

RELIGION IN SOVIET RUSSIA

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WHEN the new Soviet Constitution was proclaimed, it was declared by Marshal Stalin to have won for Russia the title "Most Democratic Country in the World". Whether this, if true, would be ground for pride, is disputable. Even in countries such as France, the United States or Great Britain, where the democratic principle is highly esteemed, only the most radiant enthusiasts believe that there can never be too much of it, or that it should be held always more important than any other value for mankind. But apart from the question whether it would be a proper boast for any country that it had pushed the democratic principle farther than any other pushed it, one may well contend that in some specifiable respects "democracy" in the Soviet Union has no more than formal acknowledgment. Where there is no genuinely popular press, no practice of free political debate, no opportunity of voting at the poll for candidates other than those on an official list, it is hard to discern the character of "government by discussion" on which every true democrat insists.

A like doubt may well be felt as one reads glowing tribute from such writers as the Dean of Canterbury to the pattern of religious toleration set by the U. S. S. R. for the rest of the world. A doubt not merely of the merit they claim for certain policies in this field, but also of the practice of such policies in other than a formal sense within the Soviet Union.

Often we are warned that by "anti-Russian capitalist propaganda" the British and American public have been shockingly misled on this matter. That the misleading has of late been much more in the opposite direction, it is the purpose of this article to show.

I.

One may easily exaggerate the significance of some outbursts in the early period of the Russian Revolution. Tempers were high, a counter-revolutionary menace produced cruel measures of defence, and the historian looking back after the lapse of more than a quarter-century has need to re-estimate "Bolshevism" as "Jacobinism" was re-estimated after a similar abatement of the anger abroad against Robespierre and Danton. The judicial spirit of Sir James Mackintosh in *Vindiciae Gallicae* is required for a like revision of the outburst in Russia,

where—as in France—one might well have said with Coleridge that the sun was rising though his light was hidden by many a cloud of human passions.

The *League of the Militant Godless* has apparently been disbanded. No more is heard of "War on the Anti-God Front", of the museums with blasphemous exhibits ranged in sequence to make religion ridiculous, or the official burlesque of the sanctities of the Christian Year at Christmas and Easter. Like the abolition of private trade and the compulsory equalizing of incomes, followed so soon by the "New Economic Policy", which acknowledged these first extravagances as a mistake, the ferocious State Secularism of those first years has faded into a sinister memory. What the other "old Bolsheviks" would have said if they could have foreseen Marshal Stalin's present *entente* with the Orthodox Greek Church, and the cooperation of prelates of the Holy Synod in council with members of the *Politburo*, it is interesting to guess. When Leo Trotsky and his circle declared Marshal Stalin an apostate in these changes from the Lenin faith and practice, what they urged as a reproach may have been in truth a compliment. But there is no doubt that in religious as in economic policies he had executed a startling *volte face*.

A piquant suggestion is one we owe here to the Dean of Canterbury. He cites the *New Testament* parable of the man with two sons who were sent to work in his vineyard, and who differed in that one said "I go, Sir" but went not, while the other said "I will not", but afterwards repented and went. To the question "Whether of the two did the will of his father?" the answer is obvious, and the Dean asks us to see in the Christian practice (combined with verbal denials) of the Soviet Union a spirit more truly devout than that of the capitalist countries, professedly Christian, but essentially exploiters of the weak. Whether Marshal Stalin and his colleagues on the *Politburo* merit this tribute from a leader in the Church of England, for an unconscious Christianity so much more valuable than that of the countries formally Christian, is the point I am here concerned to discuss. I take Dean Johnson's publications, *The Soviet Power* and *The Secret of Soviet Strength*, as typical of much that has come to us from versatile writers, especially since in June, 1941, Russia became our ally.

In these monographs we have the picture of a country which has solved with amazing speed and effectiveness the major problems of a just and at the same time an efficient administra-

tion. Soviet Russia is shown to us as having set the example of a "planned economy" to those capitalist Powers whose economy is still the sport of accident or caprice among selfish industrial competitors. To achieve this, we are earnestly entreated to realize, is what all who appreciate the responsibilities of high public trust should take as their mission, but what only Soviet Russia has so far resolved even to attempt. On this ground her work, the Dean assures us, rests on moral foundations: "Russia's beliefs have affinity with religion". There alone, as yet, have Nature's resources been surveyed with scientific thoroughness, so that they may be made to yield their utmost for the needs of man, and there alone is the product applied on principles of real distributive justice. The "vested interest", which elsewhere so obstructs social progress, has met in the Soviet Union with the same summary treatment as other superstitions of the past. No respect, it seems, is there paid to any individual demand that conflicts with the public good, and the "monopolist" whom—for example, in the United States—it was found needful to restrain in other countries by "anti-Trust Laws" has automatically disappeared, like some evil growth in a soil or climate gloriously fatal to it. The principle of "service" has been substituted for the motive of "profit."

Thus, in the Dean's account, a transformation assumed elsewhere to require generations or even centuries of gradual development, with many a failure and many a relapse, has been achieved by Soviet Russia with no set-back and in a few short years. Unemployment abolished; a people, twenty-five years ago no less than 90 per cent illiterate, now the most widely and eagerly reading general public in Europe; the discoveries and inventions of science for the first time yielding their true result in increased comfort for everyone, so that here at least Henry George would have found no shocking paradox of deepened poverty as sequel to scientific progress. For the Dean of Canterbury, here is indeed the land from which to learn at once the secret of a more efficient administration and the lessons of a more discerning social justice, for capitalistic exploitation has been the denial not only of fair play but also of a management that looks carefully ahead: it has been at once appallingly selfish and appallingly wasteful.

The average reader must rise from perusal of *The Soviet Power* thrilled by the thought of Utopia as thus at last found. He must picture the Christian moralist in company with the

industrial expert hastening to Moscow for examination of the great movement which has both fulfilled and reconciled the separate ideals, before so visionary and at times so antagonistic. One thinks of Miss Rose Strunsky's story about Russian revolutionaries in 1917, having made a pilgrimage to the tomb of Tolstoy—"to tell the little Father the good news, that the Kingdom of Heaven had come, and that Reason was established among men." Those pilgrims quickly found that their report had been premature. Unless Tolstoy had very much altered in ways of thought and of speech, his shade must have been impatient of such facile optimism.

Mr. Eugene Lyons, who knows Russia very well indeed, has written of the Dean of Canterbury that the goodness of his heart is as notable as the strangeness of his mind. But this is to do much less than justice to a mind so keen, in combination of the training of an engineer with the experience of a captain of industry and the spiritual reflections of a theologian. We shall search long for quite so compact and telling a critique on the manner in which capitalist society, in its organization of labour, sacrifices at once the just rights of the employee and the social responsibility of the enterprise to the one purpose of maximum company profits. No wonder that the circulation of the book reached some distance into its second million, unimpeded—perhaps even helped—by abuse of the author at the time for his report on the virtues of Republican Spain.

But that Dean Johnson or anyone else of the circle of pro-Soviet *litterateurs* is to be followed in so rosy an estimate of Soviet leadership to a more efficient and at the same time a more Christian social system, by no means follows from acknowledgment of merits such as these in such writing. We have known too long, and too sorrowfully, certain ways of the U.S.S.R. first under Lenin, next under Stalin, and have had too many admissions from those whose desire had been to think the best of that system, but whom intimate study on the spot had convinced of its large-scale inhumanity. Not merely such American onlookers in Moscow as Mr. W. H. Chamberlin, whose anti-Soviet predisposition has perhaps to be discounted as much as the predisposition of John Reed in the Soviet's favour, but such too as Mr. Max Eastman, who had been the Soviet's most ardent champion when he edited *The Masses*, and whose years of observation on the spot drove to painful acknowledgment that he had been entirely wrong. Or, again, Lord Passfield, whom we still know better as Sidney Webb. Two year

ago a terrible book entitled *One Who Survived*, by Alexander Barmine, recounted the personal experiences of one who had held for many years high office under a system by which he became more and more disgusted. Since then, the revelations of the Espionage Commission at Ottawa have been such as suggested by no means a form of government loftily superior to the vices of government as previously known, but rather one reproducing them in forms of which we had read with sceptical detachment in lurid fiction. Mr. Kravchenko's *I Chose Freedom* tells a like tale. Explain all such evidence away, discrediting the writers and witnesses one by one: you will not readily get rid of them all. No one with either knowledge or sense of humour will dismiss, for example, the critique by Sidney Webb either as the rash judgment of a visitor in a hurry or as prompted by "capitalist" prejudice.

So one turns to our optimistic Dean, and reads his argument again in the light of tragic counter-testimony: testimony about the "Purges", for example, or about the millions who perished through famine in the Ukraine that the First Five-Year Plan might be reported successful. One wonders at his power to reconcile the materialistic interpretation of history, so dear to Marx and to Lenin, with a zeal for justice and benevolence. These contradictory moods will surely sooner or later obstruct each other, and if even a fraction of the evidence apparently well attested about the doings of the Red Army in Finland, in Lithuania, in Poland be correct, there is no room for doubt as to which mood in these cases prevailed. One might have expected that a Dean at least would not doubt the moral peril of adopting a theory of life which makes moral differences meaningless, and that he would not be quite content with the recollection of how seldom there is logical coherence—either for good or for evil—between theory and conduct. In this respect the denial of all religion, so far from being an accidental or detachable accompaniment of Communist policy, is in truth, of its very essence—as Marx and Engels, Lenin and Trotsky, so clearly saw and so strongly insisted.

On the basis of a materialistic interpretation of history, to be "religious" becomes simply either an absurdity or an imposture, for the contradiction within human nature that all the great religions have taken as their starting-point has been analyzed away. If it reappears, as one is thankful to note that it must and does in many a Communist, this is because—like the Dean himself—the Communist thus nobly inconsistent

has either not seen or has refused to accept the practical upshot of ideas by which he has been fascinated.

A similar criticism may be passed upon the profession always repeated in Communist manifestoes but never even faintly fulfilled in the practice of Communist States, that government under the system they favour will by the very excellence of its administration in time render itself superfluous. For nearly a hundred years, ever since Frederick Engels coined the aphorism "The State will not be abolished, it will wither away", readers have been entertained with this self-eliminating quality of the Marxian regime. Dean Johnson is obviously somewhat dissatisfied about it, for he feels that the process must be expected to take at least some hundreds of years. A hope to be fulfilled, as Carlyle said, "one of these centuries" is no very effective dynamic for an Age so uneasy as our own, and the Dean has not made it appear convincing that the process is even—however slowly—on its way. Even as he was writing about how the rigor of Soviet Russia's first Constitution (July 10, 1918) was softened by its second (1924) and this again by its third (1936) "the most democratic Constitution in the world . . . in a worthy line with our own *Magna Carta*", strange developments of executive autocracy at Moscow were being prepared. 1937 witnessed the vast Purges, in which no one knows how many were "liquidated": they certainly numbered scores of thousands, one's friends in a Russian city disappearing like victims of the Black Death in mediaeval England, and the survivors waiting each day in terror to find who must go next. *Magna Carta*, with *Habeas Corpus*, was a distinctly unsuitable similitude for that third Soviet Constitution of 1936.

III.

What can we seriously make of the argument for a disposition of essential Christian purpose in the Soviet management of affairs? Dean Johnson is not alone in insisting on this. I have no reason to think that it is favoured in Moscow, where at least older members of the Bolshevik Party must find it embarrassing. But those who serve the Soviet cause in propaganda through foreign countries have laid much stress upon it as a plea for Anglo-Russian alliance. There is an astonishing passage in a recent book by Sir Bernard Pares, bidding us remember that "Communism" was a very conspicuous feature of the early Christian Church, and suggesting that British

and Russians might find here an impulse to harmony rather than to discord. The implied similitude between the habits of the Christian Society as set forth in *Acts* ii, 44-45, and those enjoined in a Soviet Union manual is beyond any play on words that one might have thought possible in so reputable a writer. Dean Johnson, and all others who use such *simulacrum* of an argument for the cause to which they are devoted, must in the first instance explain away the relevant passages in the work of authoritative Communists, from Marx and Engels to Lenin and Stalin.

By no reasonable interpretation can such passages be reconciled with the Christian account of human relationship. The Dean of Canterbury does not, as he supposes, understand Communism far better than it was understood by its founder, or by the first great revolutionary who succeeded in fashioning a vast State on its principles. When Marx coined the aphorism *Religion is the Opiate of the Working-Classes*, when Lenin translated this into practice by depriving of civic privilege all whose office it was to administer such a dangerous drug to the proletariat, when the Moscow radio during the Spanish Civil War kept up its sinister advice to give no quarter to priests, this was due to no unfortunate misunderstanding on the part of Communist leaders, which an enlightened Anglican Modernist might have dispelled. However large the allowance we make for differences in mere form of statement, however we dismiss as unimportant a denial in theory of what remains inculcated by practice, however we emphasize logical implications in contrast with psychological content, it remains clear that from Marx to Lenin and Stalin the anti-religious element could not be withdrawn from Communism without nullifying its essence. It would be a pleasure to find, but unfortunately the text forbids it, that the Secularist revolt led by the Bolsheviks was in the main revolt against an ecclesiastical institution which had been a servile tool of the autocracy, and that the rebels—despite some extravagance of expression—were in truth rescuing the real Faith from its unworthy custodians. But Lenin and Trotsky were quite capable of formulating this distinction, if what it means had really been in their minds. The intellectual confusion which the Dean attributes to them as concealing their fundamental nobility of purpose is a conjecture of his own to which their language lends no countenance.

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To clarify one's mind on this matter, getting rid of the absurd and very dangerous delusions about the attitude of the U.S.S.R. to religion having been "misunderstood", and about the feasibility of wholehearted cooperation between "Communist and non-Communist free countries whose moral purpose is fundamentally the same", does not involve despair of UNO, or relapse into the old sinister doctrine of "Power Politics".

Quite clearly the original design and the original technique of the Communist U.S.S.R. have been abandoned. There is no reason to suppose that they have ceased to be the ideal of those who at first promoted Communism there and whom experience has shown its enormous difficulties. It is likewise ridiculous to continue an effort at showing that the policy Marshal Stalin now pursues is logically consistent with the principles to which in the first years of the Revolution he declared his passionate adherence. Among the well-meant but alarming efforts thus to conciliate and to cement international harmony, the project of showing fundamental unity of purpose between the Marxian class-war and the Christian scheme of universal brotherhood, in other words a synthesis of the militant godless with the saints of the Church, should have been too fantastic for even the most reckless of ecclesiastical modernists. But, as Carlyle wrote of Puseyism, "This also, in the cycle of revolving ages, this also was a thing we were to see".
