

Documents

1. *Buddhism Worries Soviet Teachers*

Buddhism is still alive in the Buryat Autonomous Republic. The teachers' newspaper, Uchitelskaya Gazeta, contained the following article which describes the Ivolga monastery, one of the two re-established at the end of the war. Situated near the capital of Buryatia, Ulan-Ude, this monastery – the spiritual centre of Soviet Buddhism and seat of the chief Lama – attracts crowds of Buddhists on festivals and continues to exert an influence on the minds of children.

AROUND THE TEMPLE

by V. Galkina (*Uchitelskaya Gazeta*, 12 Dec., 1972)

The busy Ulan-Ude to Kyakhta highroad. Crowds of hurrying pedestrians in the village streets. Hillocks along the roadside. Everything normal. Suddenly, beyond the snow-covered road, some curious looking buildings, glittering in all the colours of the rainbow. Can it be some sort of mirage? No, it is a Buddhist Temple – a Datsan. You push open the gate and find yourself in another century, in another world. Carved pagodas with marvellously curved steep-sided roofs, strange sculptured animals, the white structures of chapels, resembling miniature Indian temples. Silence. The only sound is the tinkling of the bells under the roofs of the pagodas, caused by the wind, and a strange scraping sound.

We move closer. An elderly woman is turning the handle of a “holy” prayer wheel decorated with Tibetan hieroglyphics. A full circle has been made, and a bell rings. That means the prayer has been registered and the sin forgiven. Then her companion, a young girl aged about ten, moves up to the prayer wheel. She has a lively, smiling face, and she turns it as though it were some sort of game. She looks admiringly at the chapels, decorated with the Buddhist and national Buryat ornamentation. She is obviously attracted by their artistry. . . . Then mother and daughter move on to one of the buildings, where the daily service is taking place. One can hear the monotonous mumbling of the priest – the Lama.

We leave the temple with this pair. The mother is a woman aged about 40, with dull, sightless eyes, and the girl's face reflects her vague passing thoughts.

In the temple there remain a few believers. Today is just an ordinary day. When however a religious festival occurs, a crowd pours through the wide open central gates. Overcrowded buses arrive in Ivolga, and some people come on foot from Ulan-Ude. By no means all the visitors are believers. Many are just attracted by curiosity. Buddhism, in contrast to the militant religions, absorbs into itself religions which have preceded it and makes use, for its own purposes, of national traditions and customs. . . . A Buddhist festival is a bright, unusual kind of performance. Why not take a look at it? In the festival crowd, there are not only adults, but also children – some from other districts and local children of believers and unbelievers. Children . . .

Right next to the temple there is the small village of Upper Ivolga. Here there

is a small primary school. The headmistress, Dasha Sampilovna Pamaeva admits that the children visit the temple. She says regretfully: "We tell them not to, but how can you keep an eye on all of them?"

How do the children react to the things they see in the Buddhist temple? The teachers cannot give any definite answer. Teacher Nadezhda Alexandrovna Khantarinova, says: "Of course, we ourselves do not go there. Just imagine what they would say about us."

The temple is a bad thing. It is "taboo". Anti-religious propaganda here does not go beyond that. In essence, the teachers have closed their eyes to the problem, and refuse to appreciate all its complexities. But at the same time, in Upper Ivolga, the children are exposed to particularly strong religious influence. There are many believers in the village, and in addition to that, at festival times, many visitors from all parts of the Republic stay there. Talk on religious subjects, ceremonies and prayers all take place in the presence of the children. In such circumstances, the school must not adopt an attitude of indifference.

A few kilometres away from the temple there is the large village of Ivolginsk. Here atheist educational work is carried out. There are atheist lessons, chemical lectures exposing religious miracles, talks. But, alas, all this fails to take into account local peculiarities. Headmistress Valentina Ivanovna Tsyrenova frankly admits that the teachers do not know the essentials of Buddhism, the ways in which it exerts its influence, and have only a very vague idea about the harm that it does.

"There was one specialist who used to give us lectures; but he no longer works here." This specialist was the director of the Lower Ivolga Eight-Year School, Viktor Garmayevich Balzhyev. He had really been interested in questions of Buddhism over a period of many years. He wrote a pamphlet on the subject of the atheist education of children, on the basis of information which he himself had collected. He was a post-graduate thanks to correspondence courses, and was preparing a dissertation on this subject. Now he has dropped the subject and changed the line of his scientific work. Why?

Some years ago he undertook an investigation into the extent of religious feeling among the population and the effectiveness of the influence of Buddhism on the growing generation. He watched children at the times of religious festivals, organized enquiries, and discussed atheist subjects with the parents. But soon he felt that something was wrong. Some of the parents broke off all contact with him. His sincere desire to eliminate religious prejudices and protect the children from the influences of believers was regarded as being a crude and undesirable interference in family affairs. The means of fighting against religion proved to be ineffective and insufficiently flexible. In the long run, he "threw out the baby with the bath water". As there were no obvious results, was it worthwhile wasting time on the subject? He gave up in effect. The fact that his scientific work was a failure was only part of the trouble, but his abandonment of all anti-religious work was really a disaster.

Is such practical work really necessary? That is no idle question. The Ministry of Education of the Buryat Republic considers that the problem of atheist education is not an urgent one. It is unforgivable how little attention is paid to it. There is a widely-held opinion that Buddhism is the religion of older people and will die out with the older generation. Young people will not adopt it. Is that really so?

Well, nobody removes the Pioneer neckties from the children, nobody forces

them to pray, nobody forces them to attend religious ceremonies, there is no obvious "instruction" in Buddhism. The forms and methods of Buddhist teachings are not insistent. It does not indulge in direct attack. It operates "underground", slowly, without pressure, and seeks no immediate results. That is what makes it particularly dangerous.

Time passes, and the number of believers in the Buryat Republic decreases very slowly. Its ranks are constantly being reinforced with older people, who received their education in Soviet schools. The head of the Lamaism department of the Buryat Institute of Social Science, Xenia Maximovna Gerasimova, explains this in the following way. For many years an individual has not been religious. Then he receives a shock – the loss of a loved one, sorrow, loneliness – and there comes a revival of the religious feelings which he acquired in childhood. Sometimes it does not even need a shock to revive feelings whose foundations were laid in the past. Buddhism instils its religious concepts by taking advantage of the impressionable and adaptable nature of a child's mind, through beauty, the spectacular, unusual effect and the national forms of its ceremonial. Who can say that there will not be a revival of these concepts at some religious festival at the temple, or in the districts during prayers and services.

Buddhism is not as harmless as it looks. When at the request of the moribund Lamas it was decided to send a party of ten youths, who had had secondary education, to the Mongolian Buddhist School for Monks, numbers of volunteers promptly appeared. The process of instilling religious feeling goes on underground; it is 'latent' and very hard to detect. Besides that, the Buddhists carefully guard their inner world from outside observation.

It is too early to give in. The problem of atheist education, taking local characteristics into account, must be tackled seriously, and starting with the teacher first of all. To start with there must be a study of Buddhism in all its varieties, of lamaism, the religion widespread over the territory of the Buryat Republic. In order to fight the enemy, you must know him. There must be a clear recognition of the way in which a child is affected by the religious observances which it sees.

Finally, the most serious question – the selection of methods for carrying on the fight. They must be subtle, more intricate, more effective than the methods used by religion. We must teach children competently about religious art, clearly distinguishing its two aspects – aesthetic value and the skill of the local craftsman and the religious "outer covering". We must learn how to talk to the children about religion so that its influence is neutralized, but without offending parents who are believers; so that instead of being passive observers, the children actively reject religion on ideological grounds.

The mother and daughter have come out of the gate and started to walk quickly down the road. One must think carefully about them. Why did the mother, in her sorrow, resort to the lifeless prayer wheel, by means of which communion with God is reduced to turning a wheel, instead of appealing to living people who could lighten the burden of her sorrow through kindness? What has remained in the mind of the girl? What impressions does she carry away? Is she able, by her own efforts, to distinguish between them?