fr. Dmitri said to me once: "I find it much more pleasant to talk to a good sincere Marxist, than to a bad and insincere Christian". I can echo his words: it is much more pleasant to talk to an intelligent, good-natured sincere believer or priest than to a bad, insincere and ill-natured man who calls himself a Marxist.

Yakunin: How can Western public opinion, particularly believers in the West, help the civil rights movement in the USSR?

Medvedev: Western public opinion cannot of course solve all our problems, because the problems of our country can be solved only within our country. Nevertheless, Western public opinion can provide, and is already providing, considerable help – moral help, help in disseminating information about the persecution of dissidents and believers in the Soviet Union. Western public opinion can also provide material help for some representatives of this movement, as well as for those who have suffered from persecution in the USSR. It is no secret that in the Soviet Union the only employer is the State. Those involved in the civil rights movement who are expelled from work and deprived of employment, frequently find themselves and their families in an extremely difficult material situation. The help which comes from abroad – through legal channels of course – can enable them to survive pressure from the State and from the authorities.

Of course there are dissidents who do not need such help – for instance, I do not need such help because I have written enough books for which I am paid royalties. But I know that there are many dissidents who are unemployed, who cannot find work and are in serious material difficulties, especially if they have large families. These people should of course be helped. [...]

Religious Festival in Svanetia

The following document describes a visit made to Svanetia, a region of Georgia inhabited by the Svany. A group of young Georgians embarked on this expedition because they wished to attend a religious festival. The document is entitled, "Under the Pretext of 'The War against Detrimental Customs', the Government Forbids Religious Festivals", and is dated 9 September 1976.

On 24 July 1976 my friend and I were in Svanetia, at Mestia, the district centre. We intended to be present at the religious festival of St. Kvirike (in the language of the Svany, Lagurkoba) on 29 July, which takes place annually

in the village of Kala, 30 kilometres from Mestia. This festival is well-loved not only in Svanetia but throughout Georgia, perhaps even further afield. We saw proof of this in the numerous visitors to the festival who came from different parts of Georgia and Russia. Doubtless, not all were attracted by the same aspects of the feast of Saints Kvirike and Ivilta. But an observant eye would have noticed people who were motivated by more than curiosity, although for some certainly this was the case.

On 28 July we discovered that the only motor road from Mestia to Kala had been blockaded with tree-trunks by order of the district Party committee,