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ON A ROLLER COASTER: RELIGION AND PERESTROIKA

by Paul Mojzes

On a recent trip to the Soviet Union the analogy which kept forcing itself upon me in regard to my experience of the impact of perestroika [a Russian word for restructuring; a word which connotes more fundamental change than reform but less than revolution] upon the churches was a roller coaster. I experienced ups and downs, often in quick succession. The turns were unexpected, with a somewhat jarring effect. The ride caused a sense of adventure and excitement but also anxiety as to the final outcome of the ride. It conveyed a sense of danger, that one may get derailed or fall out of the wagon. The analogy is not apt in regard to the speed by which the actual changes seem to take place; these are proceeding slowly.

The Extent of Perestroika

This was my sixth trip to the U.S.S.R. in a little over a decade and my first since Mikhail Gorbachev ascended to power. I looked forward eagerly to see the changes brought about by the processes which catapulted this charismatic statesman into leadership. Is this more hype for foreign consumption or are changes real? It did not take long to see that something has been taking place. Some changes are being effected, but the testimony of Soviets with whom I spoke shows that their impression is uneven as to the extent of these changes.

Some of them were clearly excited. They felt that perestroika is the most promising and extensive change in the Soviet Union since 1917—perhaps as monumental a change as that of the 1917 revolution. Others were clearly skeptical as to whether there is anything more than beautiful but empty promises. Some would merely shrug their shoulders as if saying "who knows?", when asked about the impact of the "New Thinking" (a phrase Gorbachev uses to indicate the need for creative approaches to Marxist "doctrinal" formulations) and new policies. Some days I thought that I was witnessing monumental changes which were fundamentally changing the destiny of the world's largest country; other days I was sad and concerned as I witnessed conditions of oppression and poverty with little change, if any, in evidence.

Often when one explores a situation intensely an increasing clarity is gained on how to interpret a situation. For me it was the opposite. I felt less sure about what was really going on toward the end of the trip than I was at the beginning. Another analogy came to mind as I tried to assess the entire situation. Perestroika strikes me like sunshine warming up an iceberg. One can feel the warmth in the air, one can see the ice melt, streams of water rushing down its slopes or evaporating in the air, cracks appearing on the surface, sometimes chunks of ice breaking off. But no one knows how long the sun will continue to shine.
how deep the iceberg is, or whether the cracks go deep into the
main body of the iceberg.

One thing is certain. It will take many years of continued
sunshine and drifting into warmer waters to melt the iceberg. It
will take 15-20 years for the substantive changes of perestroika
to take place in the U.S.S.R. Soviet society is in many ways
traditional and conservative because the forces which fear sudden
change are very strong. Perestroika is more a hope, an
aspiration, an inspiration at this point than it is a fundamental
change. But if it were to continue it might, indeed, result in
the fundamental change which is so greatly needed and hoped for
at least by the intelligentsia of the Soviet Union.

What has changed? Many things can be mentioned. There are
far fewer slogans, banners, and pictures of the leaders in public
and private places than before. People lace their conversation
with talk about the "New Thinking," perestroika, glasnost
[openness/publicity], demokratizatsiya, and zakonitost'[legality]. Some are genuine in their wish to implement these
concepts in social practice; others are doing what they have
done for decades, namely follow the leader. A more important sign
therefore is that there are now many who rather openly criticize
various conditions and stress that now they can admit to "the
errors of the past," though this is risky since no one is sure
where the limits of criticism and initiative may be. Perhaps not
even Gorbachev knows how far this can go without endangering the
system. Some individuals, for instance, say they favor the
withdrawal of Soviet forces from Afghanistan and say that it was
a great error to send them there in the first place. Many
criticize the stagnation of the Brezhnev and other previous eras.
Newspapers are starting to discuss some topics which were tabu
for decades. History is being reopened for a more honest
appraisal; some "non-persons" have been brought to recognition
again. Modern music and art are not only allowed but have made
their appearances in the media. Some of the artistic expressions
are critical of reality. Some admit that there are many homeless
and jobless people drifting in the countryside, having been
forcibly removed from the cities and they are treated harshly.
Disorientation, drug problems, and general morale problems among
the Afghanistan veterans are reported. (Americans and Soviets now
empathize with each other about the cost of great power
involvement in civil wars like Vietnam and Afghanistan.)

Other signs of change are that huge numbers of people of all
age groups are attending church services. Permissions have been
given to import and bring in limited quantities of religious
literature, like Bibles, Torahs, Qur'ans, etc. Some church
buildings have been re-opened or returned to congregations and a
few new ones were allowed to be built. Foreign citizens have been
invited to observe previously "off-limits" government sessions as
an illustration of glasnost. Perhaps most startling are the
admissions that Gorbachev encounters opposition both in the party
and the bureaucracy, to which one should add elements of the
armed forces and common citizens. These are but a few quickly
noticeable changes brought about by perestroika.

What has not changed? People still wait in line for food and other consumer goods. Consumer satisfaction is generally neglected. Living quarters are cramped. Very shabby housing and the ghetto-like appearance of certain quarters on the periphery of the cities continues (garbage, broken pavements, pot-holes, etc.–but no empty apartments, because of housing shortage). Many villages are impoverished. People lose their jobs for having taken unpopular stands, politically or religiously. One of the most substantial or even revolutionary changes which perestroika may bring is for the "private" or cooperative sector of the economy to start providing job opportunities for those who are fired from government sector jobs. Until now government has had a monopoly status as employer. People still publicly agree with the leadership and vote unanimously. There is still a thirst for literature, especially religious, which is not available in the USSR and the consequent willingness of large numbers of people to share a rare book or journal. Dissenters are aware and the general public that the KGB knows what is going on. And so forth.

Will perestroika last or will it be reversed by the generally acknowledged opposition? It is not within the scope of this essay to examine this issue, but from a conversation with a young woman journalist on that question, the answer came in the form of an Ukrainian proverb, "If they remove the ten who are holding up the banner, they will be replaced by hundreds." Surely, she thought, perestroika is a process which is of such fundamental interest for the people that if attempts were made to stop it, there would be another revolution, no less bloody than the October Revolution. I would like to believe her though I am cognizant of the powers of the modern state to revoke previously gained concessions, and enforce acquiescence.

Impact Upon Religious Institutions

First Impressions in Moscow

This essay focuses on the impact of perestroika upon the religious institutions, rather than the effects it has in general. Clearly there is a great spiritual revival going on in the Soviet Union, though it is not clear to what degree it is linked to the other social changes. It precedes Gorbachev's ascendancy to power, but it has probably been helped by the winds of change. One of its roots is pervasive disillusionment with the fruits of the communist rule. Few creative, authentic Marxist thinkers can be encountered in the Soviet Union, though there are plenty who use Marxism as an ideology, an apologia and prop upholding the regime. A young journalist for a youth newspaper shared her impression that young people have become apathetic and completely alienated by the system. They blame their elders for creating the current problems. For the first time in years there is now a spark of genuine interest in daily politics because they have an inkling that some changes may be possible and that
actions may bring results.

But many have found militant atheism a boring, bankrupt, unfulfilling approach. Hence people have started streaming to the churches, especially in the cities. In that respect the Soviet Union seems to be an exception to the general pattern that rural folk are more traditionally religious than the more secularized urban dwellers. Perhaps the explanation lies in the ruthless destruction of churches and lack of clerical leadership in Soviet villages which have lead to a spiritual wasteland among the peasantry. Among the urban population, including the intelligentsia, there is now a curiosity, perhaps a longing, and in many instances a deep commitment to religion which has caused a revival. In the past the churches were frequented mostly by “babushkas,” the grandmothers. These elderly women are still faithful in their attendance. But now crowding in with them are people of all age groups, most noticeably the young people of teen and student age. This increase in interest seems to affect all denominations. We have visited Orthodox, Catholic, Evangelical Christians-Baptist, Pentecostal, and Jewish services and it holds true for all of them. Muslims and Lutherans are experiencing similar influx. In one of the cities which I visited, Lviv (the Ukrainian name for the city; the Russians call it L'vov), it was remarkable to see streams of people converging upon churches each morning and to continue to find them crowded practically at all hours.

During the first few days of our stay in Moscow we visited the Evangelical Christian-Baptist Church, which is also the headquarters of the All-Union Council of that denomination. There we heard up-beat reports by two ministers, one of whom seemed less forthright than the other, as he claimed that he personally never experienced any government restrictions. More important was seeing the staff and a group of about 40-50 theological students-pastors from many parts of the USSR. They were there because the Protestants have not been allowed to have a theological seminary. But the Evangelical Christian-Baptists (a denomination which includes also Pentecostals and Mennonites) are allowed to hold a correspondence school which includes bi-annual weekly training sessions in the Moscow head-quarters. From one of the denominational leaders I heard that the Soviet government is now apparently willing to offer school facilities for a theological school, but it would have to be located either at some distance in the countryside of the Moscow region or in some other city. The church leadership does not want that because they feel that they could then not maintain both their denominational leadership and participate in the training of the new generations of pastors. The students and the staff had assembled for a half-hour morning worship service which was an inspiring sight. In crowded quarters they heard an inspiring sermon by Rev. Mikhail Zhidkov and sang beautiful hymns. This brief contact with some of the student-pastors yielded some important contacts for Lviv and Kiev.
Lviv: A City of Dynamic Religious Activity

Our stay of four days in Lviv revealed a city much more beautiful than Moscow (it is more central European in architecture and it has not been destroyed in the war), people were more friendly and more willing to engage us in conversations; in general life seemed more pleasant in Lviv than in other metropolises of the Soviet Union.

A meeting was arranged with Metropolitan Nikodim of the Russian Orthodox Church. This pleasant protocol affair was enhanced by the Metropolitan’s clever use of a nice figure of speech to indicate his concern for the future of perestroika. When the leader of our group metaphorically compared perestroika to the impending spring, with many trees beautifully blooming, the Metropolitan agreed that the metaphor was apt but said that sometimes even late in Spring there can be a sudden reversal of winter frost and that it is important to build many fires in the orchard to keep the blossoms from being killed by the frost. The art of speaking to those who want to hear is still very much alive in the Soviet Union! He also proudly showed pictures taken at a recent religious festival with thousands of people crowding around the adjacent cathedral, which we later had a chance to visit. It, like so many of the religious buildings of Lviv, was truly beautiful.

During the city tour we visited many other churches, Orthodox and Catholic. Since many in our group had brought Russian Bibles and other religious materials, we distributed them. People crowded around us, grateful for what was to them a most precious gift. I shall never forget an old woman in the Catholic Church to whom one of our ministers gave a paper bookmark in the form of a cross. With tears in her eyes she repeatedly kissed the cross on her way back to her pew. She was in heaven!

Lviv had another precious experience in store. It was a Sunday morning unannounced visit to the Pentecostal Church by eight of us from our group. On a small street on the outskirts of the city (Semafornaya No. 1) is the building housing the Dom molitvi [House of Prayer]. The two-hour service had just started and the building was so crowded that we were barely able to get in. Within minutes the word must have spread that some foreigners came because two of the deacons pushed their way through the crowd, welcomed us in a room under the chancel, and then we were ushered to sit on the podium with the minister, the deacons and the over 100 member choir. One of their members later estimated that 1300 people were present at the worship service, most of them members. The majority of them stood for the entire service crowding to the maximum the building which normally could seat about 500 people. Several emotion-packed sermons were delivered by deacons and the minister, Rev. Bogdan Mal’skiy. Choral and congregational hymns (the latter without the benefit of hymnals) were sung beautifully and forcefully. Tearful, emotional "pentecostal style" prayers with everyone simultaneously praying...
aloud took place. Many tears were shed as the preachers called
the people to repentance and assured them of salvation through
Christ. We, too, were asked to sing (they recognized "Amazing
Grace") and I delivered an impromptu sermon, which my rusty
Russian confined to unaccustomed brevity. After the service
people crowded around us, wishing us well and asking questions
(on the humorous side, one of the first questions was whether it
was true what they heard about Jimmy Swaggart; they had wondered
whether the Soviet media made up the story of the sex scandal).
Some of them drove us back to our hotel. Our driver was a young
man who told us that he was employed in the Dom kulturi where he
is able to maintain his job only because he does not reveal his
religious activities and beliefs. His father-in-law is a medical
doctor, who had been exiled to Kazakhstan due to his Pentecostal
beliefs. He allowed to return relatively recently and is allowed
to practice medicine in Lviv but with no hope of professional
advancement.

That afternoon one of the men I had noticed but not talked
to at the church came to the hotel and sought me out. It did not
take long for him to start complaining about the difficulties
which they are encountering as believers, mostly in terms of
harassment at their jobs and in schools. He was unwilling to
become specific until we left the hotel and went to walk in a
park. There he detailed the story of a Lviv Pentecostal man with
nine young children some of whom had been harassed by their
teachers. One incident culminated in a teacher spitting into the
child's face. This he would not endure. Since the Helsinki
accords had just been signed he felt that he has the right to
emigrate and requested the authorities for permission to do so.
He was ridiculed as they informed him that such agreements are
for foreign consumption only, and for good measure he was
arrested and sentenced to two years of hard labor for his
temerity. The family was left completely unprovided for. The
church, being forbidden to practice charity legally could help
only by individual believers going on the sly to help with food,
rent payment and other support which made it possible for the
family to survive until the father came out of prison. With a
prison record it is hard to find decent employment, so they are
still struggling. But, said this man, in nearby Ternopol' and in
Krivoy Rog it was worse. There some Pentecostals were gassed to
death by the KGB for requesting to emigrate!

Is it any better now, I asked. Well, yes, was the somewhat
hesitant answer. His children were not discriminated against or
pressured in school, though he found out that in the school
records, next to the children's names there was a note saying
that they were children of believers, as if to explain some
handicap. He also stated that initially after Stalin nearly
exterminated the churches, it was Khrushchev who allowed greater
freedom of religion and upon Khrushchev's fall things went back
to Stalinist oppressive practices which lasted until the ascent
of Gorbachev. His impressions are an interesting contrast to the
prevalent Western interpretation, sometimes also repeated by
Soviets, that Stalin had become more tolerant of the churches due to the needs of World War II and that Khrushchev then tightened the screws. There may be a bit of truth in both interpretations, depending on which period of Stalin's rule is being remembered. Those who remember some of Stalin's concessions during the war may see Khrushchev more negatively. But overall even Khrushchev's worst antireligious policies were far less devastating than Stalin's all-encompassing purges of the 1930s which nearly put a stop to all organized religion.

Another element came up in the conversation—the deep distrust by the constituencies of the top leadership of all churches, in this instance of the Evangelical Christian-Baptists Councils (both the All-Union Council in Moscow and the Ukranian Council in Kiev) into which the Pentecostals were forced to merge by the government in the manner of a shot-gun wedding. He pointed out that the Pentecostal leaders who were originally placed on the Council simply vanished. When some Pentecostals urged the Evangelical Christian-Baptists leadership to place other Pentecostals in the Council leadership, such people were intimidated and even imprisoned by the government. So much for the constitutional principle of separation of church and state. He felt that nearly all leaders of the denomination were KGB agents. It had been my own conviction that one or two of the leaders whom I met were, indeed, government agents and I tested out my impressions with him. He confirmed my impression and said they were the most flagrant cases, but his views were much more sweeping because he felt that they were all implicated. Similar accusations by members of other churches were made several times on this trip. My own judgment is that this is an exaggerated claim, which stems from the tremendous conflicts brought about within the churches by the harsh policies of the Soviet government in their attempts to break the back of the churches. The people who came into the leadership probably felt compelled to discipline recalcitrant members against whom the government raised complaints. From the perspective of the leadership cooperation with the government is the only means to preserve the institutional life of the church. But from the perspective of many believers the church leadership is experienced as an executor of government directives: hence they regard them as KGB agents. In my opinion the truth is that, indeed, religious leaders must of necessity work with the government and be approved by it. In the process of seeking the best interests of their religious institution they (and that is particularly true of the Orthodox, Protestant, and Muslim leaders) have been forced to make accommodations and compromises. But, as the Pentecostal friend conceded, it is the position of such church leaders which makes it possible for him and other average religious people to proceed currently with fewer serious obstructions. While continuing his distrust of the leaders, he nevertheless concluded that all of our evaluations here on earth are relative; each person will be answerable by God for their role. He felt that Gregoriy Vinns was a better leader.
One thing is clear. There is a tremendous feeling of hostility and mistrust by many common believers, particularly dissenters, of their church leaders. One notices that such hostility in turn is barely hidden by the church hierarchs, who perceive their critics as fanaticized hotheads who would jeopardize the existence of the institution. The legacy of the Stalinist approach to the churches is not only the physical annihilation of many religious buildings and the death of many church people. Perhaps a more lasting result is the sowing of discord, suspicion, and even hatred in the ranks of believers. I noticed some of the same negative dynamics in a later conversation in a synagogue. They were aware that the KGB sends spies to the services. Sometimes they know who they are; at other times they simply suspect, perhaps the wrong person. Recently, however, they and others don’t seem to be nearly as frightened by the KGB presence as they were in the past. People today do not let themselves be intimidated as much; this is reflected in their willingness to talk to foreigners and to be open about their identity. That we were being watched, that our telephone calls were monitored by the KGB, that our hotel rooms were bugged, and that the dissenters are under constant surveillance is simply taken for granted. This may be a bit of paranoia left from the former days, but it is obvious that the reign of terror has left deep scars on people’s consciousness, so that currently the existence of sporadic surveillance and terror suffices to keep most people in line.

Another interesting datum is that the Pentecostals in Lviv had about 70 members in the late 1960s most of whom met clandestinely in apartments for prayers, but that today there are two Pentecostal congregations with about 1500 members each. For many years the Lviv city council would not grant them the permission to build a church. Many trips were undertaken to Moscow to petition the Department of Church Affairs for the permit without success. Only in the 1980s after an appeal to the Presidium of the Supreme Soviet did they obtain a permit to build two churches. However, the city authorities decided to permit the building of only one church, and later demolished part of the building which exceeded their specifications. Hence two Pentecostal congregations share the same building each holding two two-hour services every Sunday and several services during the week. Due to perestroika just recently they got the permission to expand the building to the size which they originally built.

Kiev

Our Kiev hosts did not do any advanced planning on the theme "The Church and Perestroika." During the city tour we visited many of the famous churches. The most interesting to me personally was the Kievsko-Pecherskaya Lavra, the famous monastery of the caves, which is now a museum. Many years ago a well-placed Communist Party member confided to me his relief that
the initial intention to dynamite the monastery, one of the oldest cultural and religious monuments of the past, was not carried out at the last moment. It is puzzling to me why the government insists on keeping it as a museum rather than returning it to the Orthodox Church as it did the Danilov monastery in Moscow and Optina Pustyn. Would it be perhaps too potent a symbol of retreat from earlier policies? Would it boost the prestige of the religious community too much? There are now voices even in the Orthodox episcopate requesting the return of this most ancient Christian symbol of Kievian Rus'.

In Kiev we had the chance to visit the Ukrainian headquarters of the Evangelical Christians-Baptists which consists only of offices. There we had a conversation with the Rev. Yakiv Dukhonchenko, the Superintendent of the Ukrainian branch of the church. He reported improvements in the treatment of the churches and pointed to some recent articles by atheist journalists and scholars who wrote about the previous mistreatment of churches. He seems to feel that it is helpful to let non-believers denounce the restrictions which were unjustly placed over religious worship. Proudly he showed us pictures of a recently completed new church building in a Ukrainian village, as a sign of the improved atmosphere, which he credited to perestroika.

Moscow: Optimism and Pessimism

In Moscow a panel discussion was organized by the Soviet Peace Committee on "The Church and Perestroika" in which the focus was more on the latter than the former. Among the panelists were an Orthodox priest, a Jewish rabbi, an Evangelical Christian-Baptist clergyman, two representatives of the Institute for the Scientific Study of Atheism, a writer, a journalist, and a few others. Clearly they were all enthused about perestroika. An acquaintance of previous encounters, Dr. Andrei Melvil of the Institute for the U.S. and Canada, was positively lyrical in his assessment of the excitement and promise of perestroika. It was a good meeting, with the usual up-beat tone which characterized my previous encounters with the Soviet Peace Committee. Hence nothing startling came out except the good sign that, despite a very good rapport among panelists, on several occasions they strongly disagreed with one another.

The secular members of the panel affirmed the crucial role of religion in Soviet life but valued it primarily as a vehicle for the re-establishment of moral virtues and civic responsibility, which all present agreed was lacking in society. They stressed the instrumental ethical role of religion, for instance some of the Ten Commandments. They admitted that in the past only the negative elements of religion were dwelt upon. It is now clear that religion also has many socially desirable qualities, that these need to be formally acknowledged and that believers need to take a more equal place in society. Parenthetically it is worth noting that in the light of current
public admissions of repressive policies toward religion, those Soviets and Westerners who maintained there was full religious liberty in that society look quite foolish, if not dangerous. The price of not telling the truth because of the exigencies of a situation is that one is exposed as a liar when the exigencies of the situation change!

The religious members of the panel agreed with the assessment of the secular members though they seemed to say, "what took you so long to figure this out?" They stressed the inherent spiritual need of human beings which only religion can satisfy. Yuriy Koryenevich, a rabbi of the Moscow Choral Synagogue answered my question whether there is anti-Semitism in the Soviet Union, by saying that this is, indeed, pervasively the case, but maintained that it was not now nor was it previously a matter of government policy, but rather a deeply ingrained feature of everyday life. From later conversations with some other Jews it would seem that he let the government off the hook a bit too easily.

The "Trust" Peace Group

Little did we know that this formal occasion, which painted a very positive, optimistic picture of the impact of perestroika on religious life, would open an opportunity for a series of informal contacts which would complete the picture by adding some pessimistic shades. A young person handed us a telephone number of the Independent Peace Group "Trust." Some of us pursued this unscheduled opportunity, which led to meetings with some remarkable personalities, a few of whom are well known through Western press reports.

First we met with "Trust" leaders, Andrei and Irina Krivov, and a number of other young people (the oldest is barely over 30) who are either members of the group or of allied groups. Recently there have sprouted all over Moscow and to a lesser degree in some of the other Soviet cities small groups with various foci (estimated combined membership in Moscow of about 2,000, but rapidly growing) which act independently of any government association and are therefore harassed in various ways by the government. Some of these groups are non-religious (though members of the group may be religious); others have an explicitly religious orientation. The Krivovs and their group publish a samizdat, "Doveriye" [Trust], frequently demonstrate for various, generally unpopular causes (e.g. alternatives to military service and the right to demonstrate) including criticism of the militaristic behavior of the Soviet Union, and generally seek to encourage East-West people-to-people peace encounters. They are deeply distrustful of the Soviet Peace Committee, which they regard as a propaganda tool for the Soviet government rather than a genuine promoter of peace. The Soviet Peace Committee reciprocates by considering them a lunatic trouble group manipulated by the CIA. Again one saw pictures in black and white with no shades of gray!
One of those present, Andrei Mironov, had been in prison and provided, somewhat reluctantly, accounts of imprisonment and KGB tactics both in and out of prison, including pre-trial attempts at strangulation, false witnesses, and "kartser" [punitive cells]. The Soviet penal system provides for three types of incarceration: group confinement, solitary confinement, and punitive confinement. This young man, who was accused under the infamous paragraph 70 of "anti-Soviet propaganda and agitation," and who calls himself a "prisoner of perestroika" because he was arrested and sentenced to four years of hard labor after Gorbachev's rise to power, told of several instances in which he was in the punitive cell for periods of 5, 10 and 25 days. These cells are shaped like a grave (about 2 feet wide and 6 feet long) made of cement, half submerged under ground and in the winter its walls are covered with ice. The prisoner has only shoes, pants, and a shirt and is fed only every second day a single ration of bread soup. Due to intense cold sometimes the prisoners shakes so much that they spill the food before succeeding to eat. Often they pass out from cold and hunger. Some prisoners are actually tortured, e.g. their arms are broken (e.g. Sergei Grigoryants, a well-known dissenter). This had not been the case with this young man. He maintained that in his case most of the physical abuse was not by prison guards but by criminal prisoners who were placed in control of the political prisoners.

According to the estimates of all those we talked to there are still about 200 political and religious prisoners in the Soviet Union, some of whom were imprisoned in the early years of perestroika, such as Vladimir Rusak, Vasily Shepilov, Alfonsas Svarinskas and Segitas Tamkiavicius. This young man was a victim of the perestroika times but, fortunately, he was also its beneficiary because he was released after a year and a half. However, he kept saying that many had suffered much more than he and that the world must not give up on the 200 or so who are in prison. One of the interesting features of his narration of the horrible fate which befell him is that he talked about it seemingly without emotions. He is currently without a job and without a permit to live in Moscow. He is thus forced to move from friend to friend.

The Krivovs, who have not been imprisoned, nevertheless pay dearly for expressing their convictions. Both trained as history teachers, they are unable to practice their profession. Irina finally got a job shoveling snow, but lost it because of her continued peace activities. Upon inquiry as to how will they support themselves with two small daughters, they said they do typing or sewing or other odd jobs, and assured us that they would be happy if no worse consequences than these befell them.

Ogorodnikov and "The Bulletin of the Christian Community"

Another important encounter was the visit to Alexandr Ogorodnikov, a young Orthodox layman, publisher of the samizdat, Byulleten' Hristianskoy Obshchestvennosti' [The Bulletin of the
Christian Community]. There we also met two young Russian Orthodox monks from the Pskov diocese, one of whom was expelled from the monastery by his bishop presumably for his too great earnestness in promoting religion. During our conversations three laymen, members of the illegal Ukrainian Catholic Church arrived. Many religious dissidents from around the Soviet Union gather around Alexander Ogorodnikov because of his principled and courageous defense of everyone's religious liberties. In the semizdat which he and a circle of his friends publish now on a monthly basis, consisting of about 200 single spaced typed pages in each issue, he documents grievances and the general position of the churches and presents letters to authorities. The church leaders do not complain about or even acknowledge some of the problems which are itemized in the Bulletin Christian Community.

For his efforts he was imprisoned eight-and-a-half years (first to four years, then, without being released and on the same charges, twice again to four years. Half a year into the last sentence clemency was given. What infuriates him and many of the formerly imprisoned is that they are given pardon as if the sentences were deserved rather than the government admitting that those were miscarriages of justice. Religious activities are not part of the formal charges against people like Ogorodnikov. Other "crimes" are concocted. Ogorodnikov was accused of "parasitism," namely not being employed by the state.

Ogorodnikov explained that the prison authorities use three weapons to break down the prisoners: cold, hunger, and time. Above all they try to break down the sense of humanity and Christian principles in their religious prisoners. For instance, no prisoner is allowed to share clothing or food with other inmates who are in greater need. Once he was in a punitive cell with another prisoner for insisting to be allowed to have a Bible. The two of them were fed on alternate days. One day when Ogorodnikov received his food he offered to share it with his fellow inmate who was very starved. When the guard noticed it he spilled the food so that neither of them could eat. If one prisoner has a warmer coat and offers it to another to cover himself temporarily, the coat is taken away from both prisoners. This is to instill a sense of selfishness which is contrary to the religious conviction of the prisoner. Ogorodnikov maintains that psychologically such practices are more oppressive than practiced during Stalin's times, because all human aspirations and compassion are being squelched.

The three Ukrainian Catholics (Uniates) reported that in August 1987 two bishops and 20 priests emerged from the underground. They and over 300 believers are seeking legal status. The government, which fears Ukrainian nationalism, does not want to let this happen. The three of them came to Moscow to see how this may be accomplished and had also come to seek help from the mainly Orthodox Bulletin of the Christian Community, a sign of grass-roots ecumenical cooperation.

It is obvious that there is a lot of risk in publishing this
samizdat. It involves constant KGB surveillance, time-consuming re-typing because no technology, such as photocopiers, is legally permitted. Yet the 100 copies which are printed evoke enormous interest and are read by large numbers of people. The group around Ogorodnikov also organizes Christian seminars because people have been deprived of religious literature for so long that it is important to give them a sense of their tradition. Active members of the seminar used to be arrested. Ogorodnikov was wondering how long Gorbachev's "pause" would last before new human and religious rights violations would occur. Clearly the kind of activity which he and his friends pursue is fraught with immense danger unless a great deal more legality and freedom of speech are implemented. Actually it is freedom of speech and expression more than freedom of religion or freedom of conscience which is at stake. Surely a person's religious conscience can hardly be taken away, but the person's right to express it, especially in spoken and written word, can be fairly easily denied. The dissidents are now claiming this right. Most of them are "intellectuals."

But intellectuals are not the only people who are courageously asserting their rights in the face of the still widespread persecutions. Ogorodnikov cited two recent cases in Ukrainian villages. A priest held services in a village near Lviv where the church has been closed by the authorities. He celebrated the liturgy without formal permission despite the steep fines imposed for each violation. In a month and a half he was fined 1,000 rubles, which is about 5 months worth of an average salary. Since the fines did not stop him, charges were fabricated against him. During last Christmas the villagers reopened the church. Then the members of the local atheist organization entered the church, tried to stop the service and ripped the priest's robe off. The believers chased the atheists out, whereupon the latter called the police, who imprisoned one young believer. In response the villagers rebelled and carried out a three-day work stoppage.

Another case took place recently in the village of Galin in the Ivano-Frankovsk region [spelling approximate]. There the villagers repaired the church, but the local authorities decided to turn the church into a museum of farming. The believers did not want to give up the church, so the authorities decided to tear it down. Bulldozers were brought at night, but one believer noticed these preparations and rang the church bells. All the believers gathered around the church and laid down in front of the bulldozers. The drivers refused to crush the people. Later army units were stationed nearby with the intent to destroy the church with tanks but the villagers dug anti-tank trenches and posted a watch at all times. Day and night ten people guard the church and thus far have prevented it from being destroyed. Ironically the local atheist party activists boasted in the press that they had successfully eliminated religion in the village and offered to give tips to other party organizations on how to do it effectively.
Ogorodnikov claims that the two greatest needs at the onset of the second millennium of the Russian Orthodox Church are freedom of speech and the right to form the educational infrastructure of the church and a viable religious culture, so that religion is not treated merely as a museum piece but be included in the general life of the country. Freedom of religion should mean more than the right to worship in a few specially designated places.

One of the monks, spoke of the sharp polarization between atheists and believers. He felt that authorities are trying to create a false image of the revival of Russian Orthodox Church life in the year of the Millennium. He said that it was true that more people attend church services in large cities and places of pilgrimage like the Trinity-St. Sergius Monastery at Zagorsk. In the villages there is a degradation of spiritual life. Villagers have ceased to have spiritual questions because village life does not prepare them for an inquiring mind. If younger people appear in a church they are persecuted in the school, while for older youth the police and the KGB, and even military authorities may be called in. Those who disobey are beaten or taken to insane asylums. This independently confirmed conversations from previous days where it was pointed out that dissidents are dealt with harshly at insane asylums or in the army and that the beatings in the army are so severe that they lead to injury and death.

Fr. Gleb Yakunin

The third significant visit was with the well-known Russian Orthodox priest-human rights activist, Fr. Gleb Yakunin, who was on a visit to Moscow. The meeting took place in the apartment of an Orthodox religious activist at which several other activists were present including Zoya Krahmalnikova, the editor of the samizdat "Nadezhda." After having been disciplined by the church authorities and then imprisoned in Siberia for his outspoken defense of the rights of believers and his criticism of the hierarchy Yakunin was recently appointed as the assistant priest [seemingly a somewhat superfluous position] in a small village church in the Moscow region in a village which is off limits to foreigners. His analysis of the impact of perestroika upon the churches was very balanced and forcefully enunciated.

Yakunin feels that real changes in the relation between church and state began about a year ago. However, many believers still do not experience anything but minor changes and suspect that there is no real perestroika in regard to church life but only concessions during the millennial celebration when the eyes of the world will be upon the Soviet Union. According to Yakunin, Gorbachev seems personally to be patient and sometimes even warm toward the churches (it is rumored that his mother is religious, but this does not mean much). Gorbachev wants to use religion to improve the moral condition of the country. The Soviet Union is, according to Yakunin, in a deep moral crisis with an increase in
prostitution and economic problems because people work so poorly; large masses of people simply do not care. Christians tend to be better workers due to their belief that what is done should be done well. Thus the church may help stabilize the moral atmosphere. The masses no longer believe in Marxist theory. Gorbachev seems to be sincere in the shift of attitude from negative to tolerant, but there are many conservatives in the bureaucracy who do not approve and oppose the current changes.

Three government sections deal with the churches: 1. the Council for Religious Affairs, 2. local government executive offices, and 3. the section for church affairs in the KGB. Most of the officials in these three departments have been around for a long time and they do not wish to change, but sometimes there are conflicts between these three departments about which even the Soviet papers have reported. Future government control of the churches will depend on the future of perestroika.

Fr. Yakunin noted a cyclic pattern in the past. Religious activities expand during eras of liberalization. Then an anti-religious reaction sets in after the work of the church expands. However, it takes many years for the gains by the churches to be gradually revoked. Therefore, moments of opportunity for expanding liberties must be seized upon or else no real gains will be made. No one knows when the next repression will set in. Fr. Yakunin’s great concern is that the Patriarch and most of the hierarchy are not using the current moment of opportunity. Patriarch Pimen’s health deprives the Russian Orthodox Church of much needed vigorous leadership; hence Yakunin’s appeal to the nearly incapacitated Patriarch to step down voluntarily and allow for the election of a new patriarch who could more vigorously demand increasing rights for the church. Fr. Yakunin and others are upset that Communist officials of the Council for Religious Affairs and some journalists have been more forthright about past restrictions and have suggested more rights for believers than the hierarchy has. However, Fr. Yakunin himself refrained from judging the hierarchy because of his priestly vows.

Zoya Krahmalnikova felt no such constraints. She vigorously criticized the hierarchy of the Russian Orthodox Church for having become so docile. She recalled her embarrassment when, during her imprisonment for religious activities, a Pentecostal co-prisoner asked her why she belongs to a church where the priests are communists. According to Krahmalnikova, the priests follow the will of the government and not the will of God or the interest of the church. This represents the modern degradation and misery of the church and society. The hierarchs are seen on TV getting government medals and maintain, like the government, that there are no religious persecutions. She was bitter that her KGB interrogator represented the same position (and lie) as the patriarch. She was particularly pained that the interrogator sarcastically brought up Billy Graham’s statement that there is religious liberty in the USSR.

The last statement brought a sudden outburst of moral indignation by all the Russian church activists in the room. They
were critical about the willingness of some Western church leaders to be duped or to acquiesce to the official propaganda about religious freedom. Yakunin in particular wondered about what he called a dubious "ecumenical protocol" which endures claims by visiting church leaders from the Soviet Union that there are no religious persecutions in the USSR without disagreement by Western church leaders who are their hosts. They regard this as an outrage, because these statements are then used by Soviet propaganda in order to give the impression to Soviet citizens that no one cares abroad as to the real situation in the USSR. Their ire was particularly directed at Billy Graham; some said he is the enemy of religion in the Soviet Union!

To the question as to what would happen if real religious freedom were to be granted, Yakunin felt that the prophecy of Medjugorje [the apparitions of the Holy Virgin to Catholic children in a village in Herzegovina, Yugoslavia] that Russia will again become the most religious country in the world, would come true. Likely the Russian Orthodox Church would break up into several churches [like it has in emigration]. A great religious renaissance would take place, because the heart and the soul of the people is ready for Christianity (and other religions). The consensus of the Russians in the room was that Christianity today has an enormous power and a golden opportunity to make a major impact in the life of their nation and the world.

On Taking Religious Literature to the U.S.S.R.

The conversation and the entire experience of this trip also changed my mind about the value of taking Holy Scriptures in the languages of the nationalities of the Soviet Union and other religious literature even when one has no specially designated person to whom to deliver it. I used to have reservations about its effectiveness. After seeing the immense joy of those receiving religious literature and after many, even Communist intellectuals, have asked whether we can give them a Bible for they have never seen one, I feel that it is desirable for interested visitors to take such items as gifts. Such literature always eventually finds its way to those who want to read it, even if it should be confiscated at the customs (they are not shredded but rather sold on the "black market") or left in some public place like a telephone booth or railway station. Better yet is to take it to a church. Soviet regulations on imports and customs regulations regarding religious items have been considerably relaxed, at least during the Millennium year.1

1 These liberalized rules have been published in Izvestiya (Moscow), No. 85, March 25, 1988, evening edition, p. 6, "Razreshena peresylka predmetov religioznogo kul’ta, a tak zhe bibliii, korana, i t.d." [Permission to send objects of religious worship and also of Bibles, Qur’ans, etc."]. Presumably up to three Holy Scriptures may be received or imported by a person at
These opportunities should be used both to mail and to take in Holy Scriptures.

Large quantities of Bibles have been legally imported in the U.S.S.R. However, their number does not suffice. Individual Evangelical Christians-Baptist congregations have received only about five copies each. *Barclay's Bible Commentary* has been translated into Russian and is promising to be of great value for the religious leadership.

It would be wise for religious leaders to start preparing for the day when religious instruction will be permitted in the Soviet Union. Currently none of the religious institutions have suitable materials for religious education. It would be a great ecumenical service to the religious communities to assist them in a field where we have much experience. One of the requests was that the Radio America and other religious broadcasts to the Soviet Union transmit programs suitable for religious education. As video cassettes and similar technology becomes increasingly available in the U.S.S.R. it is desirable to prepare such materials for future use by the religious institutions of that country. Here is a challenge to our ingenuity.

**Conclusion**

It is difficult if not impossible to impose theoretical clarity upon the current situation in the Soviet Union. Many who will undertake to visit the Soviet Union during the Millennium Celebration of the Baptism of Kievan Rus' (some use the misnomer "pilgrimage" for such trips) will come back, undoubtedly, with glowing reports of the historical festivities and the dynamic growth of religion in the Soviet Union. Others will continue to focus exclusively on the suffering of the "catacomb church," the Jewish "refusniks," and the many instances of oppression still evident there.

As I see it real changes are taking place, but not nearly as thoroughgoing and fast as many of us would wish. The conditions in the Soviet Union favor a slow implementation of perestroika at grassroots levels. Fortunately the Soviet people have learned patience.

For those who know the fear of the Soviet Communist leadership publicly to recognize errors in the "scientific materialist approach" of the "leading country of socialism" it is truly a sign of real change when Gorbachev in a meeting with Patriarch Pimen publicly admitted that the Soviet government has made mistakes in its policies and treatment of the churches or when history exams are cancelled throughout the country because of the intolerable lies in the text-books. The question is whether Fr. Gleb Yakunin's analysis of the periodic return to repression will assert itself and the religious institutions and

one time. Customs control is irregular, varying from detailed scrutiny to no examination of one's luggage.

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believers will lose the few concessions which were made to them recently. Or will the Soviet Union will continue to move toward a society in which the government becomes a government of laws, reflecting the real rather than the imaginary will of the people, and protecting the liberties even of the pesky minority, not to speak of the sizable religious segment of the population.

It should not be surprising if religious liberties do not keep the pace with other relaxations brought about by perestroika. In fact, the contrary would be a miracle. As Gorbachev and his supporters tackle their opposition it is quite possible that a concession to the hard-liners might be a more strict and dogmatic position toward religion. This is one of the least costly concessions. The religious groups do not have a strong enough social base to make such a trade-off costly. Putting renewed strictures upon the church would be like throwing some pieces of meat to mislead the mad dogs.

Perestroika is not an event but a process. It may be sped up or slowed down, even partially reversed, but not erased. The truth and the promises have been glimpsed by too many people, for the country to move back to a Stalinist or Brezhnevite position. The eyes of all who are concerned whether they live in the Soviet Union or outside, will be anxiously set on these developments. Those of us on the outside must be more than observers. One of the reasons for our interest is that we are all part of the global community. What happens in any country, particularly to a giant one, happens to all of us. We must be one another’s keepers.