10-1984

Editorial: Impressions About Religion in the Soviet Union and Yugoslavia

Paul Mojzes

Rosemont College, Rosemont, PA, pmojzes@rosemont.edu

Follow this and additional works at: http://digitalcommons.georgefox.edu/ree

Part of the Christianity Commons

Recommended Citation

Available at: http://digitalcommons.georgefox.edu/ree/vol4/iss5/1

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by Digital Commons @ George Fox University. It has been accepted for inclusion in Occasional Papers on Religion in Eastern Europe by an authorized administrator of Digital Commons @ George Fox University.
EDITORIAL

IMPRESSIONS ABOUT RELIGION IN THE SOVIET UNION AND YUGOSLAVIA

From June 8 to 27, 1984, I was the co-leader, along with Paul Peachey of Catholic University, of a seminar on "Peace and the Human Being" held for a group of 22 American academics in the U.S.S.R. This was my fifth, and longest, trip to the Soviet Union. Although the purpose of the trip was to engage in discussions on the seminar's topic with Soviet academics, almost all of whom are Marxists, there were occasions for me and other members of our group to encounter religious people, to attend various worship services, and to make some observations, superficial as they might be, about religious life in the U.S.S.R. The following month I went to Yugoslavia, my native country, to deliver a lecture and participate in a conference organized by a group of Protestant leaders from that country. The purpose was to share the Yugoslav religious experience of living under socialism with some clergy from countries which have recently embarked on the socialist path, specifically Mosambique, Nicaragua, and Cuba. At that time I again had opportunities to observe some new developments in religious life, which I wish to share with the readers.

From previous experience I have come to the conclusion that, excepting Albania, the two countries, the Soviet Union and Yugoslavia, stand at the two ends of the spectrum within Eastern Europe when it comes to the state's intervention in religious life. Nothing on this trip changed these perceptions.

I start my observations about the U.S.S.R. with the conviction that religious life in that country is alive but under careful scrutiny of the government, with many impediments placed upon religious activities.

Hotel "Cosmos" where we stayed in Moscow is located near a Russian Orthodox Church, which is situated in a field with no main street access to it. It is an "active" church, in contrast to many "inactive" churches which one sees, namely those not at the disposal of the Church for actual worship services. The term "active" and "inactive" frequently emerges in the tour guides' vocabulary as they describe church buildings. Many "inactive" churches (e.g. all churches in and around the Kremlin), are
currently museums, theaters, or are merely locked up. The church, Alexeyevskaya Pikhvinskaya Bozhya Mater, was in good repair and looked attractive. I went to the 7 a.m. service on Pentecost. The church walls were decorated with many trees branches and a lot of cut grass on the ground—a Russian Orthodox tradition. Several hundred people came, mostly women. Several priests officiated simultaneously, some hearing confessions, others preaching (the sermon was on the ten commandments, presented in such a way as to constitute religious education), one leading a liturgy. The choir was small, mostly consisting of women. A few times the entire congregation joined in singing.

Prior to the service an interesting experience took place. I stood looking at the iconostasis with my hands folded reverently, I thought. An older man approached me and sternly administered me in Russian not to be disrespectful; one stands with hands in attention in Orthodox churches, he said. Having explained to him that I was an American and meant no disrespect, he warmed up and stated that we live in the last of times and all Christians, regardless of church membership, must stick together in face of adversity.

This apocalyptic theme was encountered in several other places, most specifically in a Russian Orthodox Church in Novosibirsk, where a very elderly woman approached me—seeing I was a foreigner—and took me to an icon of the Last Judgment, showed it to me and started praying for God's mercy. Unless she meant that I belonged in the group of great sinners who were vividly depicted in the picture as suffering during the judgment, she may have reiterated the theme of these being the end of times. The great amount of suffering encountered by church people in the Soviet Union as well as the very tense international situation would naturally lend itself to grim apocalyptic expectations.

Our entire group also attended a Sunday afternoon service at the main Evangelical Baptist Church in Moscow. We had been announced beforehand and were given a chance to meet a church leader before the service. He stated that the worst times for the church were over, a statement which coincided with my impressions. He estimated that there were 5,000 Evangelical Baptists in Moscow and about 500,000 in the U.S.S.R., and that last year alone they reported over 10,000 baptisms.
The actual number, he felt, may have been practically double, but that it is neither in the interest of the church nor the state to keep accurate evidence! He felt that the influence of the Evangelical Baptists specifically, as well as of all churches in general, was on the increase, especially among the intelligentsia, but, naturally, this is not to be found in any books or publications. This coincides with what other Evangelical Baptists have claimed, namely, that currently there are far more opportunities for their work than in past decades.

At the ensuing worship services our group, and that of some visiting Quakers, was given a warm welcome and specially fine seats on the balcony. Paul Peachey, leader of our group, was asked to transmit heartfelt messages and a brief sermon to the congregation. There were many young people in the congregation, including, to my surprise, several uniformed soldiers, apparently Baptists serving their military duty in Moscow. Large choirs (50-60 strong) sang beautifully. About 2,000 people were in attendance, totally filling not only the sanctuary but the entire building, which was much too small for the needs of the church. There were three services each Sunday, all crowded.

Several of our members also visited Evangelical-Baptists in Novosibirsk (outside the city limits) and in Leningrad. In each case they were welcomed by the people. One of our members had a strange experience when he was repeatedly approached in Leningrad by an old woman who tried to put something into his hands, it seemed to him to be money. After repeated refusals, he accepted the paper, only to realize later that indeed it was money, a lot of it (about 80 rubles, perhaps the woman's monthly income). Naturally he returned the money to the church hoping that the old woman could be located. What went through her head as she did this? One is frequently at loss for adequate explanations in one's encounter with Soviet citizens.

In contrast to Novosibirsk, where there seem to be very few churches for a city of a million inhabitants, Tbilisi, the capital of Georgia, is dotted with churches, again not all of which are active. It seems that religious life is more vigorous, or perhaps more public in Tbilisi than in the other cities which we visited.

We almost had a reception with the Patriarch of the Georgian
Orthodox Church on a very short notice, but his schedule did not allow it. We did participate in a service conducted by him, a number of bishops, and a large number of clergy on a week-day evening. The patriarch and bishops processed from his residence to the church on a red carpet with many people looking on in admiration. Many children were present at the service; but practically all age groups were well represented, with many families coming together. Three choirs— one mixed (conducted by a young woman), one female, and one male—sang a most beautiful ancient liturgy, which lasted between three and four hours. The church was filled and everyone participated enthusiastically. The priests seem to be held in high esteem. We visited this church at other times and there always seemed to be people worshipping despite scaffolds inside. We also visited several times an Armenian Apostolic Church and found it open.

In the same vicinity is one of the two Jewish synagogues of Tbilisi. In front of it were a number of men with yarmulkas, hanging around in a manner reminiscent of other churches, which likewise seem to have adherents gathered for socializing. This synagogue, Sephardic in distinction to the Ashkenazi one we did not visit, had two exquisitely decorated sanctuaries, the more beautiful of the two on the second floor. Though several of us just dropped in from the street, we were cordially greeted, and were shown the many Torah scrolls and told that services are extremely well attended. (I would estimate that nearly 3,000-4,000 people could fit into the two sanctuaries). On the walls there were some bookcases with what seemed very old books. The Georgian Jewish community is very ancient, though more recent settlers also abound. Upon discrete inquiry we were told that they are not hassled by the local population and that they receive a number of visits by American Jews.

In Leningrad some of our members visited the Evangelical-Baptist church, mentioned before, while others went to a Roman Catholic mass (and found it well attended but very traditional). I attended an Orthodox service co-celebrated by several priests, some very young (it seemed they were professors and students from the nearby Leningrad Theological Academy). I had arranged a meeting at the Leningrad Theological Academy where we were received by two of the priests, who were professors. Of
particular significance was the information that their enrollment practically doubled in recent years (it has increased in all three seminaries) because the authorities allow them the use of an additional building. They have a total of about 450 students, and are divided into the regular seminary, a music department for choir leaders (now for the first time in history also admitting women) and a graduate program for training future professors and church leaders. The library struck me as inadequate for their needs. The publishing activities of churches in the Soviet Union are severely limited (to my knowledge there are only two Orthodox publications, Zhurnal Moskovskoi Patriarchii and the Leningrad Academy's annual Bogoslovskiy Trudy, and the Evangelical-Baptists' Bratskiy Vestnik) while books from abroad cannot be received easily. I arranged for an exchange between Bogoslovskiy Trudy and the Journal of Ecumenical Studies hoping that their library will be allowed to receive it.

Several of us also went to visit the Museum of the History of Religion and Atheism at the former Kazan Cathedral, a truly splendidous church building, now "inactive", as is the largest church, St. Isaac's. The museum had been showing crudely anti-religious displays (e.g. inquisitorial tools for torture of heretics), but Religion in Communist Lands (Mark Elliot, "the Leningrad Museum of the History of Religion and Atheism" in Vol. 11, No. 2 (Summer 1983), pp. 124-129) pointed out definite improvements. Indeed the display was not abusive though, naturally, it was biased toward atheism. In many instances the descriptions under pictures, statues, implements, etc. was informative rather than tendentious. There was some comparison between prerevolutionary religious practices which were described as negative (e.g. exploitation of the poor by a rich church) and present forms of religious practice in the U.S.S.R. which were characterized as patriotic. I would have thought that people would need to be prodded to go to such a museum, but that was not the case. There was a long queue at Kazan Cathedral, just as there is one in every museum and gallery in the U.S.S.R.! People were respectful, with no audible pro-religious or anti-religious remarks which I could discern. It is my impression of the Soviet Union that the vast bulk of the Soviet population under present circumstances is neither pro
Yugoslavia.

For years now the Yugoslav state has eased off its pressures upon religious groups, and has given the churches the permission to hold their services unobstructed and publish many church publications (they still continue to mushroom, both in periodical and book form, domestic and translations from abroad). While in the Soviet bookstores one may find only anti-religious atheist propaganda, in Belgrade there is a happy paradox that the central bookstore of the League of Communists of Yugoslavia, in addition to many books on religion by Marxists, many of which are definitely scholarly and not hostile, offers Bibles, the Qur'an, the Talmud, and books written by theologians! This is true of other bookstores around the country.

After Tito's death there is still much quiet political fermentation, mostly of the liberalizing kind, accompanied by great economic problems. This creates a situation of expectation and some anxiety. In some respects the authorities are more eager to know what takes place in the churches and try to implement some laws which had not been enforced strictly before. For instance in the past it was possible for foreign visitors to speak in churches unannounced beforehand to the local Council on Church Affairs. Now a fifteen day advance notice is necessary. The Mosambiquan, Cuban, and Nicaraguan visitors to the conference in Belgrade expressed the desire to visit a Methodist church but the minister did not dare to let even the Cuban Methodist bishop speak, simply because there had not been advance notice. This was the case also with me in the Methodist congregation in which I grew up. If there had been a 15-day advance notice there would have been no problem. So, there is tightening up in some respects. Also from time to time in the press there are broadsides at religion, in particular the Roman Catholic Church (irresponsible journalistic labels of clero-fascist, clero-nationalistic trends) and the fundamentalists Muslims, and less frequently the Orthodox. The Roman Catholic publications, however, have not been intimidated by this but vigorously critique such attacks with the result that the regime criticises but also respects that church more than others. The Roman Catholics have openly lamented the fact that religious...
people are second class citizens (one Roman Catholic bishop even publicly stated that they are treated as twenty-second class citizens!).

The conference in Belgrade, held July 20-22, 1984, was televised by the Belgrade TV station! A professor of Belgrade University is serving as a consultant to the Belgrade TV which is preparing six or more programs on the small churches of Yugoslavia for this fall. My understanding is that the program aims at giving an objective picture of these churches, rather than attacking them. The speakers at the conference, mostly Baptists and Pentecostals, surprised me with their education, breadth of international experience, their fluency in English, and good critical thinking. Some are full time in church work, others have additional secular jobs. The minister of the Belgrade Baptists church, for instance, is also employed by the largest Yugoslav newspaper "Politika" and was given time off to host the conference, though he continued to put in several hours daily at his secular job. Some years ago no clergymen could have held such a responsible public position.

This Protestant conference, which was ably co-ordinated by Jerald Shenk, an American Mennonite fraternal worker, formerly stationed in Yugoslavia, was greeted by a Serbian Orthodox Bishop, Danilo Krstić (who managed to uphold that the Orthodox Church is the only true church and who took a few swipes at "Geneva-type ecumenism") and by the heads of the Serbian State and the Belgrade City Council for church Affairs. The latter two, both Communist officials, were friendly in greeting the conference, lauded the work of Yugoslav churches, and even made small admissions of former mistakes on the part of the government. They gave the impression of disarming frankness, but, in fact, were not entirely candid about some of the tensions between church and state, though they alluded to difficulties with the Roman Catholic Church. It was interesting that the one from the City Council on Church Affairs stated that there is no possible Christian-Marxist dialogue on worldview issues despite the fact that such dialogue did indeed take place in Yugoslavia, and that some Christians at the conference, in addition to the present writer, energetically countered that such dialogue is fruitful and ought to be nurtured. He was not taken too seriously. This illustrates the
great diversity of views and practices in Yugoslavia. Another official, in an other place, may have welcomed theoretical dialogue between Christians and Marxists.

Visiting some former school friends, who entered a mixed Orthodox-Catholic marriage, we found that their teenage children had become Seventh-day Adventists, first against parental wishes, now with sceptical acceptance. The son was on leave from the army. As long as he had not mentioned that he was religious he was treated well in the army. Then once he confessed his religiosity to his best buddy in the army, immediately the officers found out. Tremendous pressure was brought to bear upon him, including psychiatric testing. He was released from the army in cognizance of his family as a psychically troubled person. It is unclear whether he will be asked to complete his army stint. The daughter, a university student, also stated that it is best if no one knows about one's religious commitment, otherwise one gets hassled by friends and by professors. In any case, both of them testified to the vigour of the Adventist Church and shared with me a tremendous amount of literature published in Serbo-Croatian by that church.

I am under the impression that at least some of the Protestant free churches have finally succeeded in what they were unable to do in the past, namely to indigenize themselves and attract to membership not only members of national minorities, but also the main Slavic majorities. The proselitizing practices of the free churches frequently bring them into conflict with the large churches. Ecumenism is still only "skin-deep" in Yugoslavia. There is a national council of churches on paper, but it is largely non-functioning. This is not due to government interference but to weaknesses, objective and subjective, in the churches themselves.

Travelling through Yugoslavia, one sees the churches in very good repair, practically none of them are "inactive" (unlike in the U.S.S.R. the church buildings are the legal property of the churches themselves). A good number of newly built churches can be seen, though the issuing of permits for new buildings is a thorny problem; e.g., the problem of issuing a permit for a new cathedral in Split.

One does hear complaints by clergy and lay people that religious work in Yugoslavia is difficult because the atmosphere is antagonistic
rather than hospitable. But what seems to be particularly promising is that some young people have no qualms about openly admitting their religiosity. I had the chance to be present at the defense of a diploma thesis of a young Pentecostal minister at the Biblical-Theological Institute. He is at the same time a student at the Belgrade University, Department of Philosophy. His interview with Hans Künig, during the latter's visit to Yugoslavia, was published in a slick weekly, Intervju, which has a very large circulation. It is my impression that religious people are not nearly as intimidated as when I was growing up in Yugoslavia, but are less self-consciously making their presence and witness felt, both in everyday life and in literature.

Reflections

Religious freedom is not an all or nothing proposition. It can be measured comparatively, or in terms of one's own historical experience. When measured comparatively, there is little freedom for religious institutions in the Soviet Union or Yugoslavia compared to, for instance, the United States or Finland. Comparatively there is much more religious freedom in Yugoslavia than in the Soviet Union. But in view of the history of each of these countries, many people tend to be satisfied with the present situation because it is an improvement over the very repressive earlier periods. Certain churches, especially the free churches, have more legal recognition now than prior to the Communist take-over.

Many or most religious people are not satisfied with their existence in societies which are known to be hostile to them, yet they are nevertheless hopeful about being able to work out an authentic Christian, Jewish, or Muslim lifestyle under Leninist conditions. Many have a distinct sense of mission and some regret that the inner weaknesses of the church does not allow for a more ambitious and courageous use of the increased opportunities for mission or witness to their own identity. They do not need our lamentation about their sorrowful state; they need our interest and involvement, as well as truthful reporting and critique. We in turn can profit from witnessing their fortitude, endurance, and ability to adapt themselves to drastically changed conditions.
Flat statements that there is religious freedom or there is no religious freedom are meaningless. It would be of great help if the secular press or the anti-Communist religious right wing would stop exploiting such statement for their own selfish purposes.

The process of secularization has gone far in both the U.S.S.R. and Yugoslavia. Non-church-goers far outnumber church-goers. Many people live lives untouched by religious practices or concerns. Does this mean that atheist propaganda has succeeded? In many cases it undoubtedly has. One meets young people in both societies who are astonished that a well-educated person believes in God. To the question why they do not believe in God, the answer is usually, "that is the way I have been taught and I never really reflected about it." (This is an answer not too different from what many teenagers and students in the West give to the question why they do believe in God.) But is secularization an unqualified success for atheist propaganda? Hardly so, for many Communists bitterly complain that the newer generation have none of the revolutionary ardor which they had; that they have become apathetic, cynical, consumer and pleasure-oriented. Most of them have no enthusiasm for either religion or atheism. One wonders who is the ultimate loser in the struggle for souls? Neither Marxism-Leninism nor religious groups can smugly claim that the future is theirs.

Paul Mojzes, Editor