

The Leningrad Museum of the History of Religion and Atheism*

MARK ELLIOTT

The strangest mix of emotions overwhelms the Western visitor to Leningrad's Kazan Cathedral, now styled the Museum of the History of Religion and Atheism. How is one to fathom this breathtaking sanctuary? What are one's feelings gazing at its magnificent rows of Corinthian columns all marching toward the Cathedral's centre where a massive dome soars upward, the whole ensemble a striking imitation of St Peter's in Rome? But the observer is jolted back to the reality that this is no longer part of Christendom. In one of history's more grotesque paradoxes this mammoth sanctuary erected for Christian worship now serves as the headquarters of a militant organisation whose purpose is not merely to disparage God but literally to deny his existence. The spiritually sensitive onlooker has difficulty reconciling the awe produced by the grandeur of the structure with the disgust and revulsion produced by the rows of exhibits of religion at its worst which crowd the floor of the former cathedral.

To understand this, one of the Soviet Union's most curious "attractions", it is important to outline the museum's development and the evolution that has taken place in its approach to religion. The Museum of the History of Religion and Atheism is the most prominent museum in the Soviet Union devoted to the undermining of religious beliefs and the propagation of atheism. As an affiliate of the USSR Academy of Sciences, it seeks to propagate Soviet Marxism's faith in "scientific atheism". Specifically, the museum aims to "unmask the myth of Christ, demonstrate the reactionary nature of the ideological basis of Christianity", and more generally to disprove "the 'theory' of spiritual revelation", all of this through exhibitions and literature which "address not only the mind but the heart, possess great persuasive power, [and] create a definite psychological mood".¹

The museum edifice, originally the Cathedral of Our Lady of Kazan, served as a shrine for the famous icon of the Virgin of Kazan and remains

*Portions of this paper appeared in Vol. 23 of *The Modern Encyclopedia of Russian and Soviet History* under the entry for "Museum of the History of Religion and Atheism". The author presented the study in its present form to the Historians' Study Group, London, on 18 September 1982.

one of the most impressive examples of Russian neo-classical architecture. The church, commissioned by Paul and completed under Alexander I from 1801 to 1811, was the work of the Russian architect A. N. Voronikhin. After the destruction of Napoleon's Grand Army in Russia the Tsar designated the cathedral as a memorial to the victory over the French. General M. I. Kutuzov, hero of the 1812 campaign, was buried there in 1813 and numerous war trophies lined the sanctuary. In 1837 statues of Kutuzov and General Barclay de Tolly were placed on either side of the monument's north entrance off the Nevsky Prospect.²

Leningrad's Museum of the History of Religion and Atheism opened only in 1932 after some 44 other anti-religious museums. Nevertheless, this institution eventually became the most significant of its kind in the country. During the Second World War the museum organised an exhibition on "the history of the heroic past of the Russian people", and by implication apparently moderated the exhibits' emphasis on anti-religious propaganda. Also conforming with Stalin's wartime compromise with the church, Soviet authorities in 1941 closed all anti-religious museums outside Leningrad and Moscow or transformed them into general historical museums.³

The most famous director of the museum, heading the institution from 1947 to 1955, was Vladimir D. Bonch-Bruyevich, scholar, historian and personal friend and political adviser of Lenin's. In 1946-47 he served as the head of the Central Anti-religious Museum (Moscow). When that institution closed in 1947 Bonch-Bruyevich was appointed to head the Leningrad Museum and brought with him to his new post the massive collections of the Moscow Museum. This acquisition included thousands of exhibits and a library of nearly 80,000 volumes. Under the leadership of Bonch-Bruyevich the museum greatly expanded its activities. Restoration work began to repair the damage done by German artillery and aircraft during the Second World War and a manuscript division was added to the museum's library. Bonch-Bruyevich initiated a publication series, stimulated research and educational work on the subject of atheism, and secured additional facilities for the use of the museum.⁴ According to M. I. Shakhnovich, Bonch-Bruyevich thwarted repeated attempts to have the Museum closed in his last years "when scientific-atheistic propaganda was neglected".⁵

Under Khrushchev and Brezhnev the Museum became a firm fixture in a renewed and intensified anti-religious campaign. Its holdings continued to grow with the acquisition of the significant personal library of Bonch-Bruyevich and the contents of various closed religious establishments. At present the Museum holds over 200,000 printed volumes, a sizeable manuscript archive, a collection of more than 150 icons, paintings by well-known Western and Russian artists and quantities of sculptures, photographs, religious artefacts and archaeological materials.⁶

In recent decades the museum staff has been able to increase the number of visitors dramatically, from 257,000 visitors in 1956 to the current annual rate of more than 700,000. This has been accomplished in large part due to the staff's emphasis upon group excursions: in 1960, for example, museum workers averaged nearly seventeen guided tours daily.⁷ While the presentation of exhibits and the staff's work to maximise mass exposure to them are the museum's central functions, its institutional life encompasses a much broader range of activities. These include extensive staff lecturing on atheism in schools, factories and cultural organisations; making provision for academic research in the varied museum collections; staff work in organising provincial houses, clubs and circles on atheism; staff participation in teacher conferences on methods useful in fostering an atheistic world view; staff activity in publishing materials on atheistic themes (brochures, guidebooks, collections of academic articles including, from 1957 to 1963, the *Yezhegodnik* or *Yearbook* of the museum), and museum-sponsored workshops on such subjects as preservation techniques or the training of atheist propagandists for "individual work" with believers.⁸ A recent example of this institution's "evangelistic outreach" is a travelling exhibit on "Bible Legends" on loan to a museum in Soviet Moldavia.⁹

As late as 1974 museum exhibitions were organised around eight subjects: 1) Science and Religion; 2) The Origin of Religion; 3) Religion and Atheism in the Ancient World; 4) Religions of the East; 5) The Origin of Christianity; 6) Religion and Atheism in the West; 7) History of Russian Orthodoxy and Russian Atheism; and 8) The Overcoming of Religious Survivals in the Period of the Large-Scale Construction of Communism in the USSR. The clear intention of the exhibitions was to disparage religious experience by means of a variety of distorting caricatures, especially from the history of Russian Orthodoxy and Roman Catholicism.¹⁰ On this author's first visit in 1974 displays dwelt upon the darkest days of religious intolerance without any reference to the reforming or redeeming possibilities stemming from spiritual faith. The former cathedral had become a storehouse of an assortment of branding irons, thumbscrews, whips and similar instruments of the Inquisition; supplementing the collection were unsubtle paintings of pompous, grotesquely formed clerics; and dioramas of heretics burning at the stake.¹¹

In the late 1950s Marcus Bach, American author and professional student of religion, came away from these exhibitions with identical impressions. Little had changed between the 1950s and the 1970s. Bach's recollections in his book, *God and the Soviets*, demonstrated the continuity in the museum's harsh portrayal of religion. There was the painting of Christ the oppressor; Christ the driver of the Horses of the Apocalypse grinding people under their hooves; and Christ the "Jewish Fortune-teller". Bach continued, "I went down into a lower level to see the

part played by the Inquisition, to gaze at religion's torture chambers and religion's instruments of terror . . . I walked around viewing scenes from other bloody chapters in the frightful fable of faith: horror scenes from the Thirty Years' War, obscenities from the period of the Reformation, torture practices of the Counter-Reformation . . . I paused transfixed before . . . iron shackles, iron chains, hair shirts, [and] iron crosses with ball and chain."¹²

Imagine this writer's surprise in March 1981 upon revisiting the museum to see every exhibition radically reworked. Crowds of Russian tourists were so thick that I feared we would not get in. It seemed quite apparent that this was a busy, regular stop on the tour of the old capital for Soviet citizens — but not so for Western tourists. I managed to explain the tightness of our schedule and a guide let us in. The museum had been closed for two years and had just re-opened several days before our 19 March visit. The best description of my feelings that day come from quick jottings in a diary, given here in paraphrase and quotes. "The contrast between the 1974 exhibit and today's is dramatic. No whips, thumbscrews, etc. The approach now is much less obnoxious, [and less] blatant." Here religion is still condemned "but in a relatively restrained, sophisticated, subtle way. There are anti-religious quotes from Engels, Marx and Lenin but the appearance of the exhibits is closer to refined instructional propaganda than to the harangue of 1974." The basement exhibits are gone, at least for now, and that is where the crude Inquisition diorama had been located in 1974, Catholicism, viciously portrayed, no longer held a prominent spot on the museum floor. Museum exhibitions in 1981 centred on 1) Origins of Religion; 2) Russian sectarianism; 3) Russian Orthodoxy; and 4) West European deism and atheism — in general a much more concentrated focus on Russian as opposed to worldwide religious life, especially in the last century. If I missed other sections in my rush they certainly were not as prominent as were the above. Kutuzov's sepulchre is still in one corner. There is a large statue of Lenin against another wall. The Russian Orthodox display included heavy irons used by monks for penance and a painting of a heretic burning at the stake; "still, on the whole, much toned down from 1974. The section on Father Gapon and [his part in] the 1905 revolution could even be construed as a partially positive statement on one religious figure." Interestingly, our two regular guides, who did not go with us to this museum, and who rarely saw the need to ask my opinion on any subject, both made a point of questioning me on changes I had noted in the revamped museum.

But whatever the changes in form, the museum still dedicates itself to the destruction of a religious consciousness by distortion and crude reductionist arguments. James Megivern, Professor of New Testament at the University of North Carolina, Wilmington, made acute observations to this effect after our 1981 tour. The museum may have been "far more

blatant and offensive in its earlier form, but it is still a simplistic propaganda weapon that is contradicted and discredited by the very building in which it rests . . . The overall result is that it gives one a quaint sense of time stopped, a throwback to the 1920s. The 'critique of religion' as it emerged by then from Marx, Nietzsche, Freud, Durkheim and their cohorts is here set forth as the last word of dogma. The irony of this is comic . . . The dogma about the 'natural' dying out of religion got ludicrous assistance from Lenin's henchmen who wiped out 42,000 Orthodox priests in the first two decades after the revolution. But, of course . . . Kazan Cathedral memorialises only the atrocities of religion, not of communism."¹³

What, if anything, can these impressions of a museum before and after renovation tell us about possible changes in the Soviet approach to religion? Certainly it would be foolish to hazard guesses about the future based on the above observations apart from other evidence. It would even be risky to see changes at the former Kazan Cathedral as necessarily representative of the state approach to religion in the last decade. The fact is, for every subtle, more polished Soviet handling of religion as in the Museum of the History of Religion and Atheism, there are instances of reversion to 1930s-style "forceful persuasion", as in the case of prison sentences for religious dissidents.

What the museum alterations do reflect and what the West may safely extrapolate from this morsel of evidence, is this: a controversy of long standing continues among Soviet atheist ideologues and within the Communist party over the best approach to religion. The debate surely does not centre on whether or not religion is a potential threat to the regime; that is granted. The debate centres rather on methods: what is the most effective way to destroy the continuing influence of religion in Soviet life? The relative niceties of the present museum exhibitions belong to the strategy which say brute force and crude frontal attacks merely harden religious convictions whereas carefully constructed anti-religious propaganda will produce results more to the party's liking. Now with Brezhnev's passing the question is: will subtle persuasion or unsubtle force — or some mixture of the two — emerge as the dominant motif in the Soviet approach to religion?

¹A. A. Versinskaya *et al.*, "Massovaya rabota muzeya po preodoleniyu religioznykh perezhitkov", *Yezhegodnik muzèya istorii religii i ateizma*, Vol. V (Leningrad, 1961), p. 349; V. N. Sherdakov, "Muzei istorii religii i ateizma v sisteme nauchno-ateisticheskoi propagandy", *Voprosy nauchnogo ateizma* No. 19 (Moscow, 1976), p. 101.

²"Kazan Cathedral", *Great Soviet Encyclopedia*, 3rd ed., Vol 11, 1976, p. 541; "Kazan Cathedral", *Modern Encyclopedia of Russian and Soviet History*, Vol. 16, 1980, pp. 86-7.

³M. S. Butinova and N. P. Krasnikov, *Muzei istorii religii i ateizma; spravochnik-putevoditel* (Leningrad, 1965), p. 8; "Dvadtsat pyat' let Muzeya Istorii Religii i Ateizma Akademii Nauk SSSR", *Yezhegodnik muzeya istorii religii i ateizma*, Vol 1 (Leningrad, 1957), p. 1; Nikita Struve, *Christians in Contemporary Russia* (New York, 1967), p. 279; N. S.

Timasheff, *Religion in Russia 1917-1942* (New York, 1942), p. 141.

⁴Butinova and Krasnikov, *Muzei*, pp. 10-11; M. I. Shakhnovich, "V. D. Bonch-Bruyevich — issledovatel' religiozno-obshchestvennykh dvizhenii v Rossii", *Yezhegodnik muzeya istorii religii i ateizma*, Vol. 7 (Leningrad, 1963), pp. 294, 299; Sherdakov, "Muzei", p. 104.

⁵Shakhnovich, "Bonch-Bruyevich", pp. 298-9.

⁶Butinova and Krasnikov, *Muzei*, p. 10; David E. Powell, *Antireligious Propaganda in the Soviet Union: A Study of Mass Persuasion* (Cambridge, Mass., 1975), p. 59; Sherdakov, "Muzei", p. 104; Struve, *Christians*, p. 279.

⁷Butinova and Krasnikov, *Muzei*, p. 12; George Kline, *Religious and Antireligious Thought in Russia* (Chicago, 1968), pp. 154-5; Powell, *Antireligious Propaganda*, p. 60; Struve, *Christians*, p. 280; Verzhinskaya et al., "Massovaya rabota", p. 349.

⁸Butinova and Krasnikov, *Muzei*, pp. 8-11; "Dvadsat pyat' let", p. 4; William B. Stroyen, *Communist Russian and the Russian Orthodox Church 1943-1962* (Washington D.C., 1967), p. 92; Struve, *Christians*, p. 280; Verzhinskaya et al., "Massovaya rabota", pp. 349-50, 353-55. Sherdakov ("Muzei", p. 104), director since 1975, enumerates the museum's major publications aimed at educated audiences. One important addition is *Muzei v ateisticheskoi propagande: sbornik trudov*, ed. R. A. Filippova et al. (Leningrad, 1979).

⁹Keston News Service, 17 September 1982. See also Sherdakov, "Muzei", pp. 102-3.

¹⁰Butinova and Krasnikov, *Muzei*, p. 10; Powell, *Antireligious Propaganda*, p. 60.

¹¹Kline, *Religious and Anti-Religious Thought*, p. 154; J. C. Pollock, *The Faith of Russian Evangelicals* (New York, 1964), p. 47.

¹²*God and the Soviets* (New York, 1958), pp. 21-2.

¹³Wilmington (North Carolina) *Morning Star*, 11 April 1981.

MIKLÓS HARASZTI

In *RCL* Vol. 11 No. 1 we published two documents about Hungarian Catholics (pp. 96-108) and stated in our introduction (p. 95) that they were both written pseudonymously. We now wish to apologise most sincerely to the author of the document entitled "Turning the Other Cheek", Miklós Haraszti, who in fact wrote under his real name.

Haraszti is one of a small group of dissenters in Hungary who have been coming under growing pressure from the State since 1982. He is one of the editors of the unofficially published journal *Beszélő* (The Talker). He was also associated with a so-called "samizdat boutique" which operated unofficially but openly from a private flat in Budapest until it was closed by the Hungarian authorities in December 1982. Haraszti is currently under investigation on unspecified charges after a brief period of detention earlier this year.

Though not a believer himself, Haraszti has taken an interest in church controversies for some years, including the current one between the Roman Catholic hierarchy in Hungary and the "Basis" groups. According to the most recent reports, this controversy is continuing unabated since the suspension of Father György Bulányi in June 1982.