

RELIGION & DEMOCRACY



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GLASNOST IN THE NCC?

Today, religious life in the Soviet Union continues to be restricted to worship. Believers are not legally permitted to engage in charitable activities, set up study groups or lectures, create youth groups or other organizations, publish parochial or diocesan newsletters. Thus most of the expressions of religious life which North American Christians consider intrinsic to their religious witness -- as, indeed, Soviet Christians also do -- are outlawed in the USSR.

The words of Keston College in England -- a respected research organization which for years has reported soberly on the troubled life of churches behind the Iron Curtain? Or perhaps the quotation is from Slavic Gospel Association, Open Doors, or one of the other well-known mission groups which have for years demonstrated solidarity with fellow believers in the Soviet bloc?

No, the words are those of Leonid Kishkovsky, President-elect of the National Council of Churches, and Bruce Rigdon, longtime NCC pointman on the Russian Orthodox Church. They appear in the foreword to the NCC's 1987 mission study booklet honoring the millennium in the Soviet Union -- this year's celebration of the 1,000-year anniversary of the official coming of Christianity to Kievan Rus', the medieval Russian state centered in what is now the Ukraine.

The Rigdon/Kishkovsky foreword is included in *One Thousand Years: Stories from the History of Christianity in the USSR, 988-1988*, by J. Martin Bailey, an associate general secretary of the NCC.

In 1986 Dr. Bailey led a controversial NCC delegation of over 200 people which visited the U.S.S.R. This and other NCC-sponsored tours have not been noted for their attention to the plight of unregistered Soviet believers. In fact, many of us have long been distressed by the calculated avoidance of any serious publicly expressed concern for the plight of those who have particularly suffered for their faith at the hands of the communist authorities.

In the foreword to Bailey's book, however, it is frankly acknowledged that "Christian witness in the Soviet Union has...brought hundreds of men and women to trial, imprisonment and exile." The foreword even notes that "a North American visitor to the USSR is not likely to meet these Christians or their families."

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This year marks the millennial anniversary of Eastern Slavic Christianity. Although official celebrations are being held by the Russian Orthodox Church in Moscow, the 988 baptism of Prince Vladimir in the Ukraine. It is a tragic irony that both the Ukrainian Orthodox Church and the Eastern Rite Catholic Church in the Ukraine have been outlawed by the Soviet government and so must celebrate their 1000th anniversary underground.

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The discussion of Gleb Yakunin, whom Rigdon and Kishkovsky call a "representative figure," is illustrative of the NCC's more receptive attitude towards the problems of those who have been repressed because of their religious beliefs. The foreword describes the harassment and imprisonment of this Russian priest and founder of the Christian Committee for the Defense of Believers' Rights in the U.S.S.R. Mention is even made of his 1975 appeal to the Fifth Assembly of the World Council of Churches (Nairobi, Kenya). What is not noted is how unresponsive the WCC and NCC were in that case, and have generally been, to such appeals for help.

There is much which is worthwhile and useful in the basic text, study guide, and other materials prepared by the NCC on the millennium. American Christians can learn a great deal about the history, theology, liturgy, music, art, and customs of Russian Orthodoxy. The materials are presented in readable and interesting fashion. Bibliographies contain references to leading experts on religion behind the Iron Curtain, including Michael Bourdeaux, Dmitry Pospelovsky, and Trevor Beeson.

These materials contain a refreshing note of candor which has been lacking in previous NCC statements on religion behind the Iron Curtain. For example, in the study guide it is noted that early Soviet church leaders faced "a militantly atheistic civil government that had as one of its primary objectives the elimination of the church." Regarding the status of the religious believers today, the guide asserts:

Religious oppression still exists in the Soviet Union, though it may be cleverly disguised. Other than institutions of higher theological learning, the church cannot establish schools or educational programs for children, youth or adults. It cannot establish charitable or social service institutions, nor conduct programs of mission or evangelism. Although some publications are permitted, they are generally restricted to limited editions of liturgical books, scriptures, theological journals (most of which are for export), church calendars and paper icons, often in numbers insufficient to meet the needs of the total church membership.

Problems of Balance Remain

Much of the basic NCC text focuses on the biographies of seven prominent figures in the history of Russian Christianity, five of whom pre-date the Soviet era. Here the text evinces a continuing and unfortunate tendency within the NCC: the reluctance to give serious attention to those parts of the Church which have suffered most at the hands of the communist government. None of the chapters



RNS Photo/Wide World

Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev, in an historic meeting on April 29, 1988, with Russian Orthodox Patriarch Pimen (right), condemned past anti-religious repression and called for a more tolerant attitude toward religion in the interest of national unity.

deals with a prominent Soviet Christian who has courageously resisted being co-opted by the state. Gleb Yakunin would have been a logical and inspiring addition to the two representatives of the official Soviet line who are included.

Instead, the text limits itself to highlighting the lives of two who have cooperated closely with Soviet authorities -- Metropolitan Nikodim (a member of the Central Committee and the Presidium of the World Council of Churches) and Alexei Bichkov (the General Secretary of the main registered Protestant organization in the U.S.S.R.: the All-Union Council of Evangelical Christians-Baptists).

The text does acknowledge that Nikodim's and Bichkov's support for the official Soviet line has touched off considerable controversy. Bailey points out that Metropolitan Nikodim played a major role in blocking a vote of censure against the Soviets at the Christian Peace Conference. At issue was the brutal Soviet suppression of the "Prague Spring" of 1968. Bailey also notes that Nikodim "sometimes appeared to Westerners too comfortable with a regime that had brutally persecuted the church." But he quickly goes on to add that "those who knew him best...came to understand that he was a child of Russia, deeply committed to the land in which his forebears had lived. He was also a realist...." One cannot but wonder if Bailey would be so indulgent with a South African church leader who refused to denounce apartheid and instead dutifully did Pretoria's bidding.

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The Way It Used to Be at the NCC

The National Council of Churches was not always so timid regarding religious repression in the Soviet Union. During the 1950s, the NCC spoke out with some authority on a number of issues related to believers. In 1962 *Religion in Communist Dominated Areas* was founded as an information service of the Department of International Affairs of the NCC. The founder and editor of RCDA was Paul Anderson, an expert on religion in the Soviet Union and a consultant to the NCC. For ten years the NCC published what was then the only major English publication dedicated to studying religion under communism.

But in 1972 the NCC withdrew its support, claiming inadequate funds. Paul Anderson retired and the new editor, Blahoslav Hruby, in the first independent issue of the journal, described his sense of what had happened:

The task of Dr. R.H. Edwin Espy, General Secretary of the National Council of Churches of Christ...to keep RCDA as a part of it was not an easy one. Some people thought that the location of RCDA in NCCC was out of place and that it harmed East-West relations, Christian-Marxist dialogue, etc. Dr. Espy knew better and he always valued and defended RCDA against its critics and detractors.... It was with great reluctance that he agreed to the termination of RCDA as a program of NCCC. This happened not because of him, but because some NCCC member denominations never gave financial support to this vital ecumenical witness.

The slide was on, and sixteen years later comes the bizarre scene of another general secretary of the National Council of Churches bragging to the General Secretary of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union that the NCC had successfully countered the fears of the religious Right (translate: those who are, in fact, very much in the tradition of NCC consultant Paul Anderson and other NCC leaders of an earlier era).

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It is very clear throughout the text that Bailey's main sympathies are with the registered, not the unregistered, Protestants -- and with the Russian Orthodox hierarchy and not those who have felt betrayed by their leadership's parroting of the Kremlin line.

The study guide, *Eyes to See, Ears to Hear*, by Betty Jane Bailey and Constance J. Tarasar, offers some excellent suggestions for discussion which help illuminate the difficult dilemmas faced by Soviet believers forced to choose between cooperating with the state authorities or incurring their retribution. This sensitive approach is helpful, but if study participants do not have the same depth of background on Yakunin that they do on Nikodim, the quality of the discussion is very likely to reflect that same imbalance.

Occasionally some serious factual errors appear in the text. The number of churches closed by Stalin during the 1920s and 1930s is significantly underestimated. Bailey puts the number at 12,000, whereas it was much, much higher. Of 54,000 Russian Orthodox churches existing before the October Revolution, by 1939 well less than 1,000 remained open, perhaps as few as 100. Bailey puts the number of Russian Orthodox parishes today at 20,000; that is nearly three times the number of churches which both Soviet and Western sources usually cite. Bailey's figure, in fact, corresponds to the 1961 figure given by the officials of the Russian Orthodox Church.

The NCC preference to take the "registered" perspective over the "non-registered" emerges again in the discus-

sion of smuggling Bibles into the Soviet Union. Bailey noted that Baptist leader Bichkov favors receiving Bibles only "through legal channels" and quotes him as saying that the Bible smugglers "mainly create noise." The statement is simply false. Millions more Bibles have, in fact, reached the Soviet Union "unofficially" over the past several decades than through the occasional concessions which the "registered" leaders have managed with great difficulty (though much fanfare) to wring from the Soviet authorities.

Many who have been dismissed over the years as Cold War zealots and enemies of peace, for making the sort of frank statements which now appear in the new NCC materials, may feel somewhat vindicated. It is of course true that the NCC's new openness on these matters parallels a greater openness by Soviet political and religious leaders as well. Thankfully, *glasnost* can be contagious.

Despite its many positive points, the foreword does set up one "strawman" provocation. The reader is told that a major reason for the preparation of the mission study is to provide "a much-needed corrective and challenge" to the notion held by some in the West that all Soviet citizens are members of the Communist Party and atheists. To be sure, there are undoubtedly some in the West who believe such nonsense. But the responsible critics of the NCC and WCC have no need of such correction. They have never ignored the continuing vitality of many Soviet churches. What they have insisted is that the plight of believers in

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the Soviet Union has consistently been much more serious than has been acknowledged by ecumenical church bodies. Such organizations have limited themselves almost entirely to contacts with registered Soviet church leaders, who are in no position to admit publicly the full story regarding religious repression in the Soviet Union.

Can Balance be Recovered at the NCC? _____

On December 8, 1987 at a meeting at the Soviet Embassy in Washington, DC, Arie Brouwer, the General Secretary of the NCC, made the following statement to the assembled group and Mikhail Gorbachev:

I represent the National Council of Churches (and) as you know one of the sources of fear of the Soviet Union is on the religious Right in this country. And I want you to know, I want to testify here that the relationship of more than thirty years standing between the National Council of Churches and the churches in the Soviet Union have done a great deal in order to alleviate some of that concern and express appreciation to you for your policies of *glasnost* and *perestroika* which have helped to improve our reputation, because people have begun to believe that what we've been saying for many years may be true. Thank you.

That the senior executive of the NCC would apparently brag about doing "a great deal" over thirty years to "alleviate some of that concern" raised by the religious Right about the Soviet Union is very revealing. To be sure, there are extremists on the Right who deserve to be critiqued for the one-sidedness of some of their reporting, just as the religious Left has justly earned a similar rebuke. But what Dr. Brouwer seems to have missed is that the vast majority of the criticism aimed at the NCC in recent years has not come from extremists on the Right, but from that broad middle (including responsible conservatives and liberals) which rejects inaccurate and incomplete information regardless of what part of the political or religious spectrum it springs from.

That Dr. Brouwer would then portray the benefits of *glasnost* and *perestroika* as improving the NCC's reputation is silly. What credit is due to the NCC for finally jumping on the bandwagon of greater openness in discussing very serious problems faced by believers in the Soviet Union? Soviet *glasnost* in this respect simply confirms what the NCC went to such trouble not to talk about before the Gorbachev era.

How sad that Dr. Brouwer could think of nothing better, or more convincing, to say to Mr. Gorbachev in his public remarks than "thank you" for allegedly improving the reputation of the NCC. Why was not a word said about the situation of believers in the Soviet Union? That issue does not appear to have been uppermost in his mind. Even Patriarch Pimen in his recent historic meeting in the Kremlin with Mr. Gorbachev used the opportunity to mention the continuing serious problems faced by believers.

It is noteworthy that what is presently being said by the Kremlin (and now finally also by the NCC) during *glas-*

nost -- namely, that there really have been serious problems for religious believers in the Soviet Union -- has been said for years by others who have tried to get the NCC to speak out more forthrightly on these issues.

Furthermore, it ought to be noted that those who have suffered most at the hands of the Soviets have insisted over and over again that it was precisely public pressure from the West which protected them and eased their lot. It is a lesson that our Jewish friends learned long ago and that we in the Christian world have been very slow to grasp. What has always been needed is that prudent combination of private intervention and public pressure; to rely on either tactic to the exclusion of the other is a prescription for failure.

Some will conclude that the greater frankness of the NCC in dealing with the problems of believers in the U.S.S.R. simply parallels the Kremlin's willingness to be more open. Such an explanation, however, deals with only part of the story. There are clearly important officials within the NCC who are pushing for a more prominent and forthright NCC advocacy for believers, both registered and unregistered, in the Soviet Union.

Last fall, for example, Leonid Kishkovsky of the Orthodox Church of America was elected to become NCC President, beginning in 1990. For many years Father Kishkovsky has walked a tightrope between his involvement on the Board of Directors of the Research Center for Religion and Human Rights in Closed Societies and his ecumenical commitments to the National Council of Churches. The research center publishes the quarterly journal *Religion in Communist Dominated Areas* -- a publication which has faithfully sought to inform the religious community about the problems of believers behind the Iron Curtain and which used to be a program of

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Leonid Kishkovsky (left), President-elect of the NCC, commented on the Millennium Appeal (see page 5) at an April 27 press conference along with Edward Leavy (center) of the Anti-Defamation League of B'nai B'rith and Dr. Bohdan Bociurkiw of Carleton University in Canada.

Religious Liberty Alert

Appeal Expresses Solidarity with Soviet Believers

1988 marks the millennial anniversary of Christianity in Kievan Rus'. In 988 Prince Vladimir accepted Byzantine Christianity as the official religion of the Eastern Slavs under his jurisdiction. Today Christian communities in the Ukraine, Belorussia, and Russia trace their roots to this momentous event. Christians throughout the rest of the world have joined with Soviet believers in this millennium celebration.

While the millennium season is an appropriate time to reflect on the history of the Church, it is also an opportunity to examine the current situation of religious believers in the U.S.S.R. Unfortunately, present Soviet policy places great pressures on religious believers of all faiths and circumscribes the activities of religious communities -- and this despite the U.S.S.R.'s accession to such international affirmations of religious freedom as the U.N. Declaration of Human Rights, the U.N. Declaration Against All Forms of Religious Intolerance, and the Helsinki Final Act.

A Call for Religious Liberty in the U.S.S.R.

Throughout the year, colorful millennium celebrations will occur against the backdrop of the unsatisfactory conditions faced by Soviet believers. Therefore, this season is a time when expressions of solidarity with the faithful are particularly significant. And with Soviet General Secretary Gorbachev's policies of *glasnost* and *perestroika* promising new patterns of relationships with believers and new legislation on church and state, expressions of solidarity that catalog deficiencies in Soviet religious policy and suggest reforms are crucial.

An Appeal for Religious Freedom in the Soviet Union on the Occasion of the Millennium of Christianity in Kievan Rus' is just such an expression of solidarity. The *Appeal* initiative, led by the James Madison Foundation in cooperation with the Puebla Institute and the Holy Trinity Fathers, is an ecumenical, bipartisan call for fundamental and permanent reforms redressing the continuing pattern of persecution and harassment of religious believers. The document, signed by over 250 prominent American religious, intellectual, and political leaders, urges the Soviet government to undertake immediately the specific measures necessary to safeguard the right of religious freedom for all Soviet citizens. Among the *Appeal's* recommendations are the following:

- a general amnesty should be proclaimed for all religious prisoners of conscience;
- religious communities should enjoy freedom to

preach, to publish, and to disseminate their teachings through the mass media;

-- parents should be able to transmit their faith to their children without being harassed or discriminated against on this account;

-- religious believers who wish to emigrate from the Soviet Union on religious grounds should be allowed to do so;

-- Article 52 of the Soviet Constitution should be amended so that citizens of the U.S.S.R. are guaranteed not only the right to "religious worship," but also to form religious associations and disseminate religious beliefs on terms of full constitutional equality with atheistic organizations and atheistic propaganda.

An Ecumenical Initiative

The *Appeal* is an expression of ecumenical solidarity rarely seen in the contemporary American religious scene. Signatories to the *Appeal* include such diverse personalities as: **Joseph Cardinal Bernardin**, Archbishop of Chicago; **John Boone**, Presbyterians for Democracy and Religious Freedom; **Bishop Edmond Browning**, Episcopal Church; **Bishop Paul Duffey**, United Methodist Church; **Arthur Hertzberg**, World Jewish Congress; **Kent Hill**, Institute on Religion and Democracy; **Leonid Kishkovsky**, Orthodox Church in America and President-elect, National Council of Churches; **Leon Klenicki**, Anti-Defamation League of B'nai B'rith; **Bernard Cardinal Law**, Archbishop of Boston; **Bishop William Lazareth**, Evangelical Lutheran Church in America; **Joseph Lowery**, Southern Christian Leadership Conference; **Mohammed Mehdi**, National Council on Islamic Affairs; **Billy Melvin**, National Association of Evangelicals; **Adrian Rogers**, Southern Baptist Convention; **Ronald Sider**, Evangelicals for Social Action; and **Stephen Sulyk**, Metropolitan for Ukrainian Catholics in the United States.

If you know of church leaders or groups that are planning millennium pilgrimages to the U.S.S.R., please encourage them to carry along copies of the *Appeal* and present them to Christians and Soviet officials. You can help publicize the *Appeal* by contacting religious and secular newspapers. And, as always, you are encouraged to continue to pray for those in the U.S.S.R. whose faith commitment subjects them daily to continuing persecution and discrimination. Copies of the *Appeal* and additional information can be obtained by writing the James Madison Foundation, 1030 15th St., N.W., #412, Washington, D.C. 20005, or by calling (202) 842-1514.

-- Amy Sherman

(Miss Sherman is Program Officer at the James Madison Foundation)

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the NCC. In contrast, in recent years the NCC has not been a strong public advocate of believers in the U.S.S.R. More often than not, the NCC has simply repeated or accepted without question what it has been told by its official contacts in the registered church world.

Leonid Kishkovsky, as President-elect of the NCC, will not, unfortunately, have anything like the power vested in the NCC general secretary, but he nevertheless represents an important and unmistakable link to a more honorable and balanced NCC approach (the pre-1972, Paul Anderson era) to believers behind the Iron Curtain. He has the intelligence, compassion, and commitment to the ecumenical movement to carry on the fine tradition of RCDA founder Paul Anderson (see sidebar on page 3). His task, however, will not be an easy one.

Kishkovsky's influence on the foreword to Dr. Bailey's book is clear. Other parts of the foreword bear the imprint of Bruce Rigdon, who has been more anxious in recent years to talk about the problem of peace than that of reli-

gious liberty. It is significant that Kishkovsky and Rigdon were able to combine efforts here, and the foreword is probably the most balanced and best part of the book.

The National Council of Churches is to be commended for producing some good materials on churches in the Soviet Union. Yes, there are a number of mistakes, as well as errors of omission and emphasis which can be critiqued, but there is also much which deserves to be praised.

The influence of Father Kishkovsky, as well as the existence of a pre-1972 NCC legacy which was more balanced, are cause for hope. But the true test of the present *glasnost* in the NCC is whether it would continue should its Soviet counterpart evaporate.

Let us pray that the two are not inextricably tied together.

-- Kent R. Hill

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