

# **SOVIET RUSSIA AND RELIGION**

**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, coöperated 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



borne particularly in mind in the eastern republics and districts." Another statement of the Communist Party reads: "Anti-religious propaganda in the village must have the nature of a quiet, cautious talk, a deepening propaganda influencing the mind of the hearers. With no less caution it is necessary to carry on anti-religious propaganda among the workers, particularly at present when is observed a considerable influx of peasantry into the working class." Contrary to the general impression, atheism is not an essential condition for entrance into the Communist Party of Russia (or of any other country).

A great many churches have been closed in the Soviet Union since the Revolution and either demolished or put to such secular uses as serving as schools, recreation centers, or museums. No mere majority vote of the people in a community leads to the shutting down of a church. Before this step is taken an overwhelming proportion of citizens must be in favor of it; as long as there is a substantial number of persons, no matter how much in the minority, who wish to worship in a church, it is kept open. Concerning this matter a leading Communist, P. Kerzhentsev, writes as follows: "A believer whose religious feelings are affronted will only become still more religious. Thus the forcible closing of a church against the will of the population will merely evoke a desperate, passionate struggle and confirm the dupes of the priests in their faith. The cultural standards of the population must be raised, books of popular science circulated, and cinemas and theatres substituted for church ceremonies, for people go to church for entertainment too, for the sake of the singing or ritual."

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### *Anti-Religion and the Peasants*

Because of the cultural backwardness of the peasantry, the Communists have had to go slower with their anti-religious campaign in the agricultural districts than anywhere else. Yet scientific and anti-religious education have been absolutely essential in the rural regions on account of the program to mechanize and collectivize the farms. Because the peasants depended to so large an extent on the most primitive religious beliefs, it was decided that the most effective form of enlightenment was to give them "the correct explanation of the origin of hail, rain, drought,

thunderstorms, the appearance of insect plagues, the properties of various soils, the action of fertilizers, etc.” The Soviet farm program would surely have been doomed to failure had the peasants continued to rely on their traditional superstitions. For example, part of the old agricultural technique in Russia was to have a procession march through the fields led by a Greek Orthodox priest, who would sprinkle holy water over the earth to the accompaniment of a chant such as the following:

“Worms and grasshoppers!  
Mice and rats!  
Ants, moles, and reptiles!  
Flies and horseflies and hornets!  
And all flying things that wreak  
Destruction . . . . .

“I forbid you in the name of the Savior come on earth to suffer for men. I forbid you in the name of the all-seeing cherubim and seraphim, who fly around the heavenly throne. I forbid you in the name of the angels and the millions of heavenly spirits standing in the glory of God. I forbid you to touch any tree, fruitful or unfruitful, or leaf or plant or flower. I forbid you to bring any woe on the fields of these people.”

Much of the most strenuous opposition to collective farming came from priests who thought, quite rightly, that this new system of agriculture would tend to undermine their influence. They told the peasants that the establishment of Collectives was contrary to the wishes of Divine Providence and that those who joined would suffer dire punishments from the Almighty. Professor Hecker writes that he once “enquired of a peasant why he was so opposed to collective farming, which promised so many advantages; his bizarre reply was that it was opposed to the will of God, for had God desired Collectives, he would have created not the individual Adam and Eve, whom he had put into the Garden of Eden, but he would have created a Collective and instructed them to work the garden as a group.”

*Variety of Atheist Propaganda*

Whether country or city is concerned, the anti-religious campaign in the Soviet Union actively puts into practice the state-

ment of Lenin that it is essential to give the masses of the people "the greatest variety of atheist propaganda material—to acquaint them with facts from the most diversified forms of life. Every way of approach to them must be tried in order to interest them, to rouse them from their religious slumber, to shake them up by most varied ways and means." The educational attack on religion in the U.S.S.R. follows out this counsel by utilizing every conceivable device that might help uproot the superstitions of the workers and peasants. Anti-religious books, magazines, newspapers, motion pictures, plays, lectures, and radio broadcasts sweep the country. In many of the higher educational institutions there are special anti-religious departments.

Noteworthy in the larger cities are the anti-religious museums, several of which I inspected on my visit to the Soviet Union. These museums, which now number more than thirty, are just as much pro-science as anti-religious. They have most effective exhibits exposing the myths of the Bible, the miracles claimed by the Church and its saints, and the anti-social practices of the various cults,—such as their opposition to education, science, and knowledge in general, their encouragement of drunkenness, and their support of war. Not the least important of the teachings in these museums, as in the anti-religious campaign in general, are those directed against superstitious beliefs and practices which hinder the extension of health measures for the prevention and cure of disease. In all of these anti-religious activities the central and driving force is the Union of Militant Atheists, which has as its motto, "The fight against religion is the fight for Socialism."

Both in order to increase productivity and at the same time to cut down on the length and strain of the working week the Soviet Government has drastically altered the religious basis of holidays in the U.S.S.R. In the urban centers it decreed a rest day for every sixth day, regardless of the exact day of the week. This, of course, has weakened greatly the influence of Sunday as a religious holiday. In the farming regions, however, as a concession to the peasantry, there has been retained the seven-day week with Sunday as the rest day. Both in the industrial and agricultural districts the Communists have done everything possible to

cut down on the celebration of the inordinate number of Saints' Days and Church feasts formerly taken for granted. The Government has at the same time been careful to establish a number of special secular holidays such as May 1, the International Day of Labor, and November 7, the anniversary of the Bolshevik Revolution, to catch the imagination of the people and to give their feeling for pageantry an outlet. The effort has also been made, with considerable success, to transfer to New Year's Day the non-religious, festival aspects of Christmas. On January 1, 1936, a point was made of having "New Year's trees" with children receiving presents and quite an ado over a personage known as "Uncle Frost".

### *Effects of Social-Economic Progress*

Most far-reaching of all in its effects upon religion has been the tremendous social and economic progress of the U.S.S.R. The principles of Marxism imply that religion should be fought from every possible angle and on every possible front; it is not just a matter of atheist preaching and propaganda, as with bourgeois anti-religious groups. In Lenin's words:

"In modern capitalist countries the basis of religion is primarily *social*. The roots of modern religion are deeply embedded in the social oppression of the working masses, and in their apparently complete helplessness before the blind forces of Capitalism. . . . Fear of the blind force of capital—blind because its action cannot be foreseen by the masses—a force which at every step in life threatens the worker and the small business man with 'sudden,' 'unexpected,' 'accidental' destruction and ruin, bringing in their train beggary, pauperism, prostitution, and deaths from starvation—this is *THE tap-root* of modern religion. . . . No amount of reading matter, however enlightening, will eradicate religion from those masses who are crushed by the grinding toil of capitalism and subjected to the blind, destructive forces of capitalism, until these masses, themselves, learn to fight against the social facts from which religion arises in a united, disciplined, planned and conscious manner—until they learn to fight *against the rule of the capitalist in all its forms.*" \*

\* V. I. Lenin, "Religion," International Publishers, 1935, pp. 14-15.

The truth is that the social roots of religion are well on the way towards being totally abolished in Soviet Russia. With unemployment non-existent and economic security guaranteed, with health and education and old age all properly provided for, with art and culture constantly expanding and increasingly available, the masses of the people in the U.S.S.R. no longer have their old need for the consolations of religion. They are giving up the idea of immortality because they have the chance to lead happy and abundant lives on this earth. And they no longer require the moral sanctions of Christianity because the principles of Marxism are providing them with an all-inclusive and integrated code of life that unifies the country as a whole and also the individual personalities within it.

For Marxism is not simply an economic and political doctrine; it also has a definite point of view on ethics, on philosophy, on science, on history, and on art. In fact, it covers the whole of life and is probably more far-reaching in its implications than any religion that ever existed. It stands for a socially-minded and affirmative way of life in which men work together to make human existence on this earth fulfil its noblest possibilities. It gives men a great, central, and invigorating purpose which makes them rise above their personal problems and psychological complexes to a devotion towards the community as a whole. While Marxism or Communism does not constitute a religion, because there is no element of the supernatural about it, it can and does take the place in people's lives that religion at its best used to fill.

### *Why Religion Is Harmful*

While not denying that at certain times and in certain places religion has played a progressive role, the Communists are convinced that on the whole its effects have been most harmful. By teaching people to rely on prayer or on God's voluntary intervention to solve their problems, religion deters men from working out their difficulties through their own concrete thought and action. The tearful mother with her sick child, the poverty-stricken laborer with his miserable family, the tragic peasant with his failing crop,—all will appeal to God to remedy their plight instead of

initiating effective scientific procedures. In addition, religion's promise of a life after death in which the wretched and oppressed receive marvellous rewards in heaven while the oppressors go to hell, results in the exploited classes remaining resigned and humble instead of asserting and insisting upon their right to a full and happy existence on this earth. Karl Marx most aptly expressed the consequences of the idea of immortality when he said: "The mortgage held by the peasants on the heavenly estates guarantees the mortgage held by the bourgeoisie on the peasant estates."

Marx was thinking particularly of the supernatural doctrines of religion, such as the ideas of God and of immortality, when he penned his famous statement that "religion is the opium of the people." From these ideas the Christian Church derived an ethical code of human behaviour that makes whole-hearted and rational enjoyment of this-earthly life all but impossible. In the first place, the Marxist points out, mankind is supposed to carry out with absolute obedience the commands of God as interpreted by the Church authorities. God is supposed to have laid down his moral precepts in the ten commandments which he communicated to Moses back about 2,000 B.C. These laws, designed for the regulation of the primitive Hebrew society described in the Old Testament, have for the most part been treated by the Church as eternal and universal principles to be neither altered nor questioned no matter what the differences or changes in the condition of the human race.

In the second place, the Marxist claims, the supernaturalism of Christianity has led to the artificial splitting up of human beings into two separate and distinct parts, the body and the soul. Since the important thing is to keep the soul pure and undefiled for its immortal sojourn with God after death, it must hold the body under strict control and not become contaminated by animal needs and desires. Thus, for example, the Christian Church has from the beginning treated sex as something essentially sinful and base. The only way to establish the complete purity of Jesus was to have all biological laws violated and pretend that he was born of a virgin. All in all it may be said that the Christian religion from its inception up to the present day has

had a most harmful effect on frank, wholesome, and happy sex relations.

### *Personal Immortality Impossible*

In place of the dualistic conception of human nature Marxism upholds the monistic psychology which views man as an inter-functioning unity of personality (including the mind) on the one hand, and body on the other. This psychology recognizes the importance of giving a proper outlet and expression to man's emotional urges. It realizes the far-reaching effects of bodily conditions on the personality, but at the same time understands the profound influence that mental states can have on bodily conditions. Except, however, for purposes of abstract analysis, the Marxist believes that it is impossible to separate the personality from the body. In life, in action, they always function as an indissoluble unit. For this reason, then, that personality and body are in every way so intimately and fundamentally associated, Marxism argues that it is impossible for the personality to go on existing independently after the death and dissolution of the body. This means that all notions of personal immortality have to be discarded.

It is the general viewpoint known as Dialectical Materialism, based on the principles and discoveries of modern science, which leads the Communists in Soviet Russia and elsewhere to reject all the supernatural vagaries paraded by religion. Science can find no sign of an almighty God in the universe. Since all things operate according to natural law, there would be nothing for God to do even if there were one! So far as science can see, especially the branches of biology and astronomy, Nature does not show favoritism towards man or any other of its creatures. This little world of ours is only a tiny speck in Nature's immense universe, as vast in time as in space; and there is no reason to believe that Nature cares more about our puny earth than about any other spot in the cosmos. As regards survival after death, the sciences of biology and physiology, medicine and psychology, definitely rule it out by establishing that inseparability between personality and body which I have already discussed.

The Soviet attitude towards religion is often called narrow and

dogmatic. But the Communists assert that they are simply putting into practice conclusions with which many of the best philosophical minds of the western world are in fundamental agreement. For example the three outstanding philosophers of America—John Dewey, Morris Cohen, and George Santayana—give no place in their systems to God or immortality or any other doctrine of supernaturalism. The same is true of the noted English philosopher, Bertrand Russell, and the well-known English scientist, Sir Arthur Keith. Albert Einstein, perhaps the most brilliant of contemporary minds, holds similar views. And then there are the various sorts of Humanists, from Charles F. Potter to Walter Lippmann, who agree that there is no Divine Providence or future life and that men should concentrate their energies on the goods of this earth.

### *Marxists Frank About Religion*

But whereas leading western atheists are more often than not rather reluctant to make publicly known their views on religion, the Marxists in Soviet Russia always take a perfectly frank and thorough-going stand. In their epoch-making book "Soviet Communism" Sidney and Beatrice Webb excellently express the Communist viewpoint. This position "has, it is claimed, the merit of a public and persistent repudiation of the equivocal hypocrisy in which the governments and churches of other countries, together with hosts of merely conventional Christians, are today implicated. That is, for the remaking of man, no small matter. It is not with impunity that nations or individuals, outgrowing any genuine faith in a personal deity who hears their prayers and governs alike the ocean and the earthquake, the harvest and the hearts of men, can continue to practise rites and accept religious institutions as if they were still believers.

"No code of conduct professedly based on the supposed commands of an all-powerful ruler will outlast the discovery that it has, in fact, no such foundation. One result of this widely spread equivocation is seen in the practical abandonment at the present time by millions of young persons in Europe and America, not only of Christianity, but also, along with it, of nearly all the commandments by which their parents were guided, without acquiring



any substitute." In other words, lip-service in the nominally Christian countries of the West to a traditional religion and to a traditional code of morals derived from it prevents the development, which is to be seen in the Soviet Union, of an up-to-date philosophy and ethics appropriate to a modern civilization based on science and the machine.

Returning now to the subject of social and economic affairs, it is safe to say that, while the Greek Orthodox Church has been predominant in Russia, the non-Christian religions—such as Judaism, Mohammedanism, and Buddhism—have had very much the same effect on the masses with their own particular versions of supernaturalism. The clearest and frankest statement, however, that I have ever found demonstrating the social teachings of the Church comes from a Roman Catholic source. It was included by the present Pope, Pius XI, in his encyclical at Rome in the spring of 1932, at the very height of the worst depression in the history of capitalism. This remarkable passage is as follows: "Let the poor and all those who at this time are facing the hard trial of want of work and scarcity of food, let them in a like spirit of penance suffer with greater resignation the privations imposed upon them by these hard times and the state of society, which Divine Providence in an ever-loving but inscrutable plan has assigned them. Let them accept with a humble and trustful heart from the hand of God the effects of poverty, rendered harder by the distress in which mankind is now struggling. . . . Let them take comfort in the certainty that their sacrifices and troubles borne in a Christian spirit will concur efficaciously to hasten the hour of mercy and peace."

### *Karl Marx on Christianity*

In the light of this eloquent plea by Pope Pius it is most interesting to read Karl Marx's own summing up of the Christian religion.

"The social principles of Christianity," said Marx, "justified the slavery of classical days; they glorified medieval serfdom; and they are able when needs be to defend the oppression of the proletariat, though with a somewhat crestfallen air. The social principles of Christianity proclaim the need for the existence of a

ruling class and a subjugated class, being content to express the pious hope that the former will deal philanthropically with the latter. The social principles of Christianity assume that there will be compensation in heaven for all the infamies here below. The social principles of Christianity explain that the atrocities perpetrated by the oppressors on the oppressed are either just punishments for original and other sins, or else trials which the Lord in his wisdom ordains for the redeemed. The social principles of Christianity preach cowardice, self-contempt, abasement, submission, humility; . . . and the proletariat, which will not allow itself to be treated as canaille, needs courage, self-confidence, pride, a sense of personal dignity and independence, even more than it needs daily bread. The social principles of Christianity are lickspittle, whereas the proletariat is revolutionary. So much for the social principles of Christianity!" \*

I have indicated the chief reasons why the Communists in Soviet Russia are opposed to the Church and religion and also the chief ways in which they fight the old superstitions. It now remains to be asked to what extent the anti-religious campaign has been successful. The most recent figures were announced at the meeting held in Moscow in February, 1936, to celebrate the tenth anniversary of the founding of the Union of Militant Atheists. The Union now boasts a membership of more than 5,000,000 with 50,000 active local organizations. There is also the youth section, the Young Militant Atheists, who number over 2,000,000. During its existence the Union has published more than 1,000 anti-religious titles, with the actual total of books and pamphlets issued running into several millions.

Emelian Yaroslavsky, old Bolshevik and friend of Lenin's, who is President of the Union of Militant Atheists, claims that there are approximately 40,000,000 active atheists in the U.S.S.R. out of a population now close to 170,000,000. This figure does not include, however, all those who have become indifferent to religion and ceased going to church. The number of "unchurched" is estimated as at least half the population, namely, .85,000,000. The number of churches, synagogues, and mosques still open is probably about 60 per cent of the total before the Revolution.

\* Article in *Deutsche Brusseler Zeitung*, September 12, 1847.

As would be expected, the anti-religious movement has made considerably more progress in the city than in the country districts. In a metropolis like Moscow around 80 per cent of the former churches have shut down, while in the villages as a whole only from 3 to 10 per cent have closed. The most non-religious localities of all are undoubtedly the dozens of new industrial centers which have sprung up under the First and Second Five-Year Plans. In most of these places there is not a single church or religious body of any kind.

### *Old People Remain Religious*

From 30 to 40 per cent of the members of the Union of Militant Atheists belong to the Communist Party or are candidates for it. Women constitute 30 per cent of the Union. There are about one hundred different racial and language groups in the organization. The Red Army is one of the most active centers for the dissemination of atheism. Its recruits are given systematic instruction in anti-religious theory just as they are in other Communist doctrines. And at least 75 per cent of the Red Army men declare themselves against religion before they are dismissed from service. This is important, because Red Army men are likely to become especially influential in the communities to which they return. The most significant figure of all, in my opinion, is that 90 per cent of the Union membership are persons under 46 years of age. This definitely shows that it is the older people in Soviet Russia who cling most firmly to religious beliefs.

This fact indicates that the future in the U.S.S.R. almost certainly belongs to anti-religious dialectical materialism and to the affirmative, this-worldly, life-asserting philosophy of what is perhaps best called Soviet Humanism. The entire educational apparatus of the country, working in harmony with the ever more successful social and economic reconstruction, is bent on achieving such an end. A large proportion of the older generation, steeped from its earliest days in religious beliefs and practices, will undoubtedly hold fast to its traditional faiths till the very end. But the younger generations, reared for the most part in an atmosphere actively hostile or indifferent towards religion, grow up with the Communist world-view as a natural and accepted part of their

lives. And as new generations reach maturity this attitude will become even more deeply ingrained and widespread.

It is sometimes assumed by radicals that the establishment of full-fledged Socialism in the Soviet Union will automatically put an end to religion. Such a notion is obviously incorrect. The capitalist system did not bring religion into being; it has utilized and stimulated for its own purposes already existing religious institutions. With the complete disappearance of Capitalism, the social-economic roots of religion, which for the Marxist are the primary ones, will also wither away. But certain psychological and biological phenomenon that have in the past led to religious belief will continue to exist under any system. There are always likely to be, for instance, various kinds of purely personal frustration; and above all there will always be the event called death. Thus, even had the last man renounced the last god, new notions of immortality might well spring up around the fact of death. For these reasons, then, an alert socialist society will always need to sponsor direct philosophical and scientific teaching against religious superstitions.

### *Stratagems of the Church*

In addition, the Church in Soviet Russia may so change its attitude on social and economic questions that to a superficial observer it may seem to harmonize with a socialist system. The so-called Living Church movement has already exemplified this possibility. The Living Church is composed of the more progressive clergy and has assured the Soviet Government of its entire sympathy and loyalty. It has also "declared Capitalism a deadly sin and pronounced the social revolution just." The Union of Militant Atheists has recently called attention to this tendency by claiming that more and more priests are posing as Communist sympathizers in order to lure the people to church. In one village it is reported that the priests even went so far as to climb up the church towers and paint the crosses red to prove their revolutionary sentiment!

It is, however, exceedingly doubtful if such stratagems on the part of the Church can permanently offset the unaltering determination of the Communists to do away with religion and the

inclusion of this aim as one of the chief features of the educational system from one end of the country to the other. Whatever temporary and local successes the present clergy may have, it is faced with one fatal fact (among several other fatal facts), namely, that those among the younger generation who are making the priesthood a career are exceedingly few and far between. This means that eventually the Church will simply not have the personnel to carry on its work.

A reformed and liberal Church seems no solution of the religious problem to the Communist. He is likely to think, with Lenin, that this kind of Church, because it is more difficult to combat, is even more dangerous basically than an out-and-out reactionary religious organization. The Marxist position is that since religion is necessarily tied up with a belief in the supernatural, it cannot be reformed so as to become a good influence in the world without ceasing to be religion. In this respect it is unlike education, for example, which can be bent to the purposes of a socialist regime. The Marxist also considers most confusing and harmful the widespread habit of redefining religious terms like "God", "immortality" and "religion" itself so broadly and vaguely that they lose all distinctive meaning. This is thought to be a theological trick to retain the support of the more educated and intelligent people for religion. And Lenin strongly denounced this particular tendency when, before the Revolution, even a writer so friendly to the Left as Maxim Gorky indulged in it.

### *Reactions in Foreign Countries*

The effects of the anti-religious campaign in the U.S.S.R. reach, of course, across the borders of the country into almost every land. The scientifically-minded in all quarters of the earth have hailed with enthusiasm the Soviet attitude towards religion. In 1925 an International of Proletarian Freethinkers was formed, the Union of Militant Atheists becoming one of its sections. A few years later Moscow was chosen as the headquarters of this International, which maintains contacts with workers' freethought groups in more than thirty nations. In 1926 the so-called "reformist" freethinkers withdrew to organize the separate Brussels International of Freethinkers. At present the International at

Moscow is trying to bring about a united front with the one at Brussels. The influence, however, of Soviet dialectical materialism and anti-religion extends far beyond the activities of formally organized groups such as the freethinkers.

As a matter of fact, regardless of the situation in Soviet Russia, the anti-religious movement in the world at large has been steadily becoming more powerful during the last century or so. This has been partly due to the rapid advances in science, especially in the fields of biology and psychology. But equally important has been the progress of the labour movement in various countries. Almost universally, wherever the working class has grown in strength and influence, hand in hand with this development there has gone an increasingly effective campaign against the Church and religion as supporters of the present social-economic system. Recent happenings in Mexico and Spain bear out this point.

The reaction abroad to the Soviet stand on religion is not, as everyone knows, always favorable. In the same encyclical from which I have already quoted Pope Pius writes: "It is necessary . . . that we unite all our forces in one solid, compact line against the battalions of evil, enemies of God no less than of the human race. . . . For God or against God, this once more is the alternative that shall decide the destinies of mankind." And he even invites non-Christians who believe in God and religion to join the united front against the followers of Marx and Lenin. The Protestants do likewise. A recent report by the Laymen's Foreign Missions Inquiry, financed by John D. Rockefeller, Jr., calls attention to the Marxist campaign against religion and then states: "Thus it is that Christianity finds itself in point of fact aligned in this world-wide issue with the non-Christian faiths of Asia." So, for practically the first time ever recorded, we find Catholic and Protestant churchmen not only willing to coöperate with each other against a mutual foe, but ready to make common cause with Mohammedans, Buddhists, and other heathen sects.

While undoubtedly many religious persons in foreign countries are genuinely disturbed by what is happening to religion in the Soviet Union, the outcry against the U.S.S.R. in religious quarters has often been taken advantage of by groups primarily interested in witnessing the collapse of the first socialist state. Further-

more, in their appeals for "a new crusade" and "a death struggle" against the anti-religious policies of the Soviet Union the more reactionary Church authorities frequently give the impression that the use of military force against the workers' republic would not be unwelcome to them. Certain it is that the capitalist and fascist enemies of Soviet Russia are ever ready to exploit the anti-Soviet attacks by churchmen in the direction of whipping up a psychology favorable to armed intervention against the U.S.S.R. It is significant that in his first important speech during the Rhineland crisis Hitler attempted to stir up sentiment against the Soviet Union on the religious issue.

### *Religion Doomed in U.S.S.R.*

But whatever may be the opinion of the faithful in capitalist countries and whatever may be the development of religion in these same lands, there can be little doubt that the anti-religious movement in the Soviet Union will continue to grow in breadth and strength. Year by year a large and increasing proportion of the population in what was only recently one of the world's most backward nations are becoming conscious atheists who recognize that this life is all and that men must make the best of their one opportunity to create here and now happiness for themselves and others. There is little reason to believe that Soviet Russia will in the course of time return to some species of religion, refined or otherwise. The Communists are convinced that only if Capitalism, with all its misery and oppression for the masses of the people, revives in the U.S.S.R., will the counter-balancing escape mechanism of religion come back. But there is about as much chance of Capitalism becoming established again in Russia as of the United States becoming again a colony of Great Britain!

So it is possible to say that the situation in the Soviet Union indicates the prospect, for the first time in history, of a whole people—in this case numbering 170,000,000—becoming free from religion and concentrating, without supernatural distractions, upon man's welfare on this earth. Whether one happens to approve or disapprove, the attainment of this goal will surely constitute one of the most significant things that has ever occurred in the long career of the human race.

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