

Documents

Perestroika and Freedom of Conscience

At the end of 1988 a 'round table' discussion on the question of freedom of conscience was held at the Soviet Central Committee's Academy of Social Sciences. Amongst those taking part were leading social scientists, atheists and jurists. Also

present were a number of clergymen including Russian Orthodox Archbishop Kirill of Smolensk and Vyazma whose forthright contribution was later printed in the atheist monthly Nauka i religiya (Science and Religion).

Laws and Convictions

Participation in the external activity of the Russian Orthodox Church over many decades placed our representatives in a very difficult situation: they had to listen to very critical comments on the subject of our state's church policy and react to them. Quite often these were the voices of overt or covert ill-wishers for whom church problems were the last concern. However, among the questioners there are people who are sincerely preoccupied by the real situation of the church. Their questions arose not from the 'malicious fabrications' of bourgeois propaganda but from problems which really existed and which today we openly admit and discuss. One of the most complex questions was, and still remains, the question of the nature of our state. It would seem that everything is very simple: the church in the USSR is separated from the state and the school from the church; religion is not forbidden, which

means that the state is constitutionally secular, not atheistic. However, the practice which has existed among us for many long years has given grounds for affirming the opposite. After all, it is no secret that until quite recently a believing person came up every day against a number of unofficial but very tangible restrictions. Let's take lecturing work in institutes of higher education or such a mass, widely-spread profession as that of teacher. Surely not a few conflicts occurred here because of religious convictions?

I know many examples of people who, having attained a noticeable public position, and having religious convictions, do not risk going to church. Well, let's say that in Moscow, Leningrad, Kiev or Odessa they can risk it. But in a small regional town, or even more so in a district town, they won't go, they're afraid.

These apprehensions are not groundless. When I was rector of the Leningrad Theological Academy and

Seminary I came up against numerous cases of gross administrative interference with religious young people. Here is a typical example. A youth from Western Ukraine entered the seminary and recounted the obstacles created by the local authorities. Right before the entrance examinations he was taken off for a period of military training via the military enlistment office. He had to delay his entry for a year. The next year they resorted to a new ploy: they took him and imprisoned him for 15 days. (This length of sentence can be given by purely administrative means, without a trial — *Ed.*) And when this persistent young man did not abandon his intention for the third time, he was summoned to the District Executive Committee, where the bosses informed him that he would not be discharged and taken off the military register because entering the seminary was the equivalent of escaping abroad! Entering the theological seminary was equated with emigration. For this official at the district level, a believer is like a person from another society, a kind of survival from the past, a historical misunderstanding, annoying and, perhaps, dangerous. Is this not why millions of believers in their own homeland feel like aliens, because it is certainly not only isolated leading figures who hold such ideas. And people were obliged to conceal their religious convictions, because they knew that these ideas were nearly always put into practice as concrete actions. Why until recently was it basically only elderly people, as a rule, who attended church services? The atheists asserted that the elderly had a low level of social consciousness, that among them were more survivals of the past. But I'll put it differently: they had nothing to lose. Nothing threatened their careers, and they were not afraid to show their religious allegiance openly.

At present much is being said about the imperfections of the legislation on cults still in force. Of course it is imperfect. But the basic difficulties arose not so much on the grounds of the legislation as when the law was replaced by a certain ideological purpose which presupposed that there would be social advantage from any initiative which curtailed religious activity.

The sources of this ideological purpose which expresses a negative attitude to religion and the church are rooted, in my view, back in our pre-revolutionary history. Already by that time in Marxist circles the idea had arisen that religious convictions were not the best for the builders of a new world. This world-view intensified in the context of the class and ideological struggle. A factor which influenced the growing severity of this position was the non-acceptance by a part of the clergy of the revolution taking place in our country. All this gave rise to an orientation in favour of the 'removal' of religious convictions, gradually forcing them out of public consciousness.

It is well known how religious convictions were 'forced out' during certain periods of our history. But as well as administrative-repressive methods, other paths, other methods were used. One of them was the pushing aside of the church and believers to the periphery of public life. A major role was played here by the same firmly established ideological stereotype according to which religion was perceived as a departure from the socialist 'norm', a rudiment of bourgeois society. Stigmatised as a survival of the past, it was ranked at the same level as those deviations from public morality which were considered unnatural for socialism. What participation by the church in public life was there to speak of! Why listen

to a voice, the fact of whose very existence causes irritation? That was why before the 'complete and final victory' over religion, it was rendered voiceless and unheard. Even in the one area of public life where limited participation by the church was permitted — in the struggle for peace — this voice was oriented outwards; our people were not supposed to hear it. Everyone remembers television reports where silent representatives of the clergy were glimpsed fleetingly at public gatherings.

If today we are overcoming the stereotype which has taken shape and we admit, not in words but in deeds, that a person who holds religious convictions is not a second-class creature but a member of socialist society with full rights, then, I think, we shall take a decisive step on the road to bringing about genuine freedom of conscience.

Atheist propaganda in its time, including the journal *Nauka i religiya*, went to a good deal of trouble to create a negative, prejudiced attitude to the church and believers. Today it could do much to destroy this attitude. Such words are awaited, and I am sure that they will be heard. And that will mean that an important step towards meeting one another will have been taken. The clergy and believers of the Russian Orthodox Church have shown their devotion to their homeland by action, and today they, no less than their non-religious fellow-citizens, worry about the fate of *perestroika* and by their labour are creating the future of the homeland. I think that the fate of this future in many ways will depend upon the unity of our people, defined not least by relations between believers and non-believers. This is why it is so important to destroy the ideological stereotype of the church and believers which our people has shared for many decades.

In this connection I would like very

briefly to touch on the question of the character of the religious world-view. I realise that a discussion of its essentials would have to be thorough and it cannot be done here in a couple of sentences. Therefore, without touching on the essence, I will say something once again on the problem of stereotypes. It is customary to oppose the scientific and the religious world-view. I think that this too is one of the clichés which has gone quite far into (people's) minds. I am convinced that such an opposition is incorrect in its very essence. A world-view is not only formed on the basis of science. Of course, the achievements of science and equally the scientific method of understanding the world are one of the essential factors which define the world-view of modern man, but they are far from being the only one. Surely historical experience, art, and finally conscience exert their influence on the formation of a person's scheme of things, on his convictions? And what if religion takes its place beside these other factors? Yes, yes, beside, not in place of. How should we characterise the world-view of a contemporary believing person, combining the scientific conception of the physical world and religious convictions? And what if this person engages in scientific work, and successfully so? Can one assert that a believing scholar has an 'unscientific' world-view but his atheist colleague has a 'scientific' one? Here we are dealing with the ideologisation of a concept like science. This ideologisation is dangerous. What does it lead to? The scientific world-view is correct and authentic, so a person who possesses it can successfully build the new society. But the religious world-view, from this point of view, is mistaken and illusory and you will not achieve the right aims with it. In general, it is not known how a person with such a world-view

will conduct himself in society. And if that is so, should one entrust him with specially responsible posts in the state, in science, in production or in national education? In other words, opposing the atheist and religious world-views as scientific versus unscientific contains the potential danger of dividing society into people of first and second categories, with all the consequences that follow from that.

In society there can be only one criterion for evaluating a member of it: the usefulness of that member to society. The wise saying 'By their deeds shall you know them' has been well known since biblical times. Society must evaluate a person not by what he says but by what he does. I think that the presence of the so-called scientific world-view among the captains of the administrative-command system which brought the country to a pre-crisis situation was of little comfort to our people. Milk and meat and justice disappeared because of this fact. Only by evaluating people according to their concrete actions and remembering at the same time that no-one can pretend to have a monopoly of the truth will we be able to create the just society towards which we are striving.

Now to the laws — as a rule they reflect the level of social consciousness and the dominant ideological and political aims of a society. The law of 1929 was like this to a significant degree. Today it is hopelessly out of date and it must be replaced as quickly as possible with a new law corresponding to the current level of social development in our country. However, it is important not only to have a good law, but to keep it. To those who lay the blame for all our troubles today on the law of 1929, I would like to say that we have never lived according to this law: neither in the time of the cult of personality nor in the times of

voluntarism or stagnation. Beginning with the most difficult post-war year for religious people, 1961, a year of mass closures of churches and monasteries, of the most offensive atheist propaganda and harsh administrative treatment of believers, the church was governed not by the law of 1929 but by a special instruction of the Council for Religious Affairs. Not one of us ever saw this instruction with our own eyes, but every parish felt the consequences of its application right up to the jubilee year of 1988. Subjective factors also had great significance such as, for example, the degree of ideological tolerance of the local commissioner (*upolnomochenny*) of the Council for Religious Affairs. Who were we then, after all, in the eyes of many commissioners? The bearers of contrary class convictions. Because of this, the fate of the law, and even the fate of the instruction, often depended upon how firm this or that functionary was in his views. Once more I want to underline that we need changes not only to the law but also in attitudes to the law, as should be the case in a socialist legal society.

Today for the first time in many years we are openly discussing such questions as the new law on freedom of conscience, the place of religion and the church in a socialist society, problems of church-state relations in the past and the present. All this has become possible thanks to *perestroika*. There is a process of renewal of social consciousness, a reconsideration of views which had become accepted. Let us try to look with different eyes at a concept which has become familiar.

The decree of the Council of Peoples' Commissars adopted in 1918 says that religious education may be carried out 'privately'. What does this mean? One thing only: without the help and support of the state. Soviet power, in proclaiming

the separation of the church from the state and the school from the church, declared the right of every citizen to freedom of conscience, that is to freedom of choice between religion and atheism. Non-interference by the state in matters of faith should have guaranteed this freedom. Unfortunately, in practice something different took place. The formulation 'privately' was interpreted so arbitrarily that it led in practice to the complete liquidation of all organised teaching of religion. The study of atheism, and also atheist propaganda, received vigorous organisational and financial support from the state. Moreover, atheism became a compulsory subject in state educational institutions. The principle of freedom of conscience was not strengthened by actual policy in the field of education. It is understandable when a secular, democratic state does not give material and organisational support to a church. But in that case it should not give support to atheist propaganda either. Otherwise the state in fact becomes not secular but atheistic, and freedom of conscience is endangered. Today, during the process of restructuring our public life, many people are asking the question: is it lawful to teach atheism on an all-union scale at the expense of the state? After all, both unbelievers and believers take part in the production of national revenue and all citizens pay taxes irrespective of their attitude to religion. Why is atheist propaganda financed out of these resources? Party studies are another matter. The party is a political organisation which officially holds atheist convictions. Atheist propaganda within the context of party studies is a lawful matter.

Not long ago I took part in a briefing held by the chairman of the Council for Religious Affairs under the Council of Ministers of the USSR, K. M. Kharchev: there was a

conversation with the heads of diplomatic missions. Among many questions there was one which especially disturbed the audience: why should foreign students studying in Soviet institutions of higher education have to study scientific atheism? I think we can also put this question on the teaching of atheism to our own students. Why should believing students have to study it compulsorily?

A few words about religious education. Religious views by no means always arise on the level of rational thought. At least, it is not on this level that what we call growth in the faith takes place. Rational thought only strengthens religiosity. Therefore the spread of religious convictions is possible without organised study of religion. This is what our 70 years' experience has shown. Even grandmothers and grandfathers worshipping in church today were not going to school in the year of October and had not studied the law of God. Now a new generation has come into the church which is aspiring to religious knowledge and the majority of them satisfy this aspiration. But how? With the help of voices on the radio and religious literature brought in from abroad. So the question arises: surely citizens of the USSR can satisfy their lawful interest in religion without help from abroad? One would think that on the basis of the Decree of 1918 religious education in our country could be organised without any support from the state, 'privately' by the means of believers. Voluntary and equal access for young people to both religious and atheistic knowledge would be a striking testimony of respect to the principle of freedom of conscience proclaimed in October.

Many questions have accumulated in the field of church-state relations. A dialogue between the church and the widest possible public could have great significance for comprehending

these questions, for mutual understanding between the sides and for the working out of reliable solutions. *Perestroika* has created favourable conditions for such a dialogue. I am convinced that both believers and non-believers are disturbed about the fate of our homeland and its future and will not pass up a historical opportunity to take a joint step along

the path of renewing public life.

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