

# The Russian Orthodox Church in the Millennium Year: What it Needs from the Soviet State.

JOHN B. DUNLOP

The Moscow Patriarchate has made lavish plans to celebrate the thousandth anniversary of the baptism of Kievan Rus' by Prince Vladimir. In July 1987 the Patriarchate opened an information centre where Soviet and foreign journalists could be briefed on the preparations for the "millennium" and receive literature on the position of religion in the USSR.<sup>1</sup> By now the church will have held its local council (*Sobor*) at the Trinity-St Sergius Lavra in Zagorsk (6-9 June), only the fourth such council in the entire Soviet period (the previous *Sobory* had been convoked in 1917-18, 1945 and 1971, and on each occasion a new patriarch of the Russian Church had been elected). The main ceremony to mark the millennium will have taken place on 10 June at the Cathedral of the Resurrection in Moscow's Danilov Monastery. Ceremonies have also been planned for Kiev, Leningrad, Minsk and Vladimir, to be attended by delegates to the council as well as by visitors from abroad. Special worship services have been scheduled in all dioceses and parishes of the Moscow Patriarchate.<sup>2</sup>

To the untrained Western eye, all of this suggests that religious life is flourishing in the Soviet Union. But unfortunately, appearances can be deceptive. The true status of the Russian Orthodox Church today can be understood only after one has become aware of the legal framework within which the Russian Church must lead its existence. In this context, it is instructive to look at how the state-controlled Soviet press is covering the millennium — what are Soviet citizens being told about the event? — and to compare what the press says with the arguments advanced in a number of recent *samizdat* statements by Orthodox believers.

<sup>1</sup> Jane Ellis, "Preparations for the Official Celebrations in 1988 of the Millennium of the Baptism of Kievan Rus' ", *RCL* Vol. 15 No. 2, pp. 195-96. See also *RCL* Vol. 15 No.3, which focuses on the forthcoming millennium.

<sup>2</sup> Ellis, *op. cit.*, p. 196.

*The Legal Situation*

The details of the legal framework within which the Orthodox Church and other religious bodies in the Soviet Union must conduct their affairs are not generally known in the West. In fact, Soviet officials routinely assume an ignorance of the relevant laws on the part of Western visitors to the USSR. I experienced this at first hand when I visited the Soviet Union in the autumn of 1987 as a member of a fact-finding tour of Western journalists, publishers, scholars, and businessmen organised by the World Media Association in Washington. During our visit we had the opportunity to talk to a number of high-ranking Soviet officials. I asked the deputy chairman of the Leningrad City Council (or Soviet), Alexander Avdeyev, the following question: "In Moscow, which has a population of almost nine million, we were told that there are over forty functioning Orthodox churches. In Leningrad, on the other hand, which has a population of nearly five million, we have been told that there are only 15 such churches. Why the discrepancy in numbers?" Avdeyev expressed surprise that I had posed such a question to him. It is the Russian Orthodox Church, he asserted blandly, and not the Leningrad City Council which decides how many functioning churches it needs in Leningrad.

This episode sums up the image of Soviet church-state relations which official spokesmen seek to convey to Western visitors. Religious associations, they intimate, are completely free to run their affairs without interference on the part of the state. This image is both false and deceitful. As Mr Avdeyev knows perfectly well, no new Orthodox church can be registered — that is, opened — in Leningrad without the express approval of the Leningrad City Council and the Council for Religious Affairs of the Council of Ministers of the USSR.<sup>3</sup> He was evidently banking on our ignorance of Soviet legislation in order to mislead us.

According to Article 6 of the most recent version of the Soviet Constitution (1977), the Communist Party is "the leading and guiding force of Soviet society and the nucleus of its political system."<sup>4</sup> Furthermore, the Party Statutes ratified by the 27th Party Congress in 1986 affirm that a member of the Communist Party is obliged "to carry out a decisive struggle . . . with religious prejudices and other

<sup>3</sup>For this legislation, see Dimitry Pospelovsky, *The Russian Church Under the Soviet Regime, 1917-1982* (St Vladimir's Seminary Press: Crestwood, NY, 1984), appendix 6, pp. 494-95.

<sup>4</sup>*Constitution of the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics* (Novosti: Moscow, 1977), p. 21.

views and customs which are foreign to the socialist way of life.”<sup>5</sup> As has been the case since the time of Lenin, an adherence to militant atheism remains a central obligation for any member of the Party.

The one article of the Soviet Constitution which refers directly to religion is Article 52, which states:

Citizens of the USSR are guaranteed freedom of conscience, that is the right to profess or not to profess any religion, and to conduct religious worship or atheistic propaganda. Incitement of hostility or hatred on religious grounds is prohibited. In the USSR, the church is separated from the state, and the school from the church.<sup>6</sup>

This article of the Soviet Constitution explicitly permits citizens — if they are not members of the Communist Party — to participate in religious worship, but grants no rights beyond this. (And even this one right is sharply limited by the fact that in many areas of the Soviet Union, such as Siberia or the Russian north, there are simply no functioning churches to attend). Soviet atheists, on the other hand, enjoy the right actively to promote their cause, in the mass media and in all institutions of learning. Atheism is a formal subject required in all schools and educational institutions. As for “incitement of hostility or hatred on religious grounds”, it is entirely up to the state to determine if this has taken place. Clearly, the Soviet Constitution’s definition of “freedom of conscience” has little in common with the manner in which this phrase is understood in the West.

Soviet law carefully circumscribes the role of religion in Soviet society. A detailed examination of this subject falls beyond the scope of this essay, but we might mention Article 17 of the Law on Religious Associations passed in 1929. This article states:

Religious associations may NOT: (a) . . . use property at their disposal for other than religious purposes; (b) give material help to their members; (c) organise for children, young people, and women special prayer or other meetings, circles, groups, departments for Biblical or literary study, sewing, working or the teaching of religions, etc., excursions, children’s playgrounds, libraries, reading rooms, sanatoria, or medical care. Only books necessary for the purpose of the cult may be kept in the prayer buildings and premises.<sup>7</sup>

It is clear that parish life as it is understood in the West is illegal in the

<sup>5</sup>*Ustav Kommunisticheskoi Partii Sovetskogo Soyuza* (Izdatel’stvo Politicheskoi Literatury: Moscow, 1986).

<sup>6</sup>*Constitution of the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics*, p. 47.

<sup>7</sup>For this legislation, see Richard H. Marshall et al.(eds.), *Aspects of Religion in the Soviet Union* (University of Chicago Press: Chicago, 1971), p. 440.

Soviet Union and that one would risk prison for attempting to put anything of the sort into practice.

At the beginning of 1986, the *Journal of the Moscow Patriarchate* published a one-page statement entitled "The Rights and Obligations of a Religious Society".<sup>8</sup> This somewhat mysterious statement — it was accompanied by no explanatory material of any kind — claimed that henceforth religious associations in the Soviet Union would be recognised as "juridical entities" — that is, they would be able to have recourse to Soviet courts. This seemed to be a significant reform, but the lack of any accompanying commentary made this uncertain. (Some Western analysts believe that the chief purpose of the statement was to allow the Soviet government to seize Russian ecclesiastical holdings at present under the jurisdiction of the Russian Church Abroad, an emigre ecclesiastical organisation, in Israel and Western Europe.) And it goes without saying that the Soviet courts would have to be independent of the Party and state before this reform could have any real meaning.

The statement also announced another seemingly significant reform. Henceforward, it declared, a priest would not need permission from the secular authorities to visit a "seriously ill" member of his parish in an apartment or home, in a home for the elderly, or in a penal institution. (Formerly, the authorities had routinely withheld such permission, with the result that believers died without receiving the last rites.) A priest continues, however, to need the express approval of the authorities to visit a parishioner who is not seriously ill or to perform any religious rite, such as a baptism or petitionary service, outside a church building.

### *The Church's Attitude to the State*

How has the Communist Party been preparing its almost twenty million members for the forthcoming Orthodox millennium? In June 1983 a special conference of party ideologists was convened to plan the state's response to the forthcoming celebrations. Since that time, a number of articles have appeared in the daily press and in specialised Soviet journals criticising the assertions of Russian churchmen that the Orthodox Church has played a beneficial role in Russian history. Thus the Soviet Union's chief propagandist, Alexander Yakovlev, a full member of the Politburo and a close associate of General Secretary Gorbachev, recently castigated all "attempts to depict Christianity as the 'mother' of Russian culture . . ."<sup>9</sup> Since only

<sup>8</sup> *Zhurnal Moskovskoi Patriarkhii*, 1986 No. 1, appendix.

<sup>9</sup> Alexander Yakovlev, "Dostizheniye kachestvenno novogo sostoyaniya sovetskogo obshchestva i obshchestvennyye nauki", *Vestnik Akademii Nauk SSR*, 1987 No. 6, p. 69.

atheist spokesmen have the right of access to the mass media, the "polemics" on this question have been crudely one-sided. As British specialist Jane Ellis has commented: "Although the average Soviet reader would be most unlikely to have any idea what church spokesmen have been saying, the atheist propagandists obviously feel it is more important to attack them than ignore them."<sup>10</sup>

It is nevertheless true that there have been assertions in the *Journal of the Moscow Patriarchate* and in occasional press conferences given by church spokesmen at the invitation of the authorities that the Russian Orthodox Church has made valuable contributions to Russian history. Yet the leadership of the Moscow Patriarchate has simultaneously been careful to give fulsome praise to the Soviet government and its policies. To take one recent example, in November 1986 Patriarch Pimen and other members of the ruling Holy Synod of the Patriarchate were invited to a reception in the Kremlin on the occasion of the 69th anniversary of the Bolshevik Revolution. There they affirmed that the Russian Church "entirely supports the domestic politics" of the Soviet state, as well as its "profoundly peace-loving" foreign policy.<sup>11</sup>

This euphoric attitude toward the policies of the Soviet state goes back to the year 1927 when then Metropolitan (and later Patriarch) Sergi, the head of the church, emerged from three and a half months of detention in a Soviet prison and issued his famous "Declaration of Loyalty".<sup>12</sup> In this statement, the church identified itself with the interests of a regime which up to that time had been seeking its destruction. Since 1927, the leadership of the Moscow Patriarchate has steadfastly adhered to the spirit of Sergi's pronouncement, an attitude which has become known as "Sergianism" (*sergiyevshchina*).

A remarkable document leaked to the West in the 1970s has revealed something of the impact of Sergianism on the church hierarchy: this is the 1974 report of V. Furov, a deputy chairman of the Council for Religious Affairs, to the Central Committee of the Communist Party concerning the affairs of the Moscow Patriarchate.<sup>13</sup>

Furov divides the bishops of the Russian Orthodox Church into three categories indicating the degree of their acceptability to the authorities. It is noteworthy that in mid-1987 five of the seven standing members of the Holy Synod — Patriarch Pimen,

<sup>10</sup>Ellis, *op. cit.*, p. 198.

<sup>11</sup>See "Na priyome v Kreml'e", *Zhurnal Moskovskoi Patriarkhii*, 1986 No. 12, p. 5.

<sup>12</sup>For the text, see Matthew Spinka, *The Church in Soviet Russia* (Oxford University Press: New York, 1956), pp. 161-65.

<sup>13</sup>See Coelestin Patock, "The Bishops of the Moscow Patriarchate Today", *RCL* Vol. 15 No. 3, pp. 282-84.

Metropolitan Yuvenali of Krutitsy and Kolomna, Metropolitan Alexi of Leningrad, Metropolitan Nikodim of L'vov and Ternopol', and Metropolitan Sergi of Odessa — were bishops who had been placed in the "good" category by Furov.<sup>15</sup> These are clerics who rose to positions of influence during the Khrushchev anti-religious persecution of 1959-64, when over half of the functioning Orthodox churches in the country were closed down. Several of them were ordained bishop at remarkably young ages: Metropolitan Yuvenali in 1965 at the age of 30 and Metropolitan Alexi in 1961 at the age of 32.<sup>16</sup> These are men whose loyalty to the Soviet state is proven and beyond question. Not surprisingly, it is they who are asked to give occasional interviews to the Soviet press.

### *Two Priests Write to Gorbachev*

It is useful, indeed necessary, to compare and contrast the official voice of the Moscow Patriarchate with the *samizdat* voice of Orthodox dissenters, some of whom have been required to serve lengthy prison sentences for attempts to publicise infringements of believers' rights in the USSR. The name of Fr Gleb Yakunin, to cite one example, has been known to readers of *samizdat* since 1965 when he co-authored an appeal to the late Patriarch Alexi concerning the ravages of the Khrushchev anti-religious campaign.<sup>17</sup> For this bold letter, he was suspended from the priesthood by the Patriarch in 1966. Ten years later, in 1976, Fr Gleb co-founded the Christian Committee for the Defence of Believers' Rights in the USSR, an organisation whose aim was to publicise abuses of religion in the Soviet Union. By 1979, the committee had sent hundreds of documents to the West detailing the infringement of believers' legal rights.<sup>18</sup> For this activity, Fr Gleb was arrested and sentenced in 1980 to five years in labour camp, to be followed by five years of internal exile. He was released as part of a limited amnesty of political prisoners during the Gorbachev period. In 1987, he was reinstated as a priest by the Moscow Patriarchate and given a stern warning from the scriptures: "See, you

<sup>15</sup> See the members of the Holy Synod listed in *Zhurnal Moskovskoi Patriarkhii*, 1987 No. 7.

<sup>16</sup> Jane Ellis, *The Russian Orthodox Church: A Contemporary History* (Indiana University Press: Bloomington and Indianapolis, 1986 and Croom Helm: London, 1986), pp. 244-45.

<sup>17</sup> A complete translation of this document appeared in *St Vladimir's Seminary Quarterly*, Vol. 10 Nos. 1-2.

<sup>18</sup> See Ellis, *op. cit.*, pp. 375-79. The Documents of the Christian Committee for the Defense of Believers' Rights in the USSR were published in Russian, with English summary translations, by the Washington Street Research Center, 3101 Washington Street, San Francisco, CA 94115, in 1982.

are well again. Stop sinning or something worse may happen to you.” (John 5:14).<sup>19</sup>

On 23 May 1987 Fr Gleb joined another Orthodox priest, Fr Nikolai Gainov, and seven laymen in sending an open letter to Gorbachev (a longer version of the letter was sent on the same day to Patriarch Pimen).<sup>20</sup> The authors begin by calling for the release from prison of Christian prisoners of conscience, such as Orthodox deacon Fr Vladimir Rusak and Lithuanian Catholic priest Fr Alfonsas Svarinskas. They point out that believers in the Soviet Union are denied the right of “manifesting social activity”. They are forbidden, for example, to organise sanatoria and hospitals, homes for the aged and invalids — they are, in fact, forbidden to show “Christian love” to their neighbours.

The authors of the letter state their belief that religious associations should be actively involved in the reexamination of the 1929 legislation on religious associations which is said to be under way. This revision should not be left to officials of the Council for Religious Affairs. There should be an “open” (*glasnoye*) discussion of all proposed changes.

Fr Gleb Yakunin and his co-authors argue that Article 17 of the Law on Religious Associations (discussed above) discriminates against “the elementary rights of believers” and should be rescinded. Bibles and gospels should be printed in sufficient quantities to satisfy the real needs of believers. Orthodox Christians should be able to subscribe to religious literature published by the Moscow Patriarchate, and small libraries should be opened in all parishes. The practice of officially registering baptisms and church marriages with the state has been abolished in a few Moscow parishes: this abolition must be extended to all parishes in the country. (This practice, the result of oral instructions and not of written Soviet law, has been one of the mechanisms whereby the state has identified religious believers. Repercussions have typically included demotion or loss of job, forfeiture of entry into university etc.)

Religious individuals, the authors maintain, must have the same access to the Soviet mass media as at present enjoyed by atheists. The relics of the sainted Moscow hierarchs Pyotr, Filip, Iona and Germogen, which are not at present kept in functioning churches, must be returned to the church. The Kiev Monastery of the Caves, which was closed down by the authorities under Khrushchev, must be reopened as an active monastery. “We want,” the authors conclude,

<sup>19</sup> *Zhurnal Moskovskoi Patriarkhii*, 1987 No. 7, p. 5.

<sup>20</sup> The open letter to Gorbachev appeared in *Russkaya Mysl'*, 5 June 1987, p. 6, and the open letter to Patriarch Pimen in *Russkaya mysl'*, 17 July 1987, pp. 6-7. See also a second open letter to Gorbachev by Yakunin, Gainov and four laymen, and dated 12 August 1987, which was published in *Russkaya mysl'*, 16 October 1987, p. 6.

“to believe in the reality of future *perestroika*”.

On balance, this open letter to Gorbachev is a remarkably moderate document which spells out the minimal requirements for the Orthodox Church to function as an independent religious body in an atheist society. The authorities, however, seem to have reacted negatively to the letter. In June Metropolitan Yuvenali, the second-ranking hierarch after Patriarch Pimen, summoned Fr Gleb and Fr Nikolai to his office for separate dressings-down.<sup>21</sup> Fr Nikolai was told that he had “infringed the church canons in addressing a state leader” and would be “punished” if he repeated such an action. Fr Gleb was berated for “breaking church discipline” and warned “not to engage in politics”.

### *Ogorodnikov's Interventions*

Alexander Ogorodnikov is a lay member of the Russian Orthodox Church. In 1974, he and several like-minded Orthodox believers founded a Christian seminar in Moscow and made several attempts, thwarted by the authorities, to publish a *samizdat* journal. In 1976, Ogorodnikov was forced to leave Moscow, and three years later, in 1979, he was sentenced to a year in labour camp for “parasitism”. While still in prison, he was sentenced to an additional six years in camp, to be followed by five years of internal exile, for “anti-Soviet agitation and propaganda”. In 1986, his term in camp was extended for three more years for his alleged “malicious disobedience” to the camp authorities. Like Fr Gleb Yakunin, Ogorodnikov was a beneficiary of the limited amnesty recently instituted by the Supreme Soviet.

On 5 May 1987, Metropolitan Yuvenali received Ogorodnikov for a three-hour discussion. In agreeing to this meeting, the Metropolitan was presumably attempting to channel the energies of this religious dissenter, who had just emerged from a decade of imprisonment, into directions which would be minimally dangerous to the Moscow Patriarchate and the Soviet state. Ogorodnikov has left a *samizdat* account of their discussion.<sup>22</sup>

Ogorodnikov suggested to the Metropolitan that the Moscow Patriarchate form a committee for the purpose of suggesting changes in Soviet legislation on religious associations, especially the notorious Article 17, which as we have seen limits the church's activities to

<sup>21</sup> See *Russkaya mysl'*, 14 August 1987, p. 7.

<sup>22</sup> See “Priyom Mitropolitom Krutitskim i Kolomenskim Yuvenaliyem Alexandra Ogorodnikova”, *Arkhiv Samizdata* No. 6009, 1987. For an English summary, see *The Samizdat Bulletin*, August 1987, pp. 7-8.

“serving the cult” in a narrowly liturgical manner. Underlining the excellent relations of the Patriarchate with the Council for Religious Affairs, Yuvenali replied that the Soviet State understands the needs of the church and strives to fulfil them. He declined to address Ogorodnikov’s suggestion that the Patriarchate seek a revision of the 1961 church regulations which effectively deprive a priest of any rights in his own parish.

Another question raised by Ogorodnikov concerned the canonisation of Orthodox Christians martyred during the Soviet period. Yuvenali said that the canonisation of these martyrs by the emigre Russian Church Abroad had “political” overtones. He declined to be specific about the individuals who would be canonised at the 1988 Council. Ogorodnikov asked the Metropolitan’s blessing for his plan to collect signatures under a petition for the reopening of the Kiev Monastery of the Caves, “the baptismal font of Russia”. Yuvenali refused to give his blessing, saying that such an undertaking would be “an encroachment on the principle of Divine freedom — when the Lord wishes, He shall return the monastery to us.”

Yuvenali refused Ogorodnikov’s request that he intercede for Orthodox believers in prison, and he criticised the “uncanonical” behaviour of imprisoned Deacon Vladimir Rusak. (Rusak was sentenced in September 1986 to seven years in strict-regime camp, to be followed by five years of internal exile, for “anti-Soviet agitation and propaganda”. His worst crime in the eyes of the authorities was to champion the cause of the new Russian martyrs, about which he has written a book, published in the West, entitled *Evidence for the Prosecution (Svidetel’stvo obvineniya)*.)<sup>23</sup> Ogorodnikov replied that Fr Vladimir had been sentenced not for his uncanonical way of life but for a book about “the Stalinist terror against the church”. He asked the Metropolitan to intercede with the authorities so that believers in penal institutions should have the right to keep a Bible in their cells, as well as to receive the sacraments of confession and holy communion, and to pray without hindrance. He noted that while in prison he had spent 689 days on hunger strike to back up his demand for a Bible. The Metropolitan offered no positive response.

On 11 September 1987 Ogorodnikov, together with two priests, one Russian Orthodox and the other Lithuanian Catholic, and a group of laymen of the Orthodox, Lithuanian Catholic and Latvian Lutheran faiths, sent a collective letter to President Gromyko and General Secretary Gorbachev.<sup>24</sup> They requested that religious associations be

<sup>23</sup> *Svidetel’stvo obvineniya* (Holy Trinity Monastery and Multilingual Typesetting, 1987) is available from Holy Trinity Monastery Bookstore, P.O. Box 36, Jordanville, NY 13361.

<sup>24</sup> The text appeared in *Russkaya mysl*, 18 September 1987, p. 7. On Ogorodnikov see *RCL* Vol. 15 No. 1, pp. 69-78.

recognised as juridical entities (which indicated the authors' uncertainty about the statement in the *Journal of the Moscow Patriarchate* discussed above). They asked that the Soviet decree of January 1918, which nationalised all church property, be rescinded and that all icons, relics, and church utensils seized from the church be returned. They called for a change in Article 52 of the Soviet Constitution (discussed above) so as to allow both anti-religious and religious propaganda, and anti-religious and religious organisations. They called for the revocation of Article 17 of the Law on Religious Associations. They asked that religious associations be allowed to form charitable organisations and that clergy be allowed to visit Soviet prisons and hospitals. Prisoners in penal institutions, they declared, should have the right to wear crosses and other religious artifacts and to have religious literature. Religious associations should have access to the mass media and should be permitted to operate their own printing houses and libraries. The religious education of both children and adults should no longer be proscribed, and Sunday schools should be established.

Religious organisations must be allowed to elect persons sharing their convictions to represent them in government bodies. The state should not interfere in the affairs of the church, and the church's contribution to Soviet state funds (such as the Soviet Peace Fund) should be truly voluntary. Believers should be able to maintain contacts with religious organisations abroad, to make pilgrimages outside the USSR, and to emigrate for religious reasons. Forms of alternative service should be available for Soviet military draftees who because of their religious convictions are unable to bear arms. Bible societies should be permitted in the Soviet Union.

This letter raises many of the same issues as the letter of Yakunin, Gainov and seven Orthodox laymen to Mikhail Gorbachev, and some of the demands go further. It should be stressed however that none of these demands calls for rights exceeding those enjoyed by religious believers in the Western democracies. Like the Yakunin-Gainov letter, the Ogorodnikov letter seeks to establish unshackled religious bodies free to serve the real needs of their membership.

### *Other Samizdat Appeals*

Other recent religious *samizdat* materials echo the concerns of these two appeals. In the first half of 1987, an Orthodox priest in Siberia, Fr Gennadi Fast, sent a letter to Gorbachev recommending that Article 52 of the Soviet Constitution be altered to read: "The church and atheistic propaganda in the USSR are separated from the

state".<sup>25</sup> This change would lead to the dropping of atheism as a mandatory subject in Soviet educational institutions.

An Orthodox layman living in Moscow, Stefan Krasovitsky, wrote an open letter to Patriarch Pimen in which he asked the Moscow Patriarchate to obtain the agreement of the secular authorities to return to the church all relics of Orthodox saints, to reopen the Kiev Monastery of the Caves as a functioning monastery, to permit the sale of religious literature — especially the Bible, prayer books, and the writings of the Church Fathers — in sufficient quantities to satisfy the needs of believers, to allow representatives of all Russian Orthodox jurisdictions to be invited to the 1988 Council, to allow the replacement of Metropolitan Sergi's 1927 "Declaration" with one "close in spirit" to that of the imprisoned bishops of Solovki, and to allow the canonisation of Orthodox martyrs who were the victims of "arbitrariness and persecution".<sup>26</sup> Krasovitsky's last two points, of course, broach the touchy question of the "Sergian" orientation of the Moscow Patriarchate since 1927.

Another *samizdat* author, Kirill Golovin (the name may be a pseudonym), has written a detailed and spirited account, dated November 1986, of the present situation of the Russian Orthodox Church.<sup>27</sup> His conclusion is that there has been no significant improvement of the church's fortunes under Mikhail Gorbachev.

One of Golovin's central concerns is the access of Russian believers to religious literature. He notes that in May 1986 — well into the Gorbachev period — all cards referring to religious journals were quietly removed from the catalogue of the huge Saltykov-Shchedrin library in Leningrad. One might think that these journals had never existed. The situation with libraries is worse in provincial cities. Suppose, Golovin writes, one tries to borrow a book such as Golubinsky's classical prerevolutionary study, *The History of the Russian Church (Istoriya russkoi tserkvi)*, in a city like Perm' or Irkutsk. The first time one might receive the book without questions being asked. But if one attempted to borrow the book a second time — there are, of course, no public xerox facilities in the USSR — one would run a serious risk of landing on the local KGB's list of *religiozniki* (religious activists).

In general, Golovin emphasises, the situation for Orthodox believers is incomparably worse in the provinces, where most of them

<sup>25</sup>Fr Gennadi Fast, "Pis'mo M. S. Gorbachyovu", *Vestnik RKhD* No. 150 (1987), p. 281.

<sup>26</sup>Stefan Krasovitsky, "Letter of a Moscow Christian to Patriarch Pimen", *Vestnik RKhD* No. 150 (1987), pp. 284-85.

<sup>27</sup>Kirill Golovin, "Gryadet den' . . .", *Vestnik RKhD* No. 149 (1987), pp. 237-49.

live, than in the capital cities. In Moscow and Leningrad, the authorities are disturbed “only by a long-lived Orthodox circle or by an influential activist”, but in a city like Tambov, the appearance of a new face in church becomes an “extraordinary event” for the local KGB.<sup>28</sup> In the villages, the position of believers is even worse. The life of country priests is one of great hardship and privation, and they are regularly transferred every three or four years by their bishops so that they do not sink deep roots in the local community. As a rule, Golovin notes, the church is “suffocated primarily by its own hands” — that is, by its own accommodating bishops.

Golovin has some useful comments on the number of functioning Orthodox churches in the USSR. In his 1984 book *Religion and the Church in Soviet Society*, the former chairman of the Council for Religious Affairs, Vladimir Kuroyedov, reported that thirty Orthodox churches had been opened in the Soviet Union since 1977.<sup>29</sup> But Kuroyedov, according to Golovin, neglected to list how many Orthodox churches had been closed down during the same period. Furthermore, Orthodox churches closed down in earlier periods, such as during the Khrushchev persecution, continue to be razed; in 1984, for example, several hundred allegedly “decrepit” churches were torn down in Ukraine. Golovin finds it of interest that, according to Kuroyedov, in the same period (1977-84) the authorities opened 300 churches for the Soviet Baptists. They are thus intentionally favouring the Baptists at the expense of the Orthodox. “Beginning with the revolution,” he observes, “the atheists have considered Orthodoxy to be the main enemy.”

#### *Articles in the Official Press*

In addition to those appearing in *samizdat*, occasional articles concerning the fate of the Orthodox Church have appeared in the official press in recent years. Thus in September 1987 Academician Dimitri Likhachev, a distinguished specialist in ancient Russian literature and the chairman of the presidium of the Soviet Cultural Foundation, gave an interview to *Literaturnaya gazeta* in which he said:

Our state must really keep outside religion; it must not interfere

<sup>28</sup>The same point is made by S. N. Pavlov (Priest-monk Innokenti) in an interesting sociological study of the contemporary Russian Orthodox Church, published in *Sotsiologicheskkiye issledovaniya*, a journal of the Soviet Academy of Sciences, 1987 No. 4, pp. 35-43.

<sup>29</sup>See V. A. Kuroyedov, “Religiya i tserkov’ v sovetskom obshchestve” (Izdatel’stvo Politicheskoi Literatury: Moscow, 1984), p. 144.

in the affairs of the church. Of course, the church also must not interfere in the affairs of the state. This is what the Council for Religious Affairs should be keeping track of! Unfortunately, in the recent past, the Council interfered, and very actively, in church affairs. And, one might ask, should the church be limited in its right to publish in appropriate quantities those books of which believers have need: the Bible, church calendars, the writings of the Church Fathers and other church literature?<sup>30</sup>

This statement by one of the most influential cultural figures in the Soviet Union was a significant event. Other cultural figures, such as the poet Yevgeni Yevtushenko<sup>31</sup> and the novelist Viktor Astaf'yev,<sup>32</sup> have likewise made clear their sympathy for religion and their disagreement with its persecutors.

During 1987 three "liberal" Soviet publications, *Literaturnaya gazeta*, *Moscow News* (which is largely for foreign consumption) and *Ogonyok* (a large-format mass-edition weekly), publicised abuses of believers' rights and callous activities on the part of local officials and repeatedly expressed concern over the political cost of such behaviour.<sup>33</sup>

To take one example: *Moscow News* carried an informative article by Alexander Nezhny, entitled "Law and Conscience".<sup>34</sup> In 1962, Nezhny began, one of the two functioning Orthodox churches in the city of Kirov, which now has a population of 400,000, was closed down by the authorities and subsequently levelled. The remaining church of St Serafim is now so crowded that it sells more candles and *prosforas* (blessed bread) than the huge Yelokhov Cathedral in Moscow.

Over the past 25 years, the believers in Kirov have repeatedly tried to obtain permission for the registration of a second parish in the city. On 15 July 1987, for example, they sent their forty-second complaint to the Procurator General of the USSR. Two thousand of them signed a letter requesting help from *Moscow News*. Local officials, however, steadfastly block registration of a second parish. Valentina Charushina, secretary of the Kirov City Executive Committee, "intentionally obscures" the issue of registration. An indication of her attitude toward the believers is the fact that she allowed a public toilet to be built directly opposite the entrance to the church. As for the Kirov commissioner of the Council for Religious Affairs,

<sup>30</sup>D.S.Likhachev, "Ot pokayaniya — k deistviyu!" *Literaturnaya gazeta*, 9 September 1987, p. 2.

<sup>31</sup>See Yevtushenko's letter in *Komsomol'skaya pravda*, 10 December 1986, p. 2.

<sup>32</sup>See Astaf'yev's reflections in *Nash sovremennik*, 1986 No. 5, p. 118.

<sup>33</sup>For a survey of this literature, see the report by Oxana Antich, *Radio Liberty Bulletin* No. 96/87 (in Russian), 2 October 1987.

<sup>34</sup>Alexander Nezhny, "Law and Conscience", *Moscow News*, 1987 No. 33, p. 13.

A. Shalaginov, he thinks that "religious people are very unpleasant and that priests are repulsive". For many years, Shalaginov has blocked registration of an Orthodox church in the town of Vyatskiye Polyany, Kirov Region, and has observed "with glee" the harassment of churchgoers and their priest by officials in the town of Malmyzh.

Later in 1987 the same newspaper reported the welcome news that a second Orthodox church had at last been registered in the city of Kirov and that a church had been permitted to open in Vyatskiye Polyany.<sup>35</sup> Nezhny's exposé had evidently had its effect.

The magazine *Ogonyok* carried a report by special correspondent Sergei Vlasov.<sup>36</sup> Parishioners in the large village of Krasnoarmeiskaya, Krasnodar Region, writes Vlasov, have been sending letters of complaint, signed by three hundred people, to various Soviet officials. The history of the Orthodox parish in the village is the following: in 1947, believers received permission to turn a house built in 1910 into an Orthodox church. Since 1950, the authorities have not given permission for the church to be repaired; consequently, its walls have developed serious cracks and its ceiling is threatening to collapse. In addition, the church is too small for the needs of believers; it can comfortably hold about a hundred, but on religious holidays some three hundred attempt to squeeze themselves inside. As a result, parishioners faint from lack of air, and in 1984 a pensioner, N. S. Petruk, died as a result of the cramped conditions in the church.

Several years ago, the believers received oral permission from the authorities to rebuild the decrepit church. They undertook this project on their own, unloading trucks and hauling heavy bricks, though most of them were elderly. The construction of the new church was slow but steady and performed "with love". On 1 August 1986, however, construction was halted by the authorities. The real reason for this decision, Vlasov makes clear, was that the old people were constructing a physically attractive church and the authorities were concerned that it might attract local young people. The legal subterfuge used to close down the new church was that it was larger than the old one, and this was said to be a serious infringement of Soviet law.

The believers admitted to Vlasov that they had indeed been constructing a larger church than the old one because they needed more space. In order to build a larger church legally they would have needed written permission from the Council for Religious Affairs, and they had no hope that such permission would be given. After halting

<sup>35</sup>"At the Council for Religious Affairs of the USSR Council of Ministers", *Moscow News*, 1987 No. 43.

<sup>36</sup>Sergei Vlasov, "Yesli rassudit' po-lyudsky . . .", *Ogonyok*, 1987 No. 13, pp. 30-31.

construction on the new church, the local authorities decided to confiscate the building and turn it into a kindergarten. "That," Vlasov writes, "is how they understand the struggle with religion here." In addition, the authorities revenged themselves on the parishioners by cutting off the gas heating to the old church, causing the temperature inside the building to fall to minus 13 degrees centigrade during the winter.

According to Vlasov, the incident in Krasnoarmeiskaya has been "rather typical" of religious life in Krasnodar Region. He cites similar occurrences in the villages of Tblisskaya, Temryuk and Krymsk. In a recent discussion between Vlasov and Archbishop Vladimir of Krasnodar and Kuban', the archbishop, after underlining his many services to the Soviet state — including visiting forty foreign countries — and after lavishing praise on the "great Lenin", confided that he was not happy with the condition of many of the parishes in his diocese. For example, he visited the village of Otradnaya, where the floors of the church are so rotten that women's shoes are constantly breaking through the floorboards. In another parish, the ceiling has to be held up by wooden poles. Vlasov notes the contrast between the extreme destitution of the parishes and the fact that the believers of Krasnodar Region recently donated 600,000 roubles to the Soviet Peace Fund. (The Chairman of the Council for Religious Affairs has recently reported that Soviet religious believers annually contribute thirty million roubles to this fund.)<sup>37</sup>

Vlasov worries aloud about the political consequences of treating believers in such a fashion, and he cites Karl Marx's dictum: "Coercive means against religion are senseless." Archbishop Vladimir, a Soviet patriot, agrees: "It is a near-sighted, unwise policy."

In response to Vlasov's exposé, the authorities in Krasnodar came to a Solomonic decision. The first secretary of the Krasnodar *raikom* (district committee of the Communist Party), A. D. Kudinov, was given a "severe reprimand", and permission was given to complete the new church in Krasnoarmeiskaya, minus the cupolās. On the other hand, the Council for Religious Affairs was told to "take measures" against the members of the parish council for "their gross infringements of the Soviet laws on religious cults". (At the very least, this will involve their removal from the parish council; fines and/or imprisonment are also likely.)

It should be obvious that the incidents reported by *Moscow News* and *Ogonyok* represent merely the tip of an iceberg. Throughout the Soviet Union, local officials and representatives of the Council for

<sup>37</sup>See "Garantii svobody" (an interview with Konstantin Kharchev), *Nauka i religiya*, 1987 No. 11, p. 22.

Religious Affairs harass Orthodox believers who seek to put their faith into practice. The regular collection of huge sums of money for the Soviet Peace Fund from parishioners who are far from wealthy is one of the most despicable practices of the authorities. There is no money to fix a leaking or collapsing roof or rotten floorboards, but there are hundreds of thousands of roubles available to be donated to the Soviet government.

In the latter part of 1987, there began to appear evidence that the *samizdat* campaign of Fr Gleb Yakunin and others — magnified by foreign radio stations which regularly broadcast their appeals to Soviet citizens — was having an effect, as was the exposing of abuses of believers' rights in the "liberal" Soviet press. In August *Sovetskaya yustitsiya* (Soviet Justice) carried a statement by an official of the Council for Religious Affairs declaring that the civil registration of such religious rites as baptism and marriage was illegal, a violation of the separation of church from state.<sup>38</sup> This was a welcome development.

Similarly, in an interview published in the anti-religious monthly *Nauka i religiya* (Science and Religion) in November, Konstantin Kharchev, Chairman of the Council for Religious Affairs, criticised "illegal limitations and infringements of believers' rights" on the part of local Soviet officials.<sup>39</sup> Religious believers in Soviet prisons must, he said, be given access to religious literature, such as the Bible and the Koran, and religious conscientious objectors should be able to perform an alternative to military service. Kharchev went on to criticise officials who hinder the registration of new religious associations out of "administrative zeal", and he condemned as "absurd" such actions by local officials as preventing a priest from administering last rites to a dying person, forbidding the ringing of church bells or refusing authorisation for the repair or installation of electricity in a church. Such acts, he said, serve to alienate the population. (Kharchev neglected to mention that several of these "absurdities" have, until very recently, been embodied in Soviet law.)

On the other hand, Kharchev delivered a stern warning to those who would abuse the new liberalisations. ". . . A certain part of the clergy and of the laity who follow them", he said,

try to make use of the policies of expanding *glasnost*' and democratisation to receive special prerogatives and often to make attacks on the basic propositions of the legislation on cults and to infringe the Constitution of the USSR. For them, freedom of conscience means unlimited religious activity. Although in a

<sup>38</sup> "O svobodnom ispolnenii religioznykh obryadov", *Sovetskaya yustitsiya*, 1987 No. 16, p. 9.

<sup>39</sup> Kharchev, *op. cit.*, p. 23.

majority of instances such actions are not anti-Soviet and anti-socialist in character, they lead objectively — as should be clear to any healthy-minded person — to conflicts between the interests of believing and unbelieving citizens.

A recent Radio Liberty report gave the following general evaluation of the current religious scene in the USSR:

. . . Because religion is still regarded by the Soviet authorities as a very sensitive ideological matter and as an alien element in Soviet society, changes in the religious sphere are proceeding very slowly and have strict limits . . . the official attitude towards religion remains generally unchanged.<sup>44</sup>

Western visitors must not allow themselves to be deceived as to the realities of the situation. They should study Soviet legislation on religion, and they should familiarise themselves with the rich *samizdat* materials available from Keston College in Britain and Radio Liberty in Munich. There can be little doubt that spokesmen like Fr Gleb Yakunin, Fr Vladimir Rusak and Alexander Ogorodnikov represent the true interests of the Russian Orthodox Church on the thousandth anniversary of its founding.

“Vera Tolz, “Church-State Relations Under Gorbachev”, *Radio Liberty Bulletin* No. 360/87 (in English), 11 September 1987.

*This article was written for the World Media Report and is reprinted with permission of the World Media Association.*