

Twenty-five years of *Science and Religion*

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Soviet atheist writing has always distinguished between the influence of "objective" and "subjective" factors in overcoming "religious prejudices". The former refers to the secularising effects of socio-economic and cultural development, the latter to the impact of atheist education (*vospitaniye*). Amongst the educational tools employed in recent years, an important place belongs to the monthly journal *Nauka i religiya* (Science and Religion), which recently celebrated its 25th anniversary.

Though a few issues of a journal under this title appeared in 1922,¹ the roots of the present publication date back to the Decree of the Central Committee of the CPSU of June 1954 "On several shortcomings in scientific atheist propaganda and measures for its improvement".² It required the All-Union Society for the Promotion of Political and Scientific Knowledge³ to publish a monthly journal entitled *Nauka i religiya*. The swift halt called to the "hundred days" anti-religious campaign later that year⁴ appears to have prevented the journal's appearance and it was only in September 1959, in the context of a new anti-religious struggle, that *Nauka i religiya* saw the light of day.

The first editorial reflected the mood of Khrushchev's anti-religious campaign by describing the journal as a "fighting organ of militant atheism" and rejected the mistaken view that religion would disappear "of itself". The prime task, however, was to educate and articles were promised on the history of religion and atheism, on scientific discoveries and their atheistic implications, on the practical concerns of propagandists, and reviews of significant literature.⁵ Articles in the first issue included a discussion of the scientific understanding of the universe, a report on the nature of contemporary Russian Orthodoxy, an extract from Bertrand Russell's *Why I am not a Christian*, an attack on Pope John XXIII (in sharp contrast to later more positive evaluations of this pontiff) and a crude attack on the Orthodox *samizdat* publicist Vadim Shavrov.

Nauka i religiya is officially described as a "scientific-popular" journal designed for the Soviet "man-in-the-street", whereas most of its western readers are academics and/or critics of Soviet religious policy. Although it contains some dull routine articles on atheist methodology, the journal

generally includes much of interest to a Soviet reader starved of information on religion. During one typical year, 1981, the journal included informative articles on Orthodox *startsya*,⁶ on the activities of the Muslim brotherhoods in the Arab world,⁷ reports on a Moscow theatre production of *The Brothers Karamazov*⁸ and a long series continuing into 1982 on "The Bible in the Light of Scientific Analysis".⁹ The series emphasised the human production of the Bible and the "necessity to approach it from a scientific, that is, atheist position", yet at the same time revealed a thorough knowledge of western biblical scholarship and gave the interested reader considerable information on the whole question of biblical studies.

The journal discloses to the western reader the major concerns of the Soviet atheist establishment as well as reflecting what one might call the current "general line" on religion. For example the often crude and derogatory assaults on individual clerics and believers published between 1959 and 1964¹⁰ coincided with the brutal anti-religious campaign unleashed by Khrushchev.¹¹ Since 1964 the journal has reflected the more "centrist" line of Soviet religious policy, rejecting "administrative measures" against believers — which is not to say that they do not occur — and placing much greater emphasis on educational means of overcoming religious beliefs. Whereas previous attacks on individuals stressed their evil motives and personal viciousness, post-Khrushchev articles of this type have tended to stress the "objective" causes of "religious extremism", notably the "crisis" of religion and the activities of "clerical anti-communists" (amongst whom Michael Bourdeaux occupies an honoured place).¹²

We cannot fully analyse *Nauka i religiya* here, but we may consider a number of articles published over the last two decades which have caused considerable debate amongst atheists. For example, in the "year of drift"¹³ in religious policy following Khrushchev's fall in 1964, there was a great deal of discussion in the Soviet press on the question of what was permissible in the struggle against religion.¹⁴ In March 1965 *Nauka i religiya* published an open letter from three of its journalists attacking the atheist publicist A. Trubnikova for works that were "directed not against religion but believers" and for giving the impression that all clerics were "money-grabbing, drunken, libertine and parasitic". Of course there are hypocrites among the clergy, but generalising from such isolated examples was not likely to influence believers towards atheism. Apart from her cavalier treatment of the facts and a tendency to portray all believers as anti-Soviet, Trubnikova was guilty of a lack of "tact and delicacy".¹⁵ Responses in subsequent issues during 1965 generally supported the authors of the open letter, though one Leningrad pensioner argued that as there were now so few believers it was less important to be concerned about offending them. The editorial boards of the journals *Ok-*

tyabr (October) and *Molodaya gvardiya* (Young Guard), which had published Trubnikova's works, wrote to *Nauka i religiya* in her defence, though these letters were quoted rather than printed in full.¹⁶

Another feature of interest during the late 1960s was the discussion of Soviet "obryadnost'" (the system of non-religious, civil rites). A controversial article published in 1965 noted:

We have created a culture much higher than the old, and thus we cannot advance against religious beliefs by means of hooliganism in church or administrative prohibitions . . .

Religion has been around for centuries. To create a new, higher consciousness which simply excludes all religiosity from the spiritual development of man will need decades at the very least.

Given that ritual is essential to any society, the author, D. Balashov, suggests learning from the church and further developing the Soviet system of rites, always remembering that:

New rites formed on the basis of old traditions . . . albeit with changed content, have generally been accepted far more quickly than those created anew.¹⁷

His critics, however, thought that Balashov was in danger of:

. . . reducing the whole affair to the removal of Christian elements from pagan rites, though there remain not a few elements in pre-Christian, pagan religious faiths which do not at all enrich our life.¹⁸

Though the initial debate over Balashov's article soon died out, the question of new rites has been a constant concern of *Nauka i religiya* during the last two decades.¹⁹

Nauka i religiya has devoted considerable attention to questions of literature and art, a tendency strengthened by the addition of the writer Vladimir Tendryakov (1923-84) to the editorial board in 1964. Tendryakov was the leading atheist literary figure in the Soviet Union, and his work was notable for its often sensitive attempts to understand the religious question. In a fiftieth birthday interview published in *Nauka i religiya* during 1973, he emphasised that only when he was able to "examine religion and religious consciousness seriously and responsibly" did he truly become an atheist.²⁰ On occasions this sensitive approach brought him under fire from more orthodox atheists. In late 1969 *Nauka i religiya* published his "*Apostol'skaya komandirovka*" (Apostolic Mission) which told of a young physicist's journey to faith in God and then back to atheism.²¹ The following year *Izvestiya* published an article on the story suggesting, not without cause, that the young man's search for God was told with a greater degree of conviction than his return to atheism, which appeared to be conditioned primarily by the need to have a "correct"

ending.²²

The journal has resolutely opposed nationalist tendencies amongst some Soviet writers and scholars.²³ During the mid-seventies *Nauka i religiya* clashed with the literary journal *Moskva* over the question of the proper educational usage of ancient monuments and warned of the danger of idealising monuments associated with the “negative sides of Russian history”.²⁴ In more recent years the journal has published a number of articles stressing the need to improve the atheist content of talks given by guides at churches and monasteries. From September 1982 into early 1984 a series of articles applied an atheist approach to the history of a number of ancient towns²⁵, a series coinciding, perhaps not fortuitously, with the Andropov regime’s attack on nationalism.²⁶

In 1976 A. I. Ivanov, chief editor of *Nauka i religiya*, wrote:

Success in the work of the journal has been achieved as a result of the great help given by party and Soviet organs, scientific institutions and other organisations. Its work is inseparable from the general process of the development of atheism in our country.²⁷

Ivanov gave no indication of the criteria by which success was to be judged. However, the *tirazh* (edition size) has risen, from the original 75,000 to the present 345,000. Moreover, with some notable exceptions, the general quality of articles has improved. Less certain, however, is the impact of the journal on its readership, either in strengthening atheist convictions or winning over believers.

The first issue of the jubilee year (September 1983) contained a questionnaire for readers,²⁸ including such questions as “Why did you begin to subscribe?” and “What problems do you think the journal should deal with?” It added the rider that surname and address did not have to be attached to replies, thus recognising that many citizens are still reluctant to speak openly of their views on religion. A number of letters were published during 1984 and in September the editors summed up the letters received which totalled nearly six hundred. Some thanked *Nauka i religiya* for its help in preparing them for atheist work amongst specific denominations, others called for more information on certain questions — often in a form that suggested that these were believers seeking further information. One woman noted the case of a priest who read the journal in order to refute atheist arguments, whilst a believer praised it for its “delicacy” in “not thrusting atheism” upon its readers. A particular concern of many readers was the strange paradox that despite the increasing dominance of a materialist world-view, many young people still participated in religious rites. Finally, some letters were highly critical and though the editors recognised the aptness of some comments, they could not accept that of one reader who argued that “we should not stand on ceremony with believers”.²⁹

Although many of the articles in *Nauka i religiya* are tendentious concerning Soviet religious policy and not infrequently distort the religious phenomenon the journal seeks to describe, at the same time it is useful to the Soviet citizen seeking information on religion. One occasionally hears tales of believers who first became interested in religion through reading atheist literature; reading *Nauka i religiya* suggests that such tales may not be apocryphal.

¹J. Delaney, "The Origins of Soviet Anti-religious Organisations", in R. Marshall, ed., *Aspects of Religion in the Soviet Union, 1917-67*, Chicago: 1971, pp. 103-29.

²*O religii i tserkvi*, Moscow, 1977, pp. 67-72.

³Known, from 1963, as the All-Union Knowledge Society (*Znaniye*).

⁴Ended by a Central Committee decree of 10 November 1954, text in *O religii i tserkvi*, *op. cit.*, pp. 72-77.

⁵*Nauka i religiya* (henceforth NiR) 1, 1959, pp. 4-8.

⁶NiR, 4-6, 1981.

⁷NiR, 2, 1981.

⁸NiR, 7, 1981.

⁹NiR, 7, 1981, 2, 1982.

¹⁰For example, further attacks on Vadim Shavrov and A. Levitin-Krasnov in NiR 5, 1960; attacks on Bishop Iov of Kazan and Archbishop Veniamin of Irkutsk in NiR 7, 1960, pp. 36-43 and 8, 1962, p. 27 respectively; also worth noting in this context was an article in 4, 1962 criticising "certain privileges contradicting Lenin's decree on the separation of church and state" which have been gained by the Orthodox Church.

¹¹On the Khrushchev period see D. Lowrie & W. Fletcher, "Khrushchev's Religious Policy, 1959-64", in R. Marshall *op. cit.*, pp. 131-55.

¹²An exception being the attacks on Levitin-Krasnov in NiR 10, 1966; on "religious extremism", see NiR 1, 1981, pp. 17-19; and on clerical anti-communism NiR 6, 1982, pp. 18-21.

¹³cf. A. Blane, "A Year of Drift", *RCL* Vol. 2, No. 3, pp. 9-15.

¹⁴Apart from articles published in NiR, a number of interesting articles appeared in the Soviet press around this time, the most significant appearing in *Sovetskoye gosudarstvo i pravo*, 1, 1965 and *Komsomolskaya Pravda*, 15.8.65.

¹⁵NiR 3, 1965, pp. 23-26.

¹⁶NiR 9, 1965, pp. 14-15, 10, 1965, p. 7.

¹⁷NiR 12, 1965, pp. 26-30.

¹⁸NiR 5, 1966, pp. 57-60.

¹⁹For example, the report on the Second All-Union Conference on New Rites, held in Kiev during 1978, in NiR 2, 1979, pp. 2-9; cf. reports in *Izvestiya* 19, 20, 22.10.78.

²⁰See obituary and appreciation of Tendryakov in *Radio Liberty Research Bulletin* RL318/84, 27.9.84; interesting interviews with Tendryakov appear in NiR 12, 1973, p. 73, and *Komsomolskaya Pravda*, 9.7.76.

²¹NiR 8-10, 1969.

²²*Izvestiya*, 27.6.70.

²³cf. John Dunlop: *The Faces of Contemporary Russian Nationalism*, Princeton; 1983.

²⁴NiR 6, 1973, pp. 17-22; *Moskva* 7, 1974; NiR 7, 1975, pp. 46-50.

²⁵NiR 9 & 11, 1982; 1, 3, 5 & 7, 1983; 3, 1984.

²⁶Apparent at the June 1983 Central Committee Plenum, and in the two *Pravda* articles 15.5.83 & 10.7.83.

²⁷A. I. Ivanov, "Zhurnal 'Nauka i religiya' — vazhnoye zveno v ateisticheskom vospitaniy", in *Voprosy nauchnogo ateizma*, No. 19, 1976, Moscow, pp. 82-96.

²⁸NiR 9, 1983, p. 63.

²⁹NiR 9, 1984, p. 2-9.