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THE PRESENT STATE OF THE CHURCH IN RUSSIA AND OTHER COMMUNIST COUNTRIES

The Church of Russia. No official statistics are available, but several visitors to the U.S.S.R. or spokesmen for the Moscow Patriarchate have recently estimated that about ten per cent of the population go to church on any given Sunday - that is between twenty and thirty million people. This means that in proportion to the total population, Church attendance in Russia after forty years of communism is higher than in many countries of western Europe. Believing Christians in Russia may well be appreciably more numerous than regular worshippers: there are many people - school teachers, university students, men and women in professional posts or government offices - who (for altogether creditable and unselfish reasons) do not wish it to be known that they are Christians, and who therefore only go to church at Christmas or Easter, when the vast crowds make concealment easier.

In large towns, at any rate, the churches are full (information about religion in country districts is scanty). In an Orthodox church the congregation usually stand, and there are few if any chairs or pews, so that a surprisingly large number can be fitted into a comparatively small space. A central town church normally has two celebrations of the Liturgy each Sunday morning, with perhaps two or three thousand present at each. At such a church there may be fifty to a hundred baptisms a week: Church authorities reckon that about half the children born in Moscow are baptized, while the proportion is lower in other towns but higher in the countryside. It is thus clear that many who are not themselves churchgoers still bring their babies for baptism; the Soviet press complains from time to time that prominent members of the Party or Komsomol go to church at night, and have their children secretly baptized.

But the town churches, though well attended, are few and far between: in 1955 there were only fifty-five in Moscow, for even million inhabitants, and fourteen in Leningrad, for three

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million. Kiev has fared better, with twenty-six churches in 1955 for one million inhabitants, but in 1960 it was reported that only eight of these were still open. In other large towns the situation is even worse: Kharkov (930,000 inhabitants) has three churches, Kazan (643,000 inhabitants) and Perm (628,000) have only two each, while some of the newly built Soviet towns have none at all. If the figure given in 1947 is correct - 22,000 open churches in the U.S.S.R. - then the proportion of churches to the population must be far higher in smaller towns or in the countryside. Many of the city parishes are large centres, with perhaps five or ten clergy and twenty other paid staff working full time; people naturally prefer to attend big and crowded churches, since there is less danger of observation. Congregations include more women than men and more old people than young; this is a disquieting feature, but one by no means peculiar to the Church in Russia. There may be truth in the words of a Russian priest, who replied, when asked what would happen in thirty years' time when all the old women were dead: 'There will be another generation of old women.' It is sometimes said that many, whom atheist propaganda alienated from Christianity in adolescence, are now returning to the Church in middle age; but of this it is difficult to judge.

In the 1950s the two theological academies and eight seminaries contained 1,000-1,500 students, thus providing an annual supply of perhaps 200-300 ordinands. But in the 1960s, owing to renewed state pressure, the number of students and ordinands was considerably reduced. There seems to be no shortage of candidates for ordination (mainly young men of peasant or working-class background, but including some university graduates); the applications for admission to the seminaries far exceed the number of places which the Church authorities are allowed to offer. Certainly bishops are also ordaining to the priesthood men who have not passed through the seminaries. In some Russian dioceses there are summer schools for older clergy who have no theological degree, while priests can also take pastoral courses by correspondence. The monas-

teries and convents have a number of young members and novices; at the end of the Second World War, monks were allowed to return, among other places, to the Monastery of the Caves at Kiev and to the Trinity-St Sergius Monastery at Radonezh (or Zagorsk, as it is now called).

Christians in Russia, though often poor, give with great generosity, so that the Church - unable to spend its money on schools or charities - is beginning to suffer from a blight of wealth. The fabric of the church buildings is beautifully maintained, and the clergy are well paid and housed: city priests usually receive a salary equal to that of a university lecturer. Beyond doubt the clergy work extremely hard, and deserve what they are paid: yet one wonders whether the communists may not be glad to see an economic division between priest and people, with the pastor enjoying a far better standard of living than most of his flock.

Despite the relative stability of Church-State relations since 1943, the outward appearance of calm is undoubtedly deceptive. It is true that on 10 November 1954 the Central Committee of the Communist Party issued a resolution, signed by Khrushchev and entitled 'On Mistakes in the conduct of Scientific-Atheistic Propaganda among the population'; this condemned violent persecution and offensive attacks on religious belief, and insisted that the anti-religious struggle be carried out on a high ideological level. Since 1958, however, atheist propaganda has been intensified, and is not by any means restricted to matters of high ideology. The Soviet press for 1959 contained several 'exposures' of individual bishops and monasteries; monks in general were denounced at some length as 'money grabbers', 'idlers', 'libertines', 'sexual perverts', and so on. Theological colleges were singled out for particular attack, perhaps to prepare public opinion for their closure. 'Does an honest man go to a theological school, in our century of science and technology?' one writer inquires. '... The rector and inspector select any sort of rabble ... lovers of an easy, dishonest life ... criminals who should be remoulded by work.' In fact, the

hours of rising at the seminaries are early, the programme crowded, and the discipline fairly strict - surely not a congenial regime for the lover of an easy life!

Besides propaganda, the government began, in the years following 1959, to use more direct methods: organized hooliganism during Church services, the imprisonment of prominent Churchmen for 'tax offences' or the like, the suppression of seminaries and monasteries, the forced closing of churches. By 1963 this campaign against the Church had developed into a full-scale persecution. Of the eight seminaries reopened around 1945, only three were still functioning in 1966; of the eighty monasteries existing in 1947, only about sixteen remained open in the 1970s. The Monastery of the Caves at Kiev was closed once more. At the Monastery of Saint Job of Pochaev the monks were treated with particular brutality. In 1961 this community numbered 140: in 1963 only 36 remained. At least one monk was beaten to death in prison, others - though in good health - were taken regularly to hospital for injections, and several were temporarily put out of the way in lunatic asylums. As a result, however, of protests in the west, the attacks diminished after a time. In 1960-63 there were also massive closures of parish churches; the number of 'functioning' churches - said to be 22,000-25,000 in 1947 - had probably dwindled by the later 1970s to less than 7,000. In many places priests have been forbidden to give communion to children of school age, although such a prohibition directly infringes the 'freedom of worship' guaranteed by the Constitution.

Renewed persecution has had the effect of stiffening the opposition of many priests and lay people. In 1965 Archbishop Hermogen of Kaluga and also two Moscow priests, Fathers Nicholas Eshliman and Gleb Yakunin, appealed to the church authorities to be firmer in resisting government pressures. In the late 1960s and the 1970s similar protests were made by laymen such as Anatoly Krasnov-Levitin and Lev Regelson. Individual voices have been silenced, but the movement of protest continues.

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In addition to this opposition movement within the official Church, the 'Catacomb Church' - refusing all contact with Patriarch Pimen and all compromise with the atheist state - still continues to exist, but little is known about it.

In the new countries which fell under their control at the end of the Second World War, the communists have attempted to establish a *modus vivendi* with the Orthodox Church similar to that prevailing in Russia since 1943. There has been no wholesale closure of churches; recalcitrant clergy have been imprisoned but as a rule not put to death, since the communists have found from experience in Russia that martyrdom only makes believers more stubborn. Church publications are permitted more freely than in the U.S.S.R., and the Church has retained a number of theological seminaries and academies; but it is excluded from all social or charitable work, and in most cases also from any part in education. Atheist propaganda is maintained as in Russia, especially among the youth, and the Church is faced by the same difficulties in reaching children and young people. At the same time the Church is used by the government to further the cause of communism, and semi-political 'confederations of priests' have been formed in many places under state patronage. Clergy are usually required to take an oath of loyalty. In Czechoslovakia, for instance, the 1949 law on Church and State obliges each priest to swear 'to do everything within my ability to support the efforts at reconstruction for the welfare of the people'; in Romania, a priest undertakes 'to defend the Romanian People's Republic against its enemies abroad and at home'. The Churches of Romania and Bulgaria continue to receive financial help from the government.

In accepting this situation, the (Orthodox) hierarchy certainly runs the risk of appearing, in the eyes of its own faithful and of those abroad, simply as a body of officials in the service of a government whose ultimate and avowed aim is to destroy 'religious prejudices'.¹

1. J. Meyendorff, *L'Eglise orthodoxe hier et aujourd'hui*, p. 143.

Of the various Orthodox Churches under communist rule, it is the *Church of Serbia* which has shown the greatest independence in its dealings with the State since the war, yet for a time it appeared to be the Serbian Church which was also confronting the most serious difficulties in its own internal life. Visitors reported that the churches, although full in Belgrade, were often poorly attended elsewhere. There was a lack of candidates for ordination, and a grave shortage of young monks, although as in Greece the communities for women greatly increased in number. In the later 1960s and the 1970s the situation has in many ways improved. But the State has tried to weaken the Church by subdivision, and in 1967, despite the opposition of the Serbian Patriarchate, an autocephalous *Church of Macedonia* was set up. This has not been recognized by any other Orthodox Church.

The *Church of Bulgaria* since 1945 has closely followed the policy of the Moscow Patriarchate *vis-a-vis* the State, and laws passed in 1949 gave the civil authorities far-reaching powers of interference in its inner life. By the 1970s, however, the Church had gained a larger measure of freedom. Attendance at services, though often poor, seems to be reviving in some areas, but there is a lack of young priests, and of monks and nuns.

The *Church of Romania* from 1948 onwards followed a policy of close cooperation with the communist authorities; at the same time, spiritually and theologically it underwent a major renewal. In Romania, curiously enough, there has never been a formal act of separation between Church and State; the *Europa Year Book* for 1960 not inappropriately sums up the situation by saying: 'Religion in Romania is disestablished, but the Romanian Orthodox Church is recognized as the national Church.' Justinian, Patriarch from 1948 until his death in 1977, at times identified himself to a surprising degree with Marxist ideology; but he was also a devoted pastor, deeply loved by his Orthodox flock. His successor Justin continues to work in close cooperation with the State.

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Churches are very well attended in Romania, and most of them still remain open: it is said that 220 churches function in Bucharest (compared with under fifty in Moscow). There are six seminaries, with a total of 1,400 students, and two university institutes for higher theological study, with a total of 1,100 students; at least nine religious periodicals are published, several of them with a standard of theological scholarship superior to anything published in Russia since 1917. By contrast with most Orthodox countries in the present century, monasticism in Romania has flourished, and in 1958 there were between seven and ten thousand monks and nuns, many of them young and with good education. Monastic life in contemporary Romania is based on the best traditions of Hesychasm, with an emphasis on the Jesus Prayer; the spirit of Paisy Velichkovsky is still very much alive. In 1946 and the years following, the first four volumes appeared of a Romanian version of the *Philokalia*, edited by Father Staniloae: far more than a mere translation, this edition was accompanied by long and scholarly commentaries, making use of western spiritual writers and of western critical research.¹

The vitality of the Romanian Church has from time to time led the government to take repressive action. The publication of the *Philokalia*, for example, was suspended in 1948 and not resumed until 1976 (in 1981 the tenth volume appeared - in all, over 4,500 pages). The state authorities have often made it difficult for the monasteries - and more particularly the communities for men - to receive novices, and by 1979 the total number of monks and nuns had fallen to about three thousand. But there is no shortage of candidates for the priesthood, and in almost every diocese new parish churches are being built each year. Of all the Orthodox Churches, not excluding the Greek, it is the Romanian that is undoubtedly the most vigorous in its outward life, and the best supported by the people.

1. See *Un moine de l'Eglise orthodoxe de Roumanie, 'L'avene-ment philocalique dans l'Orthodoxie roumaine'*, in the periodical *Istina*, 1958, pp. 295-328, 443-74.

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Besides the great Churches of Russia, Serbia, Bulgaria, and Romania, there are four lesser Orthodox Churches under communist rule. The *Church of Georgia*, founded in the fourth century by Saint Nina 'the Equal of the Apostles', remained for a long time dependent on the Patriarchate of Antioch, becoming autocephalous in the eighth century. Incorporated into the Russian Church in 1811, it became independent once more after the February Revolution of 1917. Christianity in Georgia, as in the rest of the U.S.S.R., has been heavily persecuted, and today the Church is much reduced in size. 'I shall give you some statistics from which you can draw your own conclusions,' said the Catholicos Callistratos to an American reporter in 1951. 'Out of 2,455 churches in Georgia, there are now only 100 functioning, and the same number of priests are now performing their duties.'¹ These few priests try to serve a population of more than two million. In many places without a priest, the people now gather round the ruins of their former church and hold a service on their own. There is a small seminary for training clergy, and one monastery.

The *Church of Albania*, formerly part of the Patriarchate of Constantinople, became autocephalous in 1937. The total population of the country is over 1,500,000, of whom about twenty per cent are said to be Orthodox (ten per cent are Roman Catholics, the majority of the rest Mohammedans). There has been severe persecution since 1945, and in 1967 Albanian communist sources stated that all Christian churches had now been closed.

The *Church of Poland* (autocephalous since 1924) and the *Church of Czechoslovakia* (autocephalous since 1951), while in theory self-governing, are both closely dependent on the Moscow Patriarchate. The Czechoslovak Church is made up largely of former Uniates, most of whom joined the Orthodox Church in 1950 under Communist pressure. In 1968 an appreciable number returned to Roman Catholicism.

1. Interview with Harrison Salisbury of the *New York Times*, published in *Georgian Opinion*, New York, 1956, no. 8. The number of functioning churches is now about two hundred.

For a time, relations were cool between the Ecumenical Patriarch and the Churches of Poland and Czechoslovakia. This was not surprising in view of what had happened in these countries since 1945. In Poland, for example, at the end of the Second World War the canonical head of the Polish Orthodox Church, Metropolitan Dionysius, was supplanted by a bishop dependent on the Moscow Patriarchate, but so long as Dionysius lived, Constantinople declined to recognize the intruder. The situation has now been regularized.

A few words must be added about the fate of the Uniates since 1945. On several occasions before that date, substantial numbers of Uniates returned to Orthodoxy: three dioceses were received back in 1839, and a further group in 1875; between 1891 and 1914 about 120 Uniate parishes in North America became Orthodox; around 1930, 25,000 Uniates in Czechoslovakia joined the Orthodox Church. In 1839 and perhaps also in 1875 there was a certain amount of pressure, direct or indirect, from the Russian civil authorities, but in America and Czechoslovakia the move was entirely free and in no sense the result of government interference. But the main bulk of Uniates in eastern Europe, numbering more than 5,000,000 in 1945 - over 3,500,000 in the Ukraine and Czechoslovakia, and 1,500,000 in Romania - were still loyal to the Pope when they passed under communist rule at the end of the Second World War. Between 1946 and 1950, however, these Uniate Churches under communist rule ceased to exist officially, their members being incorporated *en bloc* into the Orthodox Church.

How far was the return of the Uniates to Orthodoxy voluntary? Leaders of the Russian and Romanian Churches say that the great majority of Uniate priests and congregations genuinely desired to join the Orthodox Church, although it is admitted that there was a 'hardbitten' minority who refused to be reconciled. Roman Catholic sources, on the other hand, suggest that the movement for reunion with the Orthodox had very little popular support, but was largely the result of communist pressure, and (in many cases) of direct coercion and

police terrorism. In our present state of knowledge it is extremely difficult to decide between these contrary opinions, but on the whole the truth seems to lie more with the Roman Catholic view. There was considerable unrest among the Uniates of eastern Europe in the inter-war period, and many may therefore have welcomed the opportunity to become Orthodox; one must not forget the precedent of the Uniates in North America and elsewhere who freely chose Orthodoxy. Yet at the same time one cannot but suspect that there were many others who wished to continue subject to the Pope, and who in consequence have suffered severely for their religious convictions.¹ Orthodox leaders under communist rule have been placed in an unenviably equivocal situation, for they appear to have profited from the persecution of other Christians by the atheist government. Among the charges that can be made against the Moscow Patriarchate, there can be few if any so serious as this.

The struggle between religion and materialism in communist countries is still far from a final resolution, and many features in the present situation remain exceedingly obscure. Yet this much at least is evident: extreme gloom and extreme optimism are equally unjustified. There are some in the west who speak as if religion in communist areas were already dead, and the Church a living corpse. This is certainly not true; but it is equally misleading to assume, as others do, that the Church has nothing to fear from communism. Hitherto Orthodox believers have shown in the face of fierce persecution an astonishing power of spiritual resistance; but in the long run the subtler and more insidious forms of pressure to which the Church is today exposed may prove more devastating than any direct attacks.

1. This is surely borne out by events in Czechoslovakia in 1968, when the vast majority of the former Uniates returned to Roman Catholicism as soon as they were given the opportunity.