

THE SOVIET RELIGION

By F. J. McGARRIGLE

RELIGION is obligation. Both words are identical in their latin root, *ligare*, to bind. Whether he have obligations of love and service to a God of infinite greatness and goodness or to a finite god in the form of *panis et circenses*, bread and amusements, whether he adore a creator or *kultur*, man never is without obligations of some religion. For religion is naught but the obligations entailed in the purpose of man's existence; and the view that a man has of his *raison d'être* is, briefly his religion.

Sovietism is essentially a way of looking on the reason of man's existence. Its atheism is but one of the many religions used at different times by politicians for the purpose of unification of the country according to their political lights, through an imposed unification of religious obligations. To attain this end it is attempting what Nero and Diocletian could not do—to stamp out the conflicting religion of Christianity.

What progress is the religion of Sovietism making? The present state of this struggle between repression by Sovietism and the resistance of Christianity is well set forth in an official document of information from Moscow to a certain government. It reads:

The fact that, since the famous decree of Stalin in March of this year, the "physical warfare" on the churches, such as closure, taking of bells, confiscation, exile, do not now take place or is rare, is taken by some as a sign that in this matter a more or less forced laming of the Bolshevist militant spirit is evident. That is not so. The warfare is carried on by other means, and it is a question whether these means, at least in the long run, are not more efficacious. To a great extent weapons of the spirit have replaced brutal force in this warfare. But the old methods remain unchanged as far as restriction of movement, and taxation are concerned. The determinations of the law on religious associations of April 8, 1929, concerning the liquidation of churches can be considered as practically carried out with undiminished force especially in the villages, although the fact cannot be perfectly verified. The new method of intellectual warfare on religion is seen above all in the work of the Association of Atheists in the field of literature, flysheets and newspaper propaganda, in which the effort is evidently to elevate the qualitative side of their activity.

The Association of Atheists, which in 1925 developed into the Association of Militant Atheists, has its center in Moscow. Its activity stretches out over the whole Soviet Union. The statistics of the association show lately a rapid rise in the number of members, which at present is over 2,500,000. Toward the end of the Five-Year Plan the number is to be brought to 17,000,000. To judge rightly of the number of members, one must keep in mind that the purpose of the association is not merely the fostering of anti-religious sentiment, the diffusion of agitation literature, etc., but in the first place, the formation of each member for active warfare in behalf of atheism.

The development of antireligious organizations in the U. S. S. R. can be characterized by the following figures:

	Number of "Cells"	Number of Members
1926	2,421	87,033
1927	3,121	138,402
1928	3,980	123,007
Jan. 1, 1929	8,928	465,498
July 1, 1929	10,000	1,000,000
End of 1929	25,000	2,000,000

From the above it is evident that the formation of cells of the association according to the ideal of Communist party activity is successful. The chief endeavor at present is to increase the number of such cells in the schools, in the army and in the villages.

The literary output of the Atheists presents the following picture in numbers of copies:

	The Newspaper <i>The Atheist</i>	The Magazine <i>The Atheist</i>	The Magazine <i>The Anti-religious</i>
1927	62,514	19,387	4,324
1928	63,131	29,825	8,342
1929	144,669	66,385	18,812
1930	375,000	170,000	35,000

Other propaganda printed matter in pamphlet form:

1927	700,000 copies
1928	6,700,000 "
1929	34,000,000 "

Antireligious literature comprises:

1927	20 book titles
1928	50 " "
1929	180 " "

Atheist Journalists (*Bezbozhkor*):

March 1929 ... 3,000 End of 1929 over 5,500

These are a special class of journalists, who have been prepared in specialized courses for antireligious propaganda. Besides the placing of these specialists, the persuasion of other categories of journalists to practically interest themselves in antireligious work is energetically striven for. Worthy of mention also is the addition of the so-called Workingman and Village Correspondents (*rabkor* and *selkor*) and lately of the Army Correspondents (*wojenkor*), to the corps of atheist journalists.

Especially the method and form of antireligious propaganda has been developed. From simple public lectures the atheists have passed to study courses and antireligious universities. From crude injurious treatment of believers, which brought conviction to no one, and from demonstrations such as public disputes, carnivals, Christmas celebrations of the association of Young Communists, closing of churches, opening of the holy reliquaries, etc., they have passed to a well-thought-out, systematic program, the principles of which are drawn from the study of personal experience and from foreign literature. In addition "excursions" play an important part. Also the "antireligious museums" are considered a very important means of propaganda for atheism. In 1925 there were three such museums; in 1927, eleven; in 1928, fourteen; in 1929, thirty-four.

The activity of the Russian Association of Militant Atheists in an ever-increasing degree reaches out into foreign lands, for which the first base was won in 1925 when the Association of Proletarian Freethinkers united with the Association of Militant Atheists. During the last few years the Russian Atheists received four delegations of foreign atheists. The delegates gathered information in detail concerning the Socialist constitution and work of the Militant Atheists, and on their return held hundreds of public lectures on the Soviet union. In the increasing relations of the Russian Atheists with foreign countries personal correspondence has greatly increased, for which Esperanto is very important as a means of contact between the Russian and foreign atheists.

In such circumstances the financing of the antireligious propaganda no longer depends on collections from the members and divisions of the association, on the sale of sketches, literature, pictures, on entrance fees to permanent and temporary enterprises, especially of cinema houses; it must be carried on by federal and communal subsidy and avail itself more and more of the support of public institutions, such as workingmen's associations, directing councils, etc. Besides, a great part of antireligious work is carried on as volunteer work by way of the so called "Undertaking of works of social duty" (*obshtshestvennaia nagruska*), as, e.g., in the case of teachers.

Of essential importance is the fact that through the wide spread of antireligious propaganda in the U.S. S. R., numerous laws favoring atheism have been passed. (Cf. N. Orleanski: *The Law concerning Religious Meetings*, Moscow, 1930.) Thus the atheists enjoy full liberty for their antireligious instructions while religious instruction is forbidden in state and private schools and institutes (Article 18 of the law of April 8, 1929); the antireligious activity of citizens is favored to the utmost; the institution and existence of religious associations are rendered very difficult by the severest regulations, the clergy have not the right of participation in elections and printers can refuse to print announcements, literature and writings of a religious nature. Also those associations which according to the law may accept members without distinction of religious conviction, as for instance, the Central Workingmen's Union, are expressly justified by the law to carry on antireligious propaganda. (Cf. the Workingmen's Union circular of March 1, 1929 on the "Strengthening of Antireligious Propaganda".)

The whole work in the antireligious field corresponds exactly with the spirit and realization of the Five-Year Plan. The choice of means, as we have mentioned undergoes a change from time to time; but there is no sign of a numerical check in the acquisition of members, even though the ambitiously high number of the Five-Year ideal will not be reached.

The notorious measures of force are in abeyance, but the drive along the "ideological" front has been intensified. The problem has become a question of time.

The young generation, under the enforced continual influence of instruction on the class-worshiping character of religion, etc., unable to withdraw from atheistic organizations, will become at least progressively areligious, when not positively antireligious.

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IF THERE IS NO GOD

SOVIET RUSSIA HAS CARRIED ITS CAMPAIGN against God into the field of education, for news dispatches tell us that an anti-religious university, said to be the first in the world, has been established in Leningrad. The university opened on the anniversary of the death of Stepanoff Skvortsoff, noted atheist, for whom the school was named. Meanwhile, asks the *Chicago Journal of Commerce*, what of Stepanoff Skvortsoff, and, with classic reference, goes on:

“‘Meanwhile,’ said Sir Thomas Browne in discussing a similar matter, ‘Epicurus lies deep in Dante’s hell, wherein we meet with tombs enclosing souls which denied their immortalities.’ But it is not so deep, after all; it is Limbo, the outermost circle of the Inferno, and its inhabitants experience desire without hope, but are not otherwise unhappy. Limbo, however, is for the ‘virtuous heathens’ of pre-Christian days, who lived, as Browne remarked, ‘in that disadvantage of time, when men could say little for futurity, but from reason, whereby the noblest minds fell often upon doubtful deaths, and melancholy dissolutions.’ For Stepanoff Skvortsoff there is no such extenuation; the light was held out to him, and he denied it; if he is in hell, it is in a far deeper part than Epicurus and Homer and Horace and Ovid and Lucan inhabit. Sunk in his punishment, he is perhaps conscious that far above him, on the surface of the earth, in Leningrad that was once Petrograd, 300 students have matriculated at a university which is dedicated to the proposition that Stepanoff Skvortsoff exists no more, in any form or spirit.

“If they are right, if there is no God or heaven or purgatory or hell, and Epicurus and Stepanoff Skvortsoff are both as extinct as General Custer’s horse, how shall Stepanoff Skvortsoff plume himself on his posthumous glory? Little does it profit him that the anti-religious university in Leningrad is the Stepanoff Skvortsoff University. And do the ‘300 students, forty-seven of them women,’ who drink eagerly at the Skvortsoffian spring, derive a mighty advantage from contemplation of the honor paid to the inanimate matter that was once Stepanoff Skvortsoff? Do they reflect that if with superlative zeal they diffuse the gospel of anti-religion, for them too there may some day be erected an anti-religious university, honoring their dead and meaningless bones along with those of Stepanoff Skvortsoff and Stepanoff Skvortsoff’s dog?”

Surely, says *The Western Christian Advocate* (Methodist), these students “are dominated by an intellectual blindness that can not be interpreted in any other way than that of obsession.”