Parsons’s "Christianity Today in the USSR" - Book Review

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Book Reviews


The author's two-fold intention to fill the need for information about Christianity in the USSR, and to counter the reactionary use of religious ideology by President Reagan, are certainly laudable. The problem, and it is a major problem, is the approach used: to let the facts speak for themselves. When they are limited to very general material, the "facts" become so selective that it is the selectivity that speaks for itself.

With General Secretary Gorbachev aggressively fostering "New Thinking," and large numbers of Americans preparing to visit the USSR to celebrate the millennium of Christianity there, we obviously need a reliable survey of religious conditions in the USSR. Trevor Beeson's *Discretion and Valor* filled the bill admirably with its two editions (1974 and 1982). Thinking in terms of the way of discretion and/or the way of valor has become common in numerous articles since. Nevertheless the situation continues to change so that we now need a re-conceptualization that is more than an update. Parsons' book is not what we need for it presents neither the basic facts, nor the issues and perspectives adequately.

For example, Parsons' basic approach was to report the direct statements of persons whom he interviewed, all of them Soviet citizens. Parsons is knowledgeable in the field of philosophy of religion, which shows through in his carefully formulated questions, but the overall thrust of the presentation is clearly skewed in such a way that International Publishers (pro-Soviet) were able to publish it. This is most evident in the long concluding chapter in which most of his seven major conclusions claim freedom of religious practice for Soviet believers as guaranteed in writing in the constitution, but the practice of widespread anti-religious discrimination is dismissed as "occasional stories", "thin in their substantiation," and involving a few "egocentric people."

This is rather surprising given the inclusion of a few scholarly books of recent vintage in an annotated bibliography. At times it reads as if the author has given a sanitized version in the text, heavy on officially stated policy but weak on the policy as experienced by believers. In one footnote William Fletcher's estimate that 45 percent of the population are believers, an estimate based on Soviet atheistic scholarship, is declared "incautious"; Chrystal Lame's estimates, the author claims, have "uncertain support for reliance of (sic) samizdat (privately published materials)"; instead Parsons settles for a vague personal conclusion drawn from a 1983 CPSU Plenum Report which suggests that there are enough believers "to provoke its serious attention."
It is difficult to see how a writer, as knowledgeable as Parsons seems to be, can claim to provide objective information if text and footnotes, and even the bibliography, ignore the older work of Nikita Struve, and the recent books by Dimitri Pospielovsky and Jane Ellis on Russian Orthodoxy. Even for general comments on Soviet society it does not do to cite the old classics by Bernard Pares and B. H. Sumner, and ignore the quite amazing number of good quality journalistic and also solid scholarly research on the Soviet Union. One needs to enter into the painful details, the competing points of view, in order to help the reader visualize a more peaceful relationship within the Soviet Union, and between it and U.S.A. Such a peace must be based on understanding, compassion and forgiveness—not by putting the best face on things.

Nevertheless, for persons knowledgeable about the Soviet Union, this book offers 70 pages of quite unique material in English about the views of Soviet scientist on Christianity and religion. The book is well worth the price for these 70 pages. Even though the scholars named are quoted selectively in the form of interview answers, they apparently knew the statements would be published and should therefore be held responsible for their remarks.

As Parsons arranged the material, there is a clear progression away from the old fashioned, simplistic anti-religious remarks by the editor of Science and Religion or the assertion by Professor Novikov of Moscow University that all claims about religious discrimination are "just meaningless repetition, propagandistic invention, and nonsense." Such assertions are not even taken seriously by Soviet citizens. What makes the subsequent interview more interesting are the indicators that scholars are finding it necessary to widen the definition of religion, or needing to examine the persistence of religion on grounds of psychology and epistemology, several of them saying that it is necessary to identify mistakes made by the administration.

Most stimulating is the short interview with D. M. Ugrinovich who has written high quality books on the The Science of Religious Studies (1985) and The Psychology of Religion (1986). Ugrinovich reveals a greater sensitivity to complexity by recognizing the genuine spiritual needs of people for consolation, esthetic satisfaction, a moral need and even the need for a comprehensive world view. Religion fulfills such a need as does Marxism, he observes. Of special interest too is his broad use of American sources for theory formulation.

The progression toward serious rethinking continues. To illustrate, Professor Sherdakov, an ethicist, freely states that "the thesis of the incompatibility of religion and socialism is untrue" and also that 'the thesis of the contradiction between Communist morality and religious morality is false.'
Such short interviews are helpful in indicating new directions in Soviet scholarship. They are useful for envisioning a society of the future in the USSR in which atheists and Christians make room for each other and are able to differentiate points of agreement and disagreement, to distinguish between mistakes in practice from what was intended. Perhaps they will stimulate some readers to pursue the academic dialogue at a personal level until the scholarship between East and West becomes a creative dialogue. Perhaps that is what Parsons is trying to describe or contribute to in the rest of the book.

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