

Chronicle

Soviet Press: Believers in a Positive Light

During 1987 a significant number of articles portraying religion and certain groups of believers in a positive light appeared in Soviet newspapers and magazines. A notable precursor of this trend was a letter from Yevgeni Yevtushenko to the editor of *Komsomol'skaya pravda*, which was published in that newspaper on 10 December 1986, International Human Rights Day.

In his letter Yevtushenko defended the right of Soviet authors to reflect on religious themes in their literary works and in press articles — an activity for which the prominent contemporary writers Bykov, Astaf'yev and Aitmatov had been heavily criticised in an earlier press article by Ivan Kryvelev (*Komsomol'skaya pravda*, 30.7.86). Yevtushenko's letter, published under the title "Culture — the source of morality", presented the problem in the following terms:

Why should Bykov not enjoy the right — while taking note of the darker sides of religion — to say quite objectively that "religion has also preached human values of importance for all times and for all peoples"? Surely that is the truth. At least we should remember that during the time of the Roman

Empire Christianity played an indisputably progressive role: it was not by chance that those who preached "do not kill" and "love your neighbour as yourself" were torn to shreds by imperial lions. Kryvelev is right when he speaks about the cruelty of the crusades, the fires of the inquisition and the blood-tainted hypocrisy of those who have disfigured the postulates of Christianity. But, looking back on history, has Christianity been alone in this? We should remember the genocide in Cambodia, when Pol Pot and his followers declared the "Red Terror" against their own people... We must not confuse postulates with deviations.

Further on in his letter Yevtushenko advocates a wider dissemination of the Bible. He writes,

The bible is a great monument of culture. To this day I cannot understand why the state press has published the koran but not the bible. Without knowledge of the bible our youth is unable to understand much of Pushkin, Gogol', Dostoyevsky and Tolstoy. The whole of early Mayakovsky is permeated with biblical metaphors. Yet a bible costs a huge amount of money in second-hand

bookshops or on the black market.

Yevtushenko defines positive manifestations of religion with carefully chosen examples. "Religion was rightly called the opium of the people when it was used as a tool of social oppression," he writes.

But can we forget that during the war against fascism our church made a large contribution to the collective victory? Can we forget that the Dean of Canterbury Cathedral, Hewlett Johnson, was one of the founders of the peace movement? Can we forget that the priest Ernesto Cardenal has become one of the outstanding revolutionary poets of Latin America, active in the struggle against imperialism?

If Yevtushenko finds positive things to say about religion on the level of ideas, journalists working for the widely circulated weekly newspapers *Literaturnaya gazeta* and *Moskovskiy novosti* have promoted believers' rights in the more practical sphere of religious policy implementation.

Orthodox believers wishing to register a church in the town of Oktyabrsky, Bashkir ASSR, were the subject of an article by Vladimir Shevelev in *Moskovskiy novosti* on 25 January 1987. The nearest working Orthodox church was more than 20 km away in a village called Vozdvizhenka but the Executive Committee of the Oktyabrsky City Soviet used all kinds of delaying tactics to avoid granting registration. Shevelev's article showed how reasonable the complaints and petitions of the believers were and reserved all its criticism for the local authorities, who were eventually forced to concede and allow the church to be registered.

Another case in which overzealous atheistic authorities infringed the constitutional rights of believers was investigated by Sergei Kiselev

and brought to the attention of the public in an article entitled "Not just by any means", published in *Literaturnaya gazeta* on 21 October 1987. Father Nikolai Sakidon, the 33-year-old priest of the parish of Barvenkov near Khar'kov, was the victim of a campaign of slander in the local newspaper, *Zhovtnevi zori* (October Dawn). Kiselev went to see the priest at his home, conducted an interview there and wrote his report quoting extensively from the priest's own testimony. Readers of Kiselev's article are left with a sympathetic impression of the priest who, through conscientious fulfilment of his duties during his first year in the priesthood, saw his church's annual income rise by 18,000 roubles. According to Archbishop Irinei of Khar'kov and Bogodukhovsky, whose comments are recorded in the article, Father Nikolai is "an honest and conscientious pastor who carries out his duties in obedience to his calling and existing canonical norms, is held in great respect by the clergy and by believers, preaches understanding between people and makes contributions to the Peace Fund." N.Kolesnik, the chairman of the Council for Religious Affairs in Ukraine, concedes that the articles published by *Zhovtnevi zori* tend to reduce believers to second class status and are, therefore, a serious breach of the decrees of the party and of government concerning atheistic propaganda. A.Onishchenko, director of the Kiev branch of the Institute of Scientific Atheism, describes these particular articles as an example of "primitivism" in atheistic propaganda.

Perhaps the most notable example of a new openness to religious opinion in the Soviet press in 1987 was an extensive interview with the Polish Primate, Cardinal Glemp, published in *Literaturnaya gazeta* on 4 February. The Cardinal was asked

for his views on Gorbachev's policy of *glasnost*' and replied with the following words:

It seems to me that thinking is either right or wrong. If it is wrong then it assesses reality incorrectly, and if it is right, it understands what reality actually is . . . When one people is dealing with another it must know the whole truth about

the other people. Yet propaganda expounds only one truth. This is detrimental to the cause. I therefore believe that full and truthful information is very important. Through truth we reach mutual understanding. From there it is not so far to universal peace.

MALCOLM WALKER

Religious Believers and the New Soviet Emigration

The figures for Jewish emigration from the Soviet Union are widely regarded, especially among the important Jewish lobby in the United States, as a yardstick of current Soviet attitudes to human rights questions. Jewish emigration in 1987 has been higher than in any year since the late 1970s. But almost unnoticed, emigration of ethnic Germans to West Germany has jumped, and has now for the first time overtaken the Jewish figure. Even Armenian emigration has recently increased, passing the 6,000 mark last year. What of the religious aspects of this increased emigration? There are several interesting points which come to light on an analysis of these figures.

The official number for Jews emigrating on Israeli visas in 1987 has reached over 5,400. With a few exceptions, they fly to Vienna and then choose to go to Israel or to a third country, usually the United States. The proportion choosing Israel as a destination has been low — little more than a quarter on average — indicating that only a small number of those emigrating would consider themselves religious Jews, wishing to settle in the Holy Land.

The moving sight of Anatoli Shcharansky kissing the Western Wall in Jerusalem is not repeated by every Jewish emigrant. However, last year there were a number of Hebrew teachers and religious activists among the emigrants, some of them, such as Yulian Edelshtein, formerly imprisoned for their religious activity, for whom the dream of being allowed to go to the Promised Land has been fulfilled after years of campaigning. There was universal joy among the Moscow Jewish community when Iosif Begun, also a recently released prisoner, was among a further group of refuseniks finally given permission to leave.

The figures published for the number of Jewish emigrants are, to a certain extent, a fiction. The Soviet authorities allow many non-Jews to emigrate to Israel, although they know they are not Jewish and are unlikely to want to settle there. This is a convenient face-saving device in two ways: the authorities can rid themselves of troublesome dissidents without conceding that non-Jews too have the right to leave; and a higher than otherwise total improves Jewish-American perceptions of the Soviet human rights record. One group