Religion and Perestroika in the USSR

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Slogans about *perestroika* and *glasnost* have not disappeared from the pages of Soviet newspapers. Two untranslated Russian words, though appearing in Latin transcription, have entered foreign languages. Soviet leaders visiting in the West made loud and clear pronouncements about the undeviating process of democratization of Soviet society and very carefully watch the reaction of the foreign community. But what actually confirms these pronouncements?

Let us examine one of the most painful problems in the seventy-year old history of the Soviet regime—the problem of religion. Has anything changed in the attitude of the government towards the Church and the believers?

During the course of its history the government has considered religion as one of the main adversaries of its ideology and has attempted to destroy the Church. In the 1920s and 1930s waves of repression befell upon the Church—out of 54,000 houses of worship, which were active prior to the Revolution, virtually all were closed. Two hundred bishops, tens of thousand of priests, and millions of the faithful were sacrificed in the name of building the new society.

During the years of the Second World War Stalin was forced to open 22,000 houses of worship in order to utilize the religious feelings of the people in the struggle against Nazism.

However, after the War, during the period of Khrushchev’s famous “thaw” and the repudiation of Stalin’s cult of personality, the Church again experienced recurrent attacks of ideological fury. 14,000 houses of worship were closed again.

The growth of religious consciousness during the post-War period occurred contrary to "the objective laws of development of the socialist society." The 1970s were marked by the outburst of religious revival, the rise of independent Christian seminars and the formation of the Committee for the Defense of the Rights of Believers—an initiative of the Christian community. But, feeling the might of the determined government persecution and having experienced the arrest of its principal members, the movement went underground. By the 1980s, having lost its initial excitement, the movement, nevertheless, continued to develop having somehow preserved its inner depth. However, deprived of the possibility of being expressed openly in its authentic forms, the
revival of the religious movement had no choice but to retreat into the catacomb-of Christian consciousness, even though it had grown tremendously due to the influx of new members.

The return of those who were sent in the 1970s to the labor camps and of those who were exiled for defending the faith caused the movement to be faced with the necessity of not only returning from the catacombs but attempting to legalize its true forms and restoring its total ecclesiastical service to the world. Presently the movement has come to the point where it is absolutely ready to flow into the broad stream of life and become a fact of the "main" culture.

And particularly now, the government cannot reject the significance of religion in the life of society.

As never before, the problems, nowadays, greatly depend on legislation which presently constrains the growth of the Church organism. The legislation adopted by Stalin in 1929 became the basic weapon of repression against the Church and the faithful. It has to be changed. As long as the Stalinist legislation exists, the fullness of the service of the church will be reduced to the narrow limits of the "activity of a cult." The Church will have a right to exist only in the capacity of a museum-type exhibit and the honest initiatives of the Christian community will be regarded, in the broad propagandistic cliche, as extremist.

In order to free the Church from State captivity, it is essential in the first place, to separate it, legislatively and practically, from the State. This means not only lifting ideological controls but also granting the Church the rights of a juridical body, freedom to preach, religious upbringing and catechism for children, the economic independence of religious associations, the right to be in charge of the collected donations according to its own discretion as well as control over its own charities and, finally, freedom of publishing activity. To stop the existing ideological discrimination against the believers would only be possible by the removal of atheism from the framework of the coercive State ideology and recognition of it as simply a personal conviction.

These demands were submitted to M. Gorbachev in a letter dated September 12, 1987. The initiators were Orthodox Christians. To the present day, the letter has 2,000 signatures from the representatives of various Christian denominations.

Will there be any change in the legislation? It is difficult to say at this point. It is important to note, however, that lately some hierarchs of the Orthodox Church have begun to cautiously talk about certain desirable changes. It seems that the government has also made certain concessions to the Church and the believers. As a result, during the period of the whole perestroika campaign 200 prisoners of conscience were freed from detention. The greater part of the group consisted of prisoners of faith. It was announced that the registration of passports after baptisms
and weddings was repealed (it is a fact, however, that to date this has not been put into practice in the Church). In general the government nowadays is reacting with restraint regarding the attempts of the believers to seek out greater freedom of religious life. In recent times we are unaware of any arrests for religious activities with the exception of a sad and well-publicized case involving Pyatras Grazhulis. He received a ten-month sentence for resisting military duty on the basis of religious and nationalistic convictions. Fines for performing religious ceremonies in places "not designated for the activities of a cult" have become less frequent. From time to time the press writes about religions in a restrained and, at times, even conciliatory tone. The newspaper *Moscow News*, directed toward foreign readers as well as *Literaturnaya Gazeta*—the most liberal publication for the intelligentsia in the Soviet Union—have begun to publish articles which tend to partially rehabilitate the ecclesiastical life.

However, in my opinion, the democratization in the area of ecclesiastical life are merely cosmetic attempts to embellish the facade of ideology without changing anything of the essence. The democratization only weakened to a degree the external controls binding the Church; it did not undo them.

Analyzing *perestroika* as it relates to the religious movement we can state the following: The Church is not included in the organic process of the so-called democratization. Statements made by officials remain only statements. It is essential here to remember the unfulfilled promises which were made by the Chairman of the Council on Religious Affairs Kharchev to American Senator Richard Lugar that by November all prisoners of conscience in the Soviet Union would be freed without exception. In the last few months, however, only two were released from exile—T. Velikhova and E. Sannikora.

The Church hierarchy having already lived with a tremendous number of hard compromises seems to be fairly content with the present situation of the Church and does not want further freedom. Freedom will place a demand upon the Church to provide genuine ecclesiastical services and tell its people the truth. The Church is not ready for it and is afraid of it.

The address made by the Patriarch to the Synod on the eve of the 70th anniversary of the Revolution is significant. In this Brezhnev-type address the Soviet Period in the life of the Church was hypocritically referred to as the period of prosperity and freedom. As a measure of opposition towards religious activity the Conference of the heads of Churches and other religious associations, which took place at the Trinity- St. Sergius Monastery near Moscow on December 16, 1987, endorsed a communiqué to religious leaders and their congregations in which it states: "Spiritual uncertainties have been observed within Churches and religious associations... they tend to
exhibit nihilistic attitude towards the traditional direction of religious life and a type of peremptory
categorical criticism of religious leaders." And further: "They are attempting to oppose the Church
by trying to confer upon themselves the right to express the true interests of the believers." It
seems as if the hierarchy and the leaders of religious associations in answer to a growing religious
self-consciousness, are creating a kind of international organization of collaborators.

As before, only a small part of socially active laymen take part in the renewal of religious
life and in various manifestations of ecclesiastical freedom. The hierarchy and the intimidated
priesthood demand nothing. Even those priests who are dissatisfied with the situation in the
Church are keeping silent—it is difficult for them to come out of their state of fear and stagnation.

The changes in the life of religious communities are occurring not at the top but rather at
the bottom. Latent mature processes of spiritual renewal of the Church are spilling out into the
open. The movement of religious revival has entered the phase of new self-determination.

The processes of revival have encompassed virtually all Christian denominations. For
example, the Evangelical-Lutheran Church of Latvia has formed an action committee called
"Revival and Renewal" which includes 16 pastors. It called for changes in legislation. However,
leaders of this committee were dismissed from all service within the Church and teaching in the
Evangelical-Lutheran Seminary. Two of them were compelled to emigrate.

For the first time in its "catacomb-life" existence, the Ukrainian Catholic Church has
partly come out from the underground and demanded its legalization.

The Pentecostals have also activated their struggle for rights.

Campaigns have increased to promote the reopening of the houses of worship. The legal
defense activity has been reactivated and independent Christian publications have appeared. A
stream of letters reached M. Gorbachev suggesting various changes for the Church and the
believers. We see, therefore, a rather powerful unprecedented breakthrough being realized by the up-
to-now secretive and submerged world of the tormented spirit longing for acceptance and self-
determination. All of this comprises a unique chronicle of a stormy period in the Church's struggle
to gain those rights granted by the Lord Jesus Christ himself. The Bulletin of Christian
Community attempts to reflect this period in its publications.

We have approached a fateful time—a millennium of Russian Christianity. What does it
mean for us? Are we to lament the past greatness of the Church or are we about to enter a new
period of historically abundant religious flourishing in Russia?