

Documents

Religious Believers in the USSR and the Need for Bibles

The document published below was written in samizdat form in 1983. Its author is a Russian Orthodox Christian from Moscow. The document gives statistical information on the number of Christian believers in the Soviet Union, percentage numbers of Christians amongst the population of different regions, totals for membership of the different Christian denominations and some details of open Orthodox churches. The second part of the document examines the need for Bibles in the Soviet Union, providing interesting insights into the demand for the Scriptures.

Reliable information on the number of Christians and believers of other faiths in the Soviet Union is notoriously difficult to obtain. It should be said that the figures given

*in this document fall short of the totals generally accepted amongst both Western and Soviet commentators. For example, a figure of between 30-50 million active members of the Russian Orthodox Church has become common amongst the majority of observers over the past decade. This document, however, gives a figure of 22-26 million. We are publishing the document, not as a definitive source of statistics, but in the belief that it makes a valuable contribution to the debate on the number of Christians in the Soviet Union today. Jane Ellis examines the subject in more detail on pp. 173-81 of her book *The Russian Orthodox Church* (Croom Helm: London, 1986).*

Part One

There is no possible way of determining by means of statistics exactly how many Christian believers there are today in the USSR. All we can do is show the statistical boundaries within which the sought-for figures lie. The USSR is basically populated by

traditionally Christian peoples.* The majority of them, by tradition, are

*The author uses the term "Christian peoples" to distinguish ethnic groups with a Christian tradition from those groups with a non-Christian tradition, eg. the Muslim peoples — *Tr.*

Orthodox, and the minority are Catholics, Lutherans, Armenian-Gregorians, Baptists, Mennonites, Methodists and others.

The percentage of Christian peoples in the overall population of the USSR is on the decline, a fact shown by comparing the 1970 and 1979 censuses. We do not know how many believers and atheists there are in each group, but we can show the percentage distribution of the population of the USSR by religions in accordance with the traditional religion of the various ethnic groups as follows:

	1970	1979
Orthodox (including Old Believers)	79.3%	77.3%
Other Christians	5.0%	4.9%
Muslims	14.3%	16.6%
Jews (Jews and Karaites)	0.9%	0.7%
Buddhists, Lamaists, Confucians and others	0.5%	0.5%

The proportion of Christians in the population is declining while the proportion of Muslims is increasing, although this increase is not nearly as dramatic as some Western authors believe. In 1970, there was one Muslim to six Christians; in 1979 one to five. Although population growth among the Christian peoples in the nine years amounted to almost 12 million, several particular Christian groups actually experienced decline. These include the Karelians and Poles (the latter numbering just over 1.1 million in the Soviet Union). In the case of the Latvian, Estonian, Udmurt and Komi people population growth practically stagnated during the nine years.

The number of believers amongst the traditionally Christian populations varies markedly from region to region. There are places in Lithuania,

Transcarpathia, Northern Bukovina,* Western Belorussia, Moldavia and places inhabited by Russian Old Believers in Latgaliya (South-East Latvia) where according to estimates from local pastors, believers represent 60 to 80 per cent of the total population. The proportion of believers is high also (up to 50 per cent of the population) in those parts of Ukraine which lie to the west of the River Zbruch and in the former Izmail'skaya (now part of the Odessa) oblast, and also in places where Germans have been resettled — in the Altai, in Kazakhstan and Kirgiziya (Mennonites and Baptists); and also among Old Believers in the Bryansk and Gor'ky *oblasti* and in the Urals and Siberia.

Lutheran pastors estimate that 30 to 40 per cent of the population are believers in Estonia and Latvia; 25 to 30 per cent in the rural parts of Georgia (excluding Adzhariya, Abkhaziya and Southern Osetiya); 25 per cent in the rural parts of Armenia. We can deduce from the above estimates that the Christian believers of all creeds in these "fortunate" areas total 9 to 11 million. However, in contrast to these areas, and adjoining them, there are vast areas practically without any believers. These are basically the "New Territories" of Siberia and the virgin lands of Kazakhstan, the new industrial coal and ore extracting zones in the North, Central Asia, the Altai, Siberia and the [Soviet] Far East, and the territory obtained as a result of war and subsequently resettled with other peoples (Kaliningrad *oblast'*, Sakhalin and the Kuril Islands). In the vast area which remains, we find wide variations between zero and the "fortunate" level, which we can say begins at twenty per cent.

Without a doubt, the number of

*Northern Bukovina became part of Ukraine in 1949 — *Tr.*

believers is correlated with the number of churches allowed to remain open. Moscow itself is a good example of this. Despite the fact that after the Revolution at least 218 Orthodox churches were either destroyed or put to other purposes, there are still a very large number of Orthodox churches (no fewer than 42), at least three Old Believers' churches, one Catholic, one Armenian-Gregorian and one Baptist church, and several prayer houses and chapels. The city's large population guarantees a degree of comparative anonymity for the parishioner, which for many people is extremely important. Nevertheless in Moscow there are no more than one million believers. This figure is arrived at from a comparison of a list of estimates from clergymen arrived at independently of one another, although it seems to us to be too optimistic. In a population of over eight million, this gives a proportion of believers of 10 to 12 per cent. However, if we take for example the Primorsky region, which is equivalent in area to the United Kingdom (excluding Scotland), there are in all four Orthodox churches. In all of Eastern Siberia and the [Soviet] Far East, an area of 9.9 million square kms. (i.e. an area equal to all of mainland Europe), there are 29 Orthodox churches functioning (not including Old Believers' churches). It is true that this figure does not include prayer houses but the picture is nevertheless clear. In the absence of pastoral teaching, missionary activity, sermons and literature, the growth rate of believers is extremely small. A priest from Yakutiya is therefore quite probably correct in estimating that out of the 25 million inhabitants of Siberia, the number of Christian believers is scarcely more than one million.

The number of churches and prayer houses in one or another

locality is often determined by non-religious factors: Is the place accessible or inaccessible to foreigners? Is it the sort of place people travel through or is it out of the way? Is it in the provinces or near one of the capitals [of the republics — *Tr.*]? Does it have a homogenous or mixed population? It is also determined by the people upon whom the decision for registration depends (without having any instruction from above such a person may burn with the desire to "root out religion"). In Kuibyshev, an industrial town with an entirely Russian population of 1.2 million, there are in all two Orthodox churches, whilst in Riga, with its 850,000 inhabitants (and with at least 45 per cent Lutheran and Catholic), there were 13 Orthodox churches and at least three Old Believer churches in 1973. Riga is in this sense a "showcase" city. Besides, in the western parts of the USSR, which are traditionally Uniate (despite the official dissolution of the Union), Catholic and Lutheran, the Orthodox Church involuntarily assists in the russification of the population. In the case of totally homogenous Leningrad with its 4.1 million people, however, there are fewer functioning Orthodox churches than in Riga — eight in total. Before the Revolution, with a population almost half the size of today, there were more than 200. By 1923, they had already been reduced to 128. Before the War, all churches were closed in Smolensk, with the exception of a small cemetery church. With the coming of the Germans, Men'shagin, the new mayor, opened a further two, which the liberators subsequently soon felt obliged to close.

A great deal has been written about the destruction of churches — from the Desyatinnaya church, built in 989-96 immediately after the baptism of Rus', to the Church of Christ the Saviour, erected in 1837-83

by means of donations from the people of Russia — but still the figures do not cease to startle. Russia in 1913 had 77,106 Orthodox churches and chapels. In 1974 there were approximately 7,500 Orthodox churches and prayer houses in use in the USSR (see *Bol'shaya sovetskaya ensiklopediya* Vol. 20 p. 485). Therefore, more churches were destroyed than believers received copies of the Bible during this period, as we shall soon see. The same work (Vol. 24 p. 497) claims: "In the USSR in 1976 there were approximately 20,000 Orthodox, Catholic, Lutheran and Old Believer churches, mosques, Buddhists *datsans*, Baptist and Seventh Day Adventist prayer houses etc." Should we understand this to mean that we have an abundance of churches, synagogues, mosques and *datsans*? It is not worth speculating about this. Let these figures remain on the conscience of their authors. The building of new churches is extremely rare. In the 1950s, for example, an Orthodox church was built in Tashkent, in the 1970s one was built in Komsomol'sk-na-Amure, and in 1980-82 one was built in Yakutsk.

Using the figures which we have at our disposal, we can speculate that the number of Christian believers in the USSR today is close to 27 to 30 million (12 to 14 per cent of the total population), as opposed to a potentially Christian population of 250 million people. Therefore, V. Stepanov [also known as V. Rusak — *Tr.*] in his estimate (in his document

on the position of the Orthodox faith in the USSR) that there are 50 million Orthodox believers alone in the country paints too rosy a picture of the situation. The question of the proportion of Old Believers within the Orthodox Church is interesting. In 1859 there were 9.3 million Old Believers (17 per cent) in a total number of 53.3 million Orthodox believers. In 1897, there were already about 20 million (21 per cent) in a total of 92 million. After 1905, when all restrictions on the Old Believers were removed, their proportion rose even higher. After the Revolution, the Old Believers exhibited greater resistance to atheist pressure. Because of this, their proportion inevitably grew and so today they constitute approximately a quarter of all Orthodox believers. However, we do not see a corresponding number of churches.

We would estimate the number of believers in each denomination as follows: Catholics (Lithuanians, Poles, Trans-Carpathian Hungarians, among Ukrainians and White Russians) 1,600,000; Baptists 1,300,000; Armenian-Gregorians 800,000; Lutherans 600,000; Methodists 100,000; Calvinists 25,000. Orthodox believers, however, appear to total from 22 to 26 million, about 25 per cent of them being Old Believers.

Thus Stepanov's figures are two to three times higher than ours as he estimates 50 million against our estimate of 17-19 million Orthodox believers [excluding Old Believers — *Tr.*].

Part Two

Over the last few years we have heard much about the "religious renaissance" in the USSR. This term soon becomes misleading. There is a

growth of sincere interest in religion among the urban intelligentsia and educated youth — which leads many of them (thousands, but not millions)

to a real faith. Yet this is still a long way from a real revival, the prerequisite of which would be the awareness of a spiritual vacuum in a specific generation or a clearly defined layer of society, and a categorical internal imperative. This, alas, does not yet exist.

It is good that the church is no longer losing its members and that churches are fuller than they were several years ago — even if a number of people come out of curiosity. It is symptomatic that such curiosity did not exist ten or 15 years ago. Today there is a hope of breaking down the psychological barrier which, in this totally secularised state, puts the church in the position of something infected, something to be avoided.

The Christians who have had the most success in relation to non-believers are clearly the Baptists. Their missionary spirit is felt especially in the territory of Ukraine which lies west of the river Zbruch, on the Don, in the Northern Caucasus, in Central Asia and Kazakhstan. There is a hope that their number will have doubled by the year 2000.

How will these millions of people get hold of the Holy Scriptures? Below we will be discussing the needs of the Russian-speaking religious readers only, as we have little information about this problem in relation to the Moldavians, Armenians, Georgians, Lithuanians, Germans and others. It is also important to note that the majority of Ukrainians, Belorussians, Karelians, Osetians, and the inhabitants of the territory along the Volga will make do with the Bible in Russian, which cannot be expected from the inhabitants of the Baltic Republics, for example.

It is impossible to say how many copies of the Scriptures printed before 1917 have been preserved. Experience suggests far fewer than

one would expect. Thousands of letters with requests for Bibles and New Testaments are sent to the Moscow Patriarchate (sometimes from people who have never seen a Bible in their lives). Because of this a special worker has been employed to answer their letters with refusals. But it is only the true believers who write. Those who are uncertain in their faith, or who are just beginning to show interest, or who are afraid in any way, will not write; neither will those who are anticipating a refusal, who do not know the address, or who are illiterate.

Up to 1956 the Holy Scriptures were not printed at all in the USSR. In 1956 25,000 Bibles and New Testaments were printed. They were distributed as follows:

3,000 — to Theological Seminaries

10,000 — abroad (!)

2,000 — in storage

500 — as “samples” for local officials dealing with religious affairs etc.

9,500 — to believers

Later another 70,000 were printed of which 40,000 reached believers. From 1956-79 150,000 New Testaments were printed, of which approximately 80,000 reached believers. The need for religious literature in the provinces is such that people will buy up all available anti-religious literature and paste over all but the quotations from the Scriptures. One convert came to the faith under the influence of, as he put it, the *religious journal Science and Religion (Nauka i religiya)* [an atheist magazine — *Tr.*]. A group of Kuzbass miners appointed somebody to travel to Moscow for a Bible, and in a secondhand bookshop this man bought an ancient edition with illustrations by Doré for 2,250 roubles. This, alas, would be beyond the reach of a group of young believers meeting in one of the largest industrial enterprises in the city of Chelyabinsk.

Thus, 30 million believers are known to have at their disposal fewer than three million Bibles and New Testaments. (The Orthodox will have between them one million at the most. The Catholics, traditionally, have rarely had the Scriptures in their homes. The situation is noticeably better for the Protestants in the north-west of the country, but even they, of course, are in need of the Scriptures.) Even if the existing Bibles are used for family and group reading (and how many of them lie about unused, belonging to people who have picked them up by chance?), the most optimistic observer would not venture to maintain that those deprived of God's Word but still thirsting after it constitute less than 90 per cent of the population.

However, the genuine demand is even higher. If the Bible and New Testament began to be sold freely in this country, 50 million copies at least would probably be bought, with twice the number of readers, for the bulk of the buyers would consist of the present-day "potential believers", people ripe for the faith, reaching out in a vague kind of way, ready at times to believe in anything available and often either not finding relief for their agonising souls or, in some cases, ending up in sects, which can be anything from the wildest aberration of Christianity to an uneducated, home-made religious syncretism. Happy are those who direct their souls into the heart of genuine Christianity, of whatever denomination. Let me insist on this last point. We are far from the Catholics who see Orthodox believers as "schismatic", and from the Orthodox believers who see Catholics as "apostates", and we consider it important in an atheist state to uphold equally all the historic branches of Christianity. Due to an irony of fate at present this does not

run counter to the interests of the above-mentioned state. Uneasy with the drop in moral standards of the population, it would willingly make Christianity its open ally in the struggle against this dangerous development, but has as yet been unable to find the ideological formula it requires to do so.

Countless examples show that with the people whom we have called "potential believers" a thirst for faith begins to make itself strongly felt when they reach the age of 60. It is interesting that those who expressed their godlessness most strongly in their youth are the ones who become the most ardent followers of the faith.

If we remember that the period from 1926-41 was the period of the most flagrant and energetic state atheism — the time of the existence of the "League of Militant Godless" officially abolished only in 1947 (although in fact it had faded out during the war), the time of the periodicals *The Godless (Bezbozhnik)*, *The Godless at Work (Bezbozhnik u stanka)* and *The Atheist (Ateist)*, of anti-religious processions and puppets, of insulting caricatures of the clergy and so on — then we will more easily accept that the most "atheistic against its will", the most ethically unfortunate generation is the generation born between 1921 and 1936 on what were then Soviet territories (not those born in places that became part of the Soviet Union between 1939 and 1945).

This generation today comprises 44 to 45 million people and on the whole stands out, due to many distinguishing factors, as a sub-nation of the most "soviet" people in the USSR, against the background of both those who are younger, and (however strange it may seem) of those who are older than them, although the latter actively participated, for example, in the



Prayer for religious freedom in a Roman Catholic church.

Bratislava on 25 March 1988, a day of vigil for religious freedom.
(Photos © Otto Pressedienst)

Outside the National Theatre two hours before the vigil took place.





Augustin Navrátil, author of the petition for religious freedom in Czechoslovakia. See *Chronicle* item on pp. 162-163. (Photo courtesy Keston College)



László Paskai, Archbishop of Esztergom and Primate of Hungary. See *Chronicle* item on pp. 164-167. (Photo © KNA Bild)



Cardinal František Tomášek, Primate of Czechoslovakia. See *Chronicle* item on pp. 162-163. (Photo courtesy Keston College)

*subbotniki**, when churches were wrecked in the 1920s and early 1930s. (From this the generation being examined by us was spared due to their age.) The "outer fringe" of this generation, which is not very numerous because of heavy losses during the war, has precisely now reached the age which is critical from a moral point of view. This process will continue until the end of the century.

We do not want to say that all these people will become believers, but even if three out of every four should fail to overcome the atheistic demon of darkness which has been put within them, still a possible eight to nine million believers (with allowances made for deaths) will come into the Christian fold before the end of the century.

It must be understood that all age groups (and social groups), and not just the group described above, have a sprinkling of "potential believers", with varying degrees of density. But there are hardly any reasons to doubt that it is the older people who predominate, as is the case among believers. "Potential believers" do not recognise themselves as such and the majority of them, we repeat, will never become believers. But, as distinct from convinced atheists of the old practically extinct type, whose atheism was a variety of faith and replaced faith psychologically, these people would buy the Scriptures if they had the chance and would, of course, not refuse them if they were offered them free of charge. (In practical terms, incidentally, having to buy the Scriptures would be more beneficial to those people than receiving them free; passive acceptance of a gift is less effective than a conscious act of

acquiring something. The reality of the situation forces us, however, to disregard these psychological niceties.) Acquaintance with the Bible, or even better with the New Testament alone to start with, for many of them could be a deciding factor, a trigger mechanism, which would free the searching soul that not only does not know what it wants to find, but even does not recognise the process of its own hidden searchings. In other words, many of them will become believers only if they receive God's Word.

We must emphasise that above all it is the *New Testament* that is necessary. It is as a rule sufficient 1. for all ordinary people with little experience; 2. for believers deprived of all religious literature of any kind; 3. for Baptists and adherents of the evangelical churches; 4. for all "potential believers"; 5. for young people taking their first steps along the path of religious enlightenment. (Obviously these categories will overlap.) In relation to those people whose whole life has been spent outside God's Word (groups 1, 4 and 5), alas, the arguments against unprepared people reading the Bible, as put forward by the Catholic Church in the past, are justified. (And for many centuries the Catholic Church indeed forbade such reading.)

There is yet another extremely weighty argument for the New Testament although it may seem unexpected and even not relevant to the matter in hand. But this is not so. The New Testament for unknown reasons becomes an object of black market speculation much less frequently than does the whole Bible. There have even been cases when Bibles produced in the remote depths of the provinces have shown up on the black market in Moscow and Leningrad. We have come across at least one such Bible, marked with an inconspicuous sign, at an

**Subbotnik* — diminutive of *subбота* (Saturday). A day on which a "voluntary" work programme is carried out, usually to be benefit of the national economy — *Tr.*

underground bookseller's in Leningrad. The following explanation for this can be put forward. A believer accepted a Bible with gratitude, but soon realised that he would not be able to cope with the small type. Considering that he could not possibly hold on to a Bible when he could not put it to use he may some time later have given it as a present to a young relation who in turn could not resist the temptation of selling it for 25 to 30 roubles — not to a believer but to a black-market dealer visiting the region during the summer. The dealer then sold it for 60 roubles (although he would have let it go for 55 or even 50 roubles). Such, incidentally, are the standard prices for a Bible published in the West, both in the capitals [of the republics — *Tr.*] and in the large provincial cities. But for some reason or other a price for New Testaments has never become established in underground bookshops, and they do not like them, although individual sales do definitely take place. And this is a very fortunate circumstance as the New Testament will not be draining out of areas where there are none at all and going to areas where there are comparatively many.

It could be argued that there is no harm in the resale of Bibles. It does not matter that the black-market dealer makes his fortune, as long as the Bible falls into the hands of someone who is looking for it and is ready to pay a lot of money for it. Over and above that, as we ourselves have already stated above, it is psychologically more beneficial if the "potential believer" has to buy the Scriptures rather than receiving them as a gift. However, the problem lies in the fact that our hypothetical

"potential believer" hardly ever has the opportunity to meet an underground bookseller, whose clientele is a completely different group of people — the town's booklovers, people who are collecting their own libraries and to whom the Bible is necessary only as a part of a whole series of other often more expensive (secular) books. There is no hope of satisfying the demand of this clientele which is numbered in tens of thousands and is constantly growing. And must we satisfy their need — at the expense of those who are really thirsty? These people are hardly likely to read the Bible — at best they will leaf through it. In these circles it simply is the done thing to have a Bible. One reason why they do not buy the New Testament could be their "bibliophile reflex": why buy the second part without the first? They would not buy the Bible if it were always on sale freely and openly as they are not in the habit of buying that which will be as readily available both tomorrow and the day after tomorrow. It goes without saying that the Bible can transform people such as these as well, and apart from that there are the members of their family, their wives and children. God's Spirit blows where it will and the paths of the Lord's grace are inscrutable, but we who do not know these paths do better to take care that the Scriptures reach those who in our judgement are most in need of them.

We do not want to say that complete Bibles are not necessary at all. They are, of course, needed by millions of prepared believers, by educated people who are seriously interested in religion and by educated young people.