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SOVIET RUSSIA AND RELIGION

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**by
CORLISS LAMONT**

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SOVIET RUSSIA AND RELIGION

By CORLISS LAMONT

WHAT is happening to religion in Soviet Russia? What proportion of the people still go to church there? How many of them actually are atheists? Is there religious persecution under the Communist regime? What has become of the minor faiths in Russia such as Judaism, Mohammedanism, and the various forms of Protestantism? How is the anti-religious movement in the U.S.S.R. related to the collectivization and mechanization of agriculture? Exactly why are the Communists opposed to religion? What will be the future of religion in the Soviet Union? These and numerous other questions about religion are constantly cropping up in the widespread discussion that goes on everywhere these days concerning the Soviet Union. And in this pamphlet I shall try to answer such questions as briefly and clearly as possible.

In order to understand the religious situation in Soviet Russia today it is first necessary to have some knowledge of conditions before the proletarian Revolution in the fall of 1917. It is essential to realize in the first place that the Greek Orthodox Church was the official State Church of Russia, working hand in hand generation after generation with the cruel Tsarist tyranny and a knowing accomplice with it in the most constant and brutal injustices. The Tsar himself was head of this Church, which received huge subsidies from the State and was in reality simply a Department of the Government. Naturally it enjoyed all sorts of privileges denied to the other religious groups, whether Christian like the Roman Catholics or non-Christian like the Jews.

These minor sects were, in fact, continually subject to discrimination and persecution. Especially was this true in reference to the Jews. Time and again Greek Orthodox priests helped Government officials to instigate and even carry through the bloodiest kinds of pogroms against the Jews. In the fall of 1905, for example, over one hundred pogroms occurred in different parts of Russia resulting in 3,500 killed and 10,000 wounded. These took place with either the open or tacit approval of the Orthodox Church. The Orthodox priests, furthermore, cooperated with the

secret service of the Tsar and faithfully reported the names of those carrying on revolutionary or even liberal propaganda in their parishes. A number of priests went so far as to betray the confessional for purposes of espionage. And the Church could boast that it had brought about the imprisonment, exile, or death of thousands upon thousands of liberal or radical intellectuals and workers.

Backwardness of the Russian Church

In almost every respect the Greek Orthodox Church was intellectually inferior to the Catholic and Protestant Churches of the West. As Professor Julius Hecker puts it, the ascetic outlook on life of the Orthodox Church "was directed not merely toward the mortification of the flesh, but equally toward the mortification of the mind." In Russia before 1917 there never took place, as in western Christianity, a Reformation and successful bourgeois Revolution to give the Church a push in the direction of modernity. Any attempts to develop a liberal wing within the Church were promptly and harshly suppressed by the State-controlled Holy Synod, the governing body of the Church. Non-conforming prelates were frequently imprisoned in frigid Solovetsky Monastery on an island in the White Sea. While individual priests here and there showed sympathy towards the downtrodden workers and peasants, there existed no considerable element in the Church, as in many other Christian countries, which would support social and economic reform. The clergy of the Russian church were on the whole ignorant, superstitious, and—in their social and economic views—highly reactionary.

The Greek Orthodox Church was also decidedly inferior morally to its western counterparts. And it is generally admitted that in 1917 it had become as corrupt and decadent as the Tsarist Government itself. The crowning scandal occurred with the rise to power and influence of the monk Rasputin at the court of Tsar Nicholas. This licentious, drunken, and half-illiterate peasant attained a tremendous hold over the superstitious Tsarina through his forceful personality, his quality of hypnotic animal magnetism, and his supposed assistance in improving the health of her son. As spiritual adviser to the Empress no favour or

position which he asked for himself or his friends was refused. High officials in both Church and Government were dismissed at his bidding and mere charlatans appointed in their place. For a time he became in effect the dictator of the Greek Orthodox Church. Finally, the shame of it all became so widely and so deeply felt that Rasputin was murdered by certain members of the nobility and of the Imperial family. But the reputation of the Church had suffered a crushing and permanent blow.

There were good economic reasons for the Greek Orthodox Church to support with its full strength the Tsarist regime. Up till 1917 it was the wealthiest single organization in all of Russia, exploiting thousands upon thousands of peasants on its immense estates and owning great blocks of the most profitable stocks and bonds. At the time of the Revolution the bank account of the Church amounted to about eight billion rubles and its annual income to about half a billion. In addition, there was the tremendous capital value of its twenty million acres of land, its churches, its monasteries, and the gorgeous gold and silver decorations of these religious edifices. All of these assets were being continually augmented by the very substantial financial grants from the Government. In short, the Church itself was a great feudal-capitalist institution in the old Russia with its fundamental economic interests everywhere intertwined with and dependent upon the continuance of the Tsarist system.

The Church Supports Counter-Revolution

It was only natural, then, that the Greek Orthodox Church, both before and after the Revolution, should have fought the Communists and other radical groups with all the means at its disposal. Following the Bolshevik seizure of power in the autumn of 1917 the Church became a rallying center for the foes of the new regime. In the Civil War that ensued it supported with its full strength the White forces of counter-revolution. Priests helped to organize special *Jesus* and *Virgin Mary* regiments among the Whites. The head of the Church, the patriarch Tikhon, declared the Soviets anathema. A high Church official, the Metropolitan Antoni, issued the following characteristic curse against the Communists: "By the power given me of God, I bless every

weapon raised against the red, satanic power and remit the sins of him who lays down his head for the cause of Russia and Christ whether in the ranks of bands of rebels or as solitary avengers of the nation."

Such general incitations to murderous violence and to assassination were only too frequently carried out. And the attitude of the Church during the terrible days of the Civil War and for many years afterward shows clearly enough why priests and other religious persons were frequently punished, and sometimes even shot, for counter-revolutionary activity against the Soviet regime. But in such cases they were treated exactly the same as others committing the same offence. After a special investigation a few years ago, Sir Esmond Ovey, former British ambassador to the Soviet Union, reported: "There is no religious persecution in Russia and no case has been discovered of a priest or any one else being punished for the practice of religion." This, then, is the point: that priests and others have been punished, but *not* for the practice of religion.

Ever since the Revolution it has been the official policy of the Soviet Government and the Communist Party to oppose religion in the U.S.S.R. through education and economic reconstruction, not through force and persecution. This is not to imply that in the early days of the new regime local excesses of one kind or another were not committed in many parts of the country against the hated Church authorities. But such occurrences were inevitable in the first stages of such a far-reaching overturn and ceased as soon as the Government was able to set up stable control throughout the land. In the agreement between President Roosevelt and Foreign Minister Litvinov at the time of American recognition of the Soviet Government in 1933, provisions were included guaranteeing religious freedom to American citizens in Russia. This was an entirely superfluous stipulation, since Soviet law already provided religious freedom for every one within the country's borders.

The Soviet Laws on Religion

In the Soviet decree of 1918 "On Freedom of Conscience and Religious Societies" the following sections are important to note:

"The Church is separated from the State.

"No local laws or regulations may be issued, throughout the territory of the Republic, which limit or hinder freedom of conscience, or grant any privileges or advantages on account of adherence to a religious creed.

"Every citizen is at liberty to practise any religion or none at all. All penalties attaching to the practice of any creed whatsoever, or to the non-practising of any creed, are abolished.

"The School is separated from the Church. Instruction in religion in all State and public schools, and also private educational institutions in which general subjects are taught, is prohibited. Citizens may privately instruct and be instructed in religion."

Thus, while there is complete freedom of conscience and worship in the Soviet Union, the Church no longer receives any financial support from the Government. Equally important is the fact that it must confine itself to strictly religious activities. It is not permitted to organize charitable associations, hospitals, handiwork circles, or propaganda outside of the Church itself. Though parents can teach what they choose about religion to their children at home, religious instruction is not allowed in the public schools. Such instruction is legal, however, in special religious schools for persons over eighteen years of age. Religious rites are permitted for births, marriages, and burials at the home, the church, or the cemetery, according to the desires of the family concerned. What these various regulations mean is that the religious function in Russia has been separated from other functions and is being made to stand on its own feet. The Russian churches are open for worship, prayer, and meditation; the priests are chanting and swinging incense; the Orthodox choruses, famed the world over, are singing as of old. Now it remains to be seen to what extent pure religion, unconnected with other community activities, can maintain a clientele.

Today, of course, no church in Soviet Russia owns any land or building. This is not due to discrimination against religion, but to the fact that practically all private property has become the possession of the people as a whole. It simply means that the property of the Church—like that of industrial corporations, banks, large land-holders, and the like—has been nationalized. During the terrible famine of 1921-22 the Soviet Government

took over for the famine fund the surplus articles of gold, silver, and precious stones which the individual churches did not need for the practice of their cult. This humanitarian measure stirred up bitter opposition within the Church, though a large section of the clergy supported the step. In regard to places of worship, a special concession has been made to the Church by granting these buildings to their congregations free of rent, though subject to the payment of ordinary taxes. Since, however, the Church now possesses no revenue-producing property and receives no State subsidies, the salaries of the priests and all other expenses must be provided for by the contributions of the faithful, as in America.

All Religions Now Equal

In Tsarist Russia only members of the Greek Orthodox Church enjoyed complete religious freedom. Today *all* religions in the U.S.S.R. are on an absolutely equal basis. Furthermore, whereas in the old days, atheists were unmercifully hounded, now there is freedom of conscience for both believers and unbelievers. In other words, though the religious-minded Government of the Tsar made a point of persecuting anti-religious individuals, the atheist-minded Government of the Soviet makes a point of *not* persecuting religious individuals. At the same time it is true that the Soviet regime has not hesitated to use its influence against harmful and backward religious customs left untouched by the Tsar. Thus it has abolished by law the practice of polygamy and bigamy among the Mohammedans and has encouraged the Moslem women to cast off the veil, symbol of their former bondage and degradation.

In general the anti-religious campaign in the U.S.S.R. has been carried on with far more forbearance than hostile and exaggerated reports in the foreign press would indicate. Ordinary common sense and political strategy have been guiding factors in this matter, since the Communists obviously have not wished to give unnecessary offence to backward elements in the population. At its thirteenth Congress the Soviet Communist Party declared: "Special care must be taken not to offend the religious sentiments of the believers, which can only be overcome by years and decades of systematic educational work. This last point is to be

