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Press Conference - Christians

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PRESS CONFERENCE - CHRISTIANS

On September 11, 1987, a group of Christians arranged a press conference in Moscow. Foreign correspondents present at this event were briefed on the text of the appeal to the Presidium of the Supreme Soviet of the USSR regarding the necessity for [word is missing in the Russian text - it is probably either "revision" or "change" - translator's note] of the existing legislation dealing with religion and cults in the USSR. The initiators of this appeal were members of the Russian Orthodox Church. The appeal was also endorsed by the representation of other religious denominations from various regions of the country.

At the conference the initiators of the appeal exposed in their speeches the repressive nature of the present legislation which infringes upon freedom of conscience causing a split sense of duty for a believer. The existing legislation reduces the fullness of the religious life to mere ceremony, even to the level of a cult, and does not offer an opportunity to embody faith into the life of a person. "Faith is dead without deeds" - these words from the Holy Scripture can be used as an epigraph for the projected new legislation proposed by the independent Christians.

The initiators of the appeal declared that public discussion of the proposed project can become one of the important provisos for the true democratization of the society.

The concrete points of the project, which could serve as a legislative guarantees of freedom of faith in the USSR, were further discussed and substantiated.

To the Chairman of the Presidium of the Supreme Soviet of the USSR Andrei Andreevich Gromyko

To the member of the Presidium of the Supreme Soviet of the USSR and General Secretary of the Central Committee of the CPSU Mikhail Sergeevich Gorbachev

The important changes presently occurring in the public life of our country call for attention to the acute problem of the situation of the Christian Church. The Church requires serious and urgent examination of the situation not only from its own point of view but also from that of the State and Society.

The Christian Church has played an enormous role in the fate of the peoples of our land. Today, on the eve of its millennium, we can't repress our involvement and personal responsibility for the Christian culture of the past. This feeling runs deep in the midst of resurgent enthusiasm

for religious consciousness in our country. We are convinced that this enthusiasm is not accidental because it does express the objective need for spiritual development in our society. Therefore, we, as members of the Orthodox Church, as well as other Christians belonging to other Christian denominations inspired by our sense of duty to do service to God and our Homeland, address you with this open letter.

In accordance with the new law of June 30, 1987, we propose to submit for public discussion the situation of the Christian Church in the USSR and the introduction of changes to legislation with regard to religion and cults.

Now, unfortunately, the situation is such that the Church is actually denied the opportunity of real participation in the life of the people. Legislatively separated from the State the Church in fact found itself separated from society as well. The leading and guiding force of Soviet society in accordance with the Article 6 of the Constitution of the USSR is the Communist Party of the Soviet Union which is atheist in its ideology. Therefore only with great difficulty can the Church perform its indisputable function as the spiritual leader of the believers.

This situation gives us grounds to present the central problems related to the situation of the Church. In our opinion these problems must be resolved in the context of the new legislation on religion and cults.

To begin with, any new legislation has to be enacted in accordance with the international legal rights endorsed by the Soviet Union including the Agreement on Civil and Political Rights which is the First Act of the Conference on Security and Cooperation in Europe. The implementation of the appropriate provisions of these documents will create legitimate conditions for religious life in the country and will diminish the intensity of contradictions existing today between the believers and the State.

New legislation has to be linked to corresponding changes in the Articles of the Criminal Code of the Russian Soviet Federative Socialist Republic nos. 70142, 1901 and 227 (and in similar Articles in the Criminal Code of other republics). In the past these articles were often used to persecute religious activities and religious preaching. It should not be permitted that a person be put in jail for speaking out.

The new legislation would provide for guarantees against the humiliating and often destructive procedures of forensic-psychiatric examinations with regard to believers. In the past healthy individuals were often arrested and subjected to forced hospitalization and treatment. They were considered socially dangerous mental cases, especially because of their religious convictions.

We are striving towards concrete changes in the legislation on religion and cults. Therefore it is imperative.

1. To grant the Church and religious associations the status of juridical entities.

2. To repeal the decree of 1922 " On the Nationalization of All Church Property." This must be manifested in a non-compensatory return to the Church and religious associations all of the property and valuables historically belonging to them. This means buildings and adjoining structures, religious and ceremonial objects, icons, relics, communion cloths and other articles belonging to the Church as well as books of Holy Scriptures and religious-philosophical literature.

3. To change Article 52 of the Constitution of the USSR so that it will give equal rights to anti-religious as well as religious propaganda which is being sponsored by anti-religious and religious organizations respectively.

4. To repeal the resolution of the All-Russia Central Execution Committee and the Council of People's Commissars of the Russian Soviet Federative Socialist Republic dated April 8, 1929, "On Religious Associations" which forbids the charitable activity of the Church and religious associations. To permit the creation within the Church of charitable organizations to administer financial help to the needy using voluntary donations; and not to interfere with the practice of religious ceremonies in prisons and hospitals. To allow the believers serving sentences in places of detention to wear crosses and other religious symbols as well as having religious literature. To permit them confession and spiritual discussion with the clergy.

5. To permit the Church complete freedom to preach and disseminate religious dogma within and beyond the places designated for worship. To allow the Church access to the means of mass communication and freedom to disseminate its publications on the basis of agreements with State organizations. To permit the creation of independent religious printing and publishing houses and not interfere with the publishing and dissemination of independent bulletins on religious life in the USSR. To permit the creation of public libraries and reading halls containing religious literature.

6. Not to interfere with the activity of the Church in the area of education and upbringing, including that of minors. To permit the Church in agreement with parents and their children to organize community Sunday schools and other religious educational institutions. All believers, including children, must have the right to not attend places of work or study during important religious holidays as in being practiced in virtually all countries of the world.

7. Grant the Church and religious associations the right of public organizations in the USSR including the right to nominate delegates to the local and central organs of the government

and the right to own and be in charge of its property and other possessions. Grant the Church and religious association broader opportunity to participate in the public life of the country. In particular, allow its participation in the work of administrative commissions of executive committees, medical institutions, sobriety societies and other public and Soviet organizations.

8. To provide guarantees in the new legislation for the independence of religious organizations and the inadmissibility of arbitrary governmental interference into the affairs of the Church. To protect the Church from the discriminatory taxation and to emphasize a frequently distorted principle of its voluntary participation in the State foundation.

9. Not to interfere with the development of free contacts between the Church and the believers and international religious centers, public organizations and individual believers broad. To ensure the unimpeded right of pilgrimage to holy places situated outside the USSR. To permit the believers freedom of emigration from the USSR because of their religious convictions.

10. Being fully aware of the needs of other denominations the members of the Russian Orthodox Church insist that these citizens who according to their religious convictions cannot take up arms be given the possibility of alternate service instead of mandatory service in the Soviet Army. We want to express of confidence that many demands stated here concern not only the Russian Orthodox Church but other denominations as well.

11. Not to interfere with the activity of Biblical societies on the territory of the USSR and to provide guaranteed rights to such activities.

We expect that our proposals will be thoughtfully and benevolently considered by you and that we will receive a reply in accordance with legally established procedure.

Priest Vladimir Shibaev, Russian Orthodox
Alexander Ogorodnikov, R. Orthodox
Vladimir Pimonov, Protestant
Valeriy Senderov, R.O.
Valeriy Sulimov, R.O. (Riga)
Sergei Klubov, R.O.(Minsk/
Vladimir Frenkel, R.O.(Riga/
Anton Vasilik, R.O.(Moscow/
Mikhail Bombin, R.O.(Riga/
Stanislav Protsenko, R.O.(Astrakhan/
Konstantin Lapshin, R.O.(Arkhangelsk/
Nikolai Butko, R.O.(Minsk/
Alexander Povolotskiy, R.O.(Moscow/
Yevgeniy Augustviris, R.O.(Rovno/
Valeriy Kuznetsov, R.O.(Moscow/
Yulia Vetkina, R.O.(Leningrad/
Yekaterina Kalinkina, R.O.(Leningrad/

Sergei Bogoustov, R.O.(Riga/

From the group "Rebirth and Renewal" (Evangelical-Lutheran Church of Latvia):
doctor of theology, professor, former rector of theological seminary - Roberts Akmentinsh
teacher, provost - Modris Plate
teacher, provost - Ayval Veimanis
teacher, M.A. in Theology, priest - Yuris Rubenis
teacher, pastor - Yanis Vanags
lawyer, teacher - Yanis Karkls
pastors: August Alerson
Andrei Kawatsis
Maris Ludwigs
provost - Arthur Kaminskiy
chief provost, senior lecturer of theological seminary - Karlis Kalderovsky
Neele Sadunaite, Catholic
Vladimir Albrecht, Catholic

Joining: Paruir Airikian, Armenian Apostolic Church
Pyatras Plumpa, Catholic (Kannas)
Antanas Terliatskas, Catholic (Vilnius)
Jonas Piatkavichus, Catholic (Shauliai)
Yadviga Piatkavichus, Catholic (Shauliai)
Priest Jonas Kaunyatskas, Catholic (Skaudvila)
Linda Simutis, Catholic (Kaunas)
Vladimir Osipov (Tarus)
Mikhail Osadchev, R.O. (Moscow)
Aleksandr Titarenko, R.O. (village Istrut', Cheliebinskoblakst)
Nikolai Muratov Catholic (Moscow)
Irina Krivova (group "Trust")

Additional 623 votes were collected in Moscow, 7 in Leningrad, 1 in Gorkiy, 6 in Ukraine, 266 in Western Ukraine, 2 in Georgia, 1 in Kharkov, 2 in Tomsk, 1 in Barnaul, 2 in Arkhangelst, 1 in Artrakhan, 2 in Minsk, 1 in Kazan, 29 in Armenia, 15 in Estonia, 18 in Latvia, 27 in Lithuania.

Total 443 additional signatures.

By February 1988, 1543 signatures were collected.

The collection of signatures continues at the following addresses:

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M. Bombin
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