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MORAL AND SPIRITUAL CHANGES IN THE LAST YEARS OF THE SOVIET UNION

By **Howard L. Parsons**

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Swiftly moving economic and political transformations in the Soviet Union culminated in late 1991 in the dissolution of the USSR. At the same time have come moral and spiritual changes--demanding these transformations, stimulating them, and driven by them. By "moral and spiritual" I mean people's basic beliefs about the distinctively human (or "higher") values, about the direction, end, and significance of human living--and the readiness to commit oneself in practice to such values. Belief in these values normally imports a framework or system of thought--a philosophy that is personal or social, secular or religious.

The report that follows, now almost two years old, is a record of a society in transition. My study of subsequent changes and my month-long visit to Moscow in the fall of 1991 confirm the continuance and even the acceleration of the transition found in 1990. While I have tried to report faithfully the events and statements limited to my field of observation, the observations and reportage have not been free of my own sympathetic view of the general notion of socialism. I must confess that this viewpoint colors and shapes the meaning and moral significance of the observations--just as any viewpoint would; and no reporter, despite disclaimers of "neutrality," can be free of some such viewpoint.

On September 1, 1990 I arrived at Moscow State University to begin a series of lectures on "Marxism and Christianity." Soon thereafter I met a journalist of long-time acquaintance. In half-jest he remarked, "You must be the only Marxist in Moscow." Although I had known that the ideological landscape in the USSR had been shifting for some time, I was unprepared for this hyperbole, even in jest. But during the days and weeks of my three-month stay, the truth of my friend's remark became increasingly clear.

The chair of my Department of the Theory and History of Religion and Scientific Atheism -- its name recently changed from the Theory and History of Scientific Atheism -- had warned me: "Keep in mind in your lectures that our students are against Marxism."

Then, at my first lecture, the students protested, almost in a chorus: "We don't want to hear about Marxism." Faculty members verified this hostility among the students, saying that very few students now have elected to do major study in the theory, history, political economy, and other aspects of Marxism-Leninism. When I asked a faculty member why the students rejected Marxism, he replied that they had to do so, that it had been "imposed" on them, that "they did not choose it." Someone said that the students' animus against Marxism had been particularly acute in the scientific and technical institutes -- believable news, considering that many United States' students in the hard sciences have little interest in the humanities and social studies whatever their content.

One day in November 1990, as I walked through the halls of Moscow State University, four program advertisements on one bulletin board caught my eye: Guru Maharaji, Astrologist Sergei Bronski, Pastor Vladimir Kulikov of the Evangelical-Christian Baptists, and Grigorii Yatsutovsko, Practitioner of Mysticism (Magician).

I could hardly believe my eyes. In 1980, ten years previously, when I was also on a lecture assignment in the Faculty of Philosophy of the University, such advertisements would have been unthinkable. University authorities strictly limited or forbade the on-campus presence of religious leaders, "idealists," and foreign academics and ideologists. Now, after more than five years of *perestroika* and *glasnost*, all bans were off. The borders were permeable. During my three-month period of lectures at the University several fundamentalist preachers from the United States addressed student audiences, urging them to accept Christ and to contribute money for study materials. Representatives of Sun Myung Moon's Unification Church had recently been on campus conducting a contest to award scholarships for students to attend a conference in the United States. Russian Orthodox priests and Baptist preachers gave lectures on the campus. When I asked some professors if they saw any danger in this sudden opening to ideas that sharply collided with the doctrines of Marxism-Leninism, they replied that democracy requires such freedom.

This widening of the accessibility of religious ideas parallels changes of attitudes in philosophy. Among teachers and students there is a rising interest in existentialism. A conference on its Danish founder, Soren Kierkegaard, was held in the fall. Phenomenology, the inquiry into the content of personal awareness and being, was growing. For the first time since before the 1917 revolution, several editions of Friedrich Nietzsche's works were being published. In 1990 a major publishing house, "Progress," brought out the selected works of Alfred North Whitehead, a major Anglo-American philosopher whose work in philosophy of religion has had a special impact on U.S. philosophers. During the recent period of *perestroika*, the proliferation of private publishers, sometimes engaged in joint ventures with Western firms, has facilitated such printing, though the houses still under state auspices, like "Progress," are competing for the new market.

This dissemination of new ideas--emerging from within the Soviet Union and from foreign sources--is not only a phenomenon of *perestroika* and *glasnost*. It is a manifestation of the sea-changes occurring in the outlook of people generally. The stagnation and decline of the economy, inflation, scarce foodstuffs and other consumer goods, deteriorating public services such as medical care and transport, the manipulations of the mafia, widespread corruption among the *nomenklatura* and party leadership, ineffective parliament, the fluctuations of the Gorbachev administration--all have led many to doubt the value and relevance of socialism in the solution of their problems. Many students, especially the younger ones, were given to describe this situation with extravagance: "Socialism is a total failure." "We have lost seventy years." "Marxism is a crime." Even those who still believe in the theory and value of socialism hold that it was incompletely put into practice. What existed is variously described as "administrative socialism," "state socialism," "petty bourgeois socialism," "utopian socialism," and the like. When I asked one student "What is socialism?" she replied, "That's an untasty question." Many students now are averse to thinking about their socialist history, viewing it as an unqualified failure. But it was evident to me that many had not carefully studied the theory of socialism.

Among thoughtful students the universal mood is one of self-criticism and soul-searching, a process both personal and social, contemporary and historical, national and international--international in the sense that the USSR is a union of different republics with their own nationalities. Where and how did we go wrong? What did the Bolsheviks say and do? (There is a common confusion of Bolshevism with socialism.) Is there a class struggle? Does it conflict with humanism? What is socialism's philosophy of the human being, society, human nature, and universal human values? Did the Bolsheviks understand it and apply it? What are the alternative philosophies? What ought I commit myself to? Do I have a fulfilling future to believe in, to hope for, to work toward? Nearly all of the students with whom I talked were negative in their estimate of socialism, their country's history, and their personal futures. The prevailing feeling toward the past, present, and future is one of disillusionment and betrayal. Students tend to be absolutist in their judgments. The Bolsheviks, it seems, did everything wrong and nothing right while the pre-revolutionary period of Russian history takes on the rosy glow of a golden age. Though people differ on what changes must be made, all agree that the existing system cannot continue unaltered. But I looked in vain to find a broad consensus on the needed direction.

The breakdown in the economy--and the uncertainties in social and political life-- have brought with them a grave moral and spiritual crisis. Beyond the everyday questions of where and how to get food, how to stretch a shrinking ruble, how to earn more money (buying Western goods and selling them for profit), how to find medicine and buy and get reliable health care--there remains the residue of inescapable questions of human living. Are

human beings basically selfish or altruistic? Does their social system (socialist or capitalist or another) make an essential difference to their natures? Will the values of a free market be cancelled by selfishness and exploitation? Can I trust people? Can we achieve progress, both material and spiritual? Is there an objective and absolute ground for moral values? Is it found only in religion? What does religion have to offer that Marxism does not? What ought I to do? What can I have faith in? What can I hope for?

The roots of these philosophical doubts and searchings lie in fact as much in cultural changes and in economic ones -- cultural changes that appear to have parallels in certain developed societies in the world quite independently of their particular economic and political systems. The "countercultural revolution" and its conservative reaction that shook the society of the United States in the 1960s seems to have commenced in the USSR a generation later, in the 1980s, though moving more slowly. These cultural changes are interconnected with a complex of changes--the growth of large, impersonal economic structures, science and technology, economic and political bureaucracies, mobility of population, and urbanization, mass education, rising expectations among people, the increase of armaments, the nuclear and ecological threats, and foreign invasions and wars. Such changes include a disturbed family life and decline in the influence of "soft structures" -- family, school, religious institutions--and the weakening in the transmission of basic personal values from one generation to another. Private and public morality have been separated. The old values of patriotism, loyalty to tradition, hard work, planning, sacrifice for the future, and close family ties have been eroded by the new values of individual choice, self-realization, consumerism, and immediate gratification. Among the youth the resulting confusion and uncertainty about personal values, personal identity, a place in the scheme of things, and the meaning of life have issued in a search for commitment and the entertainment in thought and practice of various paths of life. Over against these new experiments a conservative cultural movement has emerged, and so the battle has been joined.

For some years this critical soul-searching in the USSR has expressed itself on a large scale as a shift of interest -- as a matter of emphasis, not as a complete shift -- from established state socialism toward a new system, from monism toward pluralism, from the social toward the individual, from the objective toward the subjective, from the material toward the spiritual, from a centrally planned society toward distribution of power, from the future toward the concrete and historical, and from enthusiastic idealism toward pragmatic realism.

1) From the established social system toward a new system. For most of its seventy-three year history, Soviet socialism offered a world outlook that gave cohesion and guidance to social life and that inspired individual effort and devotion through the famine and civil

war, the five-year plans for the construction of a new economy (with even the oppression and mass deaths under Stalinism), the Great Patriotic War, and the postwar reconstruction. And since the early 1970s the economy has stagnated and failed, people increasingly have lost faith in the system and its ideology. *Perestroika*, commencing 1985, legitimized social criticism and the deepening crisis in the economy. It offered a compelling material reason for questioning if not rejecting socialism. Bread speaks louder than doctrines. A common complaint now is that the ideology of socialism was forced on people, denying them the right to criticize it and the exercise of even a minimum of freedom toward the system. One philosopher has argued that Marxism-Leninism had a trickle-down theory that viewed its success to be dependent on the Central Committee of the CPSU as its source. But the consciousness of many people was crushed under the "megatonnage of dogmatisms."

Among students the charitable view of Marxism as a theory is that it is a dream, an idealistic abstraction, an ideology, a utopia--not a science for the direction of social action. Some repeated the views of their professors that it is a "religion," "an ideology, not a science," and a "foolish doctrine." Many of those who once freely accepted the teachings and directions of the Party, it was said, finally became disaffected by the discrepancy between the professed ideals of their leaders and their real practice. One middle-aged Communist told me: "In the 1950s and 1960s we young people went off with great enthusiasm to work on the Trans-Siberian Railway--sacrificing, disciplining ourselves, suffering, sheltered and very poorly fed, sharing the slogans of the leaders. But later it turned out that they were wasting millions of rubles on the project and building plush houses for themselves and securing other privileges."

Some students feel that the people have lost touch with the vital values of their cultural tradition because communism rashly and swiftly displaced them with other values. "The class struggle has falsified values here, misrepresenting what are true values." "Before the revolution of 1917, our people had respect for the value of personality. But since then we have struggled to achieve only class values. The end of communism will mean the return of personality." Some scholars attribute this crisis in human values in part to the isolation of the USSR from the international community. Those who have travelled to the developed industrial societies of the West are impressed by their high standard of living in the material domain and by the level of economic, social, and political life--the enterprise, productivity, freedom of expression and variety of opinions and lifestyles, media, and democratic institutions such as parliamentary forms and voluntary civic associations (of which the USA has two million). Of course one must question whether all such values are or ought to be "universal human values." In any case, students feel alienated from their own needs and longings and self-actualization. They are searching for a new social system in which they would achieve personal fulfillment.

Not everyone has thrown away the concept of socialism. "Nobody knows what socialism is," said an avowed socialist. "We have never had socialism. We are an artificial, wounded, sick society, a concentration camp society. Your society of the USA is sick from riches, while we are sick from misery. Yet we love the socialist idea." It was his belief that socialism has to be built "from the inside" and not (as in Soviet history) "from the top down" by centralized authoritarian power and abstract slogans. For him, as for other intellectuals, private property is the key to diversity, independence, and individuality of thought and action, opening up the opportunity for democratic decision-making and the creation of a genuine socialist order. Moreover, large numbers of working people still adhere to socialism and will be found in the parties and groups that uphold it.

A sociologist defended the theory of socialism. "People judge capitalism by looking at the stocked shops in capitalist societies. So they are nihilistic toward socialism. But I hope that conservatism in the best sense of that position will not allow society to fragment under the impact of nude nihilism. Socialist ideas are not utopian. The numbers of intellectuals in the countries of the world are growing. The nature of intellectual work and the character of labor generally demand democratization, collective principles, humanism, and respect for personality in all countries. A basic principle created by socialism is that the quantity and quality of one's labor ought to determine one's income. While this is a trivial truth, it was not applied in our society. We had the principle of a 'limited fund of wages.' Each enterprise was allotted a definite sum for its wages. More than one generation grew up under this principle. So people learned to limit their own work because if they worked more and better, the administration made the price of work (wages) less. So work was cheapened because of the limited fund of wages. Yet the principle has worked--until today. When Gorbachev visited Sverdlovsk last year a worker asked him, 'Will you tell us when an uncle at the top will decide that I can work outside the limited fund of wages?' Gorbachev answered only in generalities. Thus, such a simple idea can't penetrate to our top leadership."

No one seems prepared to predict precisely the shape of things to come in world outlook and social system. But many concur that the extremes of anarchy and authoritarianism, of chaos and repression, loom as dreaded alternatives. They justify this fear with the observation that throughout their history the Russian people have tended to swing to violent extremes. A student cited the abrupt movement after 1917 from the religious faith in Christ to the secular faith in Marx. "The Russian soul has only polarities without any mediating link between extremes." For some the search for a method of moderation must look away from both the free market in the Western mode and the old style of centralized control to what Gorbachev has called "socialism with private interests." To achieve a dynamic balance in the economy it would be necessary to avoid (1) 'Marxist capitalism,' which would be 'very primitive,' lacking in the restraints on the market gradually developed in the West over a

long period of time and (2) a reversion to military-bureaucratic-party repression which some right-wing groups are trying to provoke.

The argument for extensive but limited private property is both political and economic. (Some believe that the 'radical' proposal from the Yeltsin team of economists, taken right out of Milton Friedman, would 'legalize the shadow economy' and aims at giving amnesty to the mafia.) The argument is that a stable and creative society requires a variety of perspectives freely developing, interacting, checking, modifying, and improving one another. Said one, "The English, French, and German souls have had oppositions--empiricism and objective idealism and rationality and mysticism,"--while the Russians have has only isolated extremes. Private property among citizens--in 'a civic society'--would give the material basis for private, independent opinions which, constructively interacting, would generate the political dynamic for stability and advance. As someone put it, "democracy works only if people are economically independent--i.e., in business for themselves, or selling their own labor in the market." State socialism, by guaranteeing people security, has robbed them of the conditions of independence.

Another, extending the argument, asserted that Marxist socialism has not worked in Russian because classes and class struggle in the sense that Marx understood them did not exist and still do not exist there. Citing Willie Brandt, who said that the working class in Germany lacked the specialized education, knowledge, and skills to make good use of its rights and possessions and therefore was not ready to assume control of the economy -- he said that the key to the new stage of development of humanity are the scientific and technological strata.

Most appear to agree that now the principal economic and political factions contending for power are the right wing, the center, and the left wing. On the right wing are groups advocating a strengthening of national tradition and strong state power: monarchists, neo-Stalinists, the old-line Marxist-Leninists of the CPSU, some leaders and laity of the Russian Orthodox Church, the bureaucrats in the state apparatus and elsewhere, the nationalists such as the neo-Slavophiles, the KGB, the military, and the mafia who stand to lose by either a reformist conservatism or the genuine competition of a free market. On the left wing are the forces calling (with various emphases) for faster movement toward private property, free enterprise, parliamentary democracy, human rights, a law-governed state, and "civic society." Some forty parties have been created, many of them small. According to a poll of the Postfactum Information Service in the spring of 1990, the most popular political group is the Democratic Platform. Its outlook is similar to that of the Social-Democratic Party of Russia patterned on the European model. This party now has the strongest representation in the Supreme Soviets of the USSR and the Russian Federation. The centrists around Gorbachev are pursuing a course between (a) the "steadfast communists," among them the communist

Party of the Russian Federation, along with other groups on the right, and (b) the leftward pull of the social-democratic forces.

Intellectuals who gravitate to the "free market" model of Western capitalism are lured by illusions about both its promises and its perils for people. In their disillusionment with state socialism, they have embraced an illusion of the opposite kind. After Margaret Thatcher's resignation as Premier of Great Britain, a writer in Moscow News (issue of December 9-16, 1990) praised her "dignity," "charm," "straightforwardness and inner conviction, still rare qualities in Soviet politicians." Her work in the second half of the 1980s, he said, "could easily be called *perestroika*." Her aim was "consistent privatization of state property, renunciation of state interference in business, transition to the market regulated by itself only"; and she did "a great deal to carry it out." But the writer, Sergei Volvets, is blind to the effects of Thatcherism on the people as a whole: The tripling of unemployment to more than two million, the creation of a mass of fifteen million living in poverty, the deterioration and destruction of national health service, the decline of educational opportunities for working class children, the hobbling of trade unions by antilabor laws, and subservience to United States policy of escalating armaments and attacks on national liberation movements. Like this writer, many intellectuals are naive about the fact that unregulated free enterprize will bring exploitation of workers and bitter class conflict between workers and owners. Perhaps this is the necessary baptism of suffering that some Soviet people must undergo in order to grasp the realities of the capitalist system.

2) From monism toward pluralism. Several thinkers, including long-time Marxist-Leninists, commented on the oppressive monism of Russian ideology, both in the Russian Orthodox Church and in Marxism-Leninism since 1917. The students with whom I talked were hungry for plurality and variety in every domain of life--in lifestyles, art, literature, ideas, philosophy, religion, politics, economy. At the same time they were oblivious to the hazards of plurality -- the dispersion of attention, the quick but shallow satiety, and, in the marketplace, the brutal competition, the stress, the dehumanization, and 'the war of each against all.' But the reason for this turn toward variety is the experience of excessive security, a monotony installed by a pervasive state organization, and an uncritical equalization of people in the workplace. "In our state socialism," said a professor, "we homogenized everything. We are spoiled and too monistic. We treat all people equally." This equalization leads to the discouragement of good work when good workers realize they are not proportionately rewarded and are maneuvering for privileges. Inequalities become unfair and undeserved. Thus, while some professors share the same housing and cafeteria lines with students, others connected with the bureaucracy enjoy superior accommodations.

Variety of thought and outlook develops of course when people are free and ready, willing, and able to interact with persons of conflicting views and to learn to live with

variety, to give and take in creative and constructive ways, to express themselves honestly and to listen appreciatively, and to grow in the process. Not a few students I met showed the results of isolation from knowledge of and serious encounter with sharply opposite points of view. In a classroom discussion when I suggested variation in the roles of women and men, one student declared with certainty that the traditional gender roles are "deeply tied to biology." For some, the issue of homosexuality was met with silence or humor, and one student seemed to equate homosexuality with lust. A philosopher engaged in some of the first research in the USSR on feminism told me that conditions have not been ripe for a strong feminist movement in this patriarchal society--'patriarchy' meaning a cultural mode of domination. Another observed that while some women are ready for their own liberation, they have produced no theoretical works, lag behind Western women in this regard, and "invent" their works because they do not have enough "theoretical experience." But old stereotypes are tenacious: a Soviet man, once married to an American woman, was convinced that "all American women are feminists--and that is a problem for American men."

Likewise in religion concepts have been limited and tolerance retarded by the narrow range of religious practice in society. The culture has not produced the variety of faiths that have proliferated throughout United States history. As we discussed Protestantism, some students who were Orthodox believers did not see this faith as having equal status with their own. One said it is "not a real religion" because it is secular and identifies religion with changes in the world; another, that liberal Protestants, tolerant of the permissive morality of the 1960s in the United States, are not religious. These views of the students, while Orthodox, did not go as far as the All-Russian Conference of Orthodox-Patriotic Forces, meeting in Moscow in October 1990, which went on record against pornography, all Jews, "those who side with the Jews," those who pray together with "heretics" (Catholics, Protestants, etc.), and the media's insults of the Russian nation, Orthodoxy, and the monarchy--which is to be restored.

In this setting I understood with new clarity the historic role played by Western Protestantism, together with capitalism, in spreading the doctrines and practices of individualism with voluntary association in communities. A Russian historian, not religious, put the comparison in this way. The Protestants of the West, he said, in their struggle against the medieval order strove for their freedom of faith and for the democratic state. "They believed in putting garments on Christ." But our people of Russia, never having experienced their Middle Ages or the Reformation, are now, in a secular age, faced with "a naked God."

(To be continued in the next issue)