

Book Review

RELIGION IN THE U.S.S.R.
Edited by Robert Conquest.
(The Bodley Head. 21s.).

Review by A.A.

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If any further evidence was needed to show the evil inherent in communism this latest volume in the Soviet Studies Series, dealing with the various religions in the U.S.S.R. since the October revolution, would surely provide an overwhelming display of accredited facts. The strength of the book lies in the almost complete absence of the author's personal views and the reliance on quotations and information drawn from mostly Russian sources. These provide an appalling picture of the persecution suffered by the various religions unfortunate enough to fall under communist influence. All have been persecuted more or less continuously apart from the years of the German invasion when the communists, with typical hypocrisy, tolerated the religions for their support in the war, only to turn on them again when the danger had been averted. Today the Orthodox Church and some other religions are able to purchase a very small measure of freedom by supporting the lies and distortions of Soviet foreign policy; a high price to pay indeed, but who can judge them after the years of terror, murder and suppression?

Buddhism appears to be the religion that has suffered most. In Buryatia, for example, there were 36 *datsans* and 16,000 lamas in 1916, while in 1960 in the Buryat Autonomous Republic and the Chita region there were no more than 2 *datsans* and a few dozen lamas! In Tuva, where there had been 22 Buddhist temples and more than 4,000 lamas before the revolution, there were only 100 lamas in 1960 and no mention of any surviving Buddhist temples. In 1962 the total number of lamas in the Soviet Union was given as "about 300"!

The 54,174 churches of all types served by 50,105 priests and deacons, and the 1,025 monastic institutions housing 94,629 monks, belonging to the Orthodox Church in 1914, had been reduced by 1941 to 4,225 churches with 5,665 priests and 3,100 deacons and sacristans, and 37 monasteries.

The most hopeful fact that does emerge after fifty years of cruel persecution is that communism has completely failed to eradicate religion. It may have deterred those who were lukewarm in their beliefs but, on communist admission, anti-religious propaganda, the closing of churches and the disappearance of priests, has only served to reinforce the faith of literally millions of believers.

It is interesting to note that in the case of Islam, members and officials of the communist party have been criticized and expelled for following Muslim rites, and "in October, 1964, *Pravda Vastaka* announced the dismissal of the Minister of Trade of the Kara-Kalpak A.S.S.R., whose observance of Muslim rites had been reported in the newspapers in July". This is far from being a lone case.

Although this book presents a long line of communist crimes, it is in another sense a book of hope, for it shows how religion has survived and in some ways flourished under persecution. The "bleak hopelessness of modern secularism", or materialism, or atheism, has not triumphed and, so long as intelligent Russians continue to be born, it probably never will.

This most factual and documented of books should be read by all believers in "peaceful co-existence"; the doctrine of "We'll leave you alone and you leave us alone to suppress, murder and otherwise tyrannize our own population until we are ready to deal with you". One does not leave a cancer to spread unchecked, nor make provision for the safety of evil. A little more concern for those suffering under communism, and particularly the unfortunate millions consigned to communist rule through the criminal actions or negligence of Western politicians after the last war, is something much needed in the West.

(Original editorial inclusions that followed the essay:)

How many of our "communists", I wonder, realize that the reference of "the common Man", COMMUNIS HOMO, was originally not to the man in the street as such, but to the immanent deity, the very Man in everyman!

A. K. Coomaraswamy.