

Revolution and Revival in the USSR

In August Gorbachev was ousted from power by hard-line communists. The world feared and trembled. The standard-bearer of the opposition was the Russian president Boris Yeltsin. The coup failed. Gorbachev was reinstated. The media endlessly interviewed Sovietologists. The comments centered on political and economic reforms. Next to nothing was said about the spiritual dynamics behind the revolution. The Western media showed their secular bias by neglecting to discuss the implications for religion if the coup of the hardliners had succeeded.

Just before the dramatic events in August I finished reading Dr. Kent R. Hill's invaluable book *The Soviet Union on the Brink; An Inside Look at Christianity and Glasnost*. Dr. Hill provides the reader with an extensive background to the dramatic changes which have taken place in the USSR. Who could have thought even a few years ago that *Pravda*, the giant and very official Communist party publishing house, would decide to print Bibles? *Pravda's* deputy director Mikhail Troschin said the demand for the Bible is very great. He acknowledged that the desire for the Bible might always have been there, "but for some political purpose it wasn't published." One of the political purposes was, of course, Lenin's hatred of religion. *Pravda* has also printed nearly a million copies of a 1992 calendar with a Leonardo daVinci portrait of the Madonna nursing her child.

At the moment there is more openness to religion in the Soviet Union than in the West. The Soviets have seen the consequences of stark atheism and did not like what was seen and experienced. For example, Dr. Hill notes that on October 26, 1990 Vladimir Kinelev, first vice-chairman of the State Committee on Science and Higher Education for the Russian Republic, proposed to John Bembaum, vice-president of the Christian College Coalition, that the CCC establish a Christian College in Moscow. New evangelical churches are springing up all over Moscow. These new congregations are largely the result of evangelistic meetings conducted by churches. In Moscow the Baptist Union is building a seminary. Exciting developments are taking place.

What of the church's future in the Soviet Union? Dr. Hill's basic thesis is that Christians must fully acknowledge the positive changes now occurring in the Soviet Union. But he also warns against unwarranted optimism. Even though communism is now a discredited force since the failure of the August coup, I believe his warning is still valid. The openness towards religion in Moscow does not necessarily mean that freedom of religion has now been achieved in every town and village throughout the Soviet Union. There are still many anti-Christian forces at work, despite the disintegration of the official party line.

In the first part of his book, Dr. Hill examines the relationship of Marxism to Christianity. He outlines the anti-Christian character of Marxism; its evil nature and its inability to change from within. And he notes that "apart from a fundamental departure from and rejection of central tenets or interpretations of Marxism, true religious freedom in the Soviet Union can never be more than an illusion." With the communist party no longer in the Soviet Union's driver seat, religious freedom may become a reality for many, but not

for all. Not all the states which declared their independency from Moscow are democratic. Some are still communist controlled; others are Islamic. And recent history testifies to the hardship Christians experience under Islamic controlled governments. Part two of Hill's book is devoted to the history of church/state relations from the Bolshevik Revolution in 1917 to the beginning of the Gorbachev era in 1985. This is the story of heroic Christian martyrs; the tale of timid church leaders in high places and courageous action by many priests, pastors and lay people. At the very height of the Communist persecution registered church leaders, both Protestant and Russian Orthodox, told the World Council of Churches and other church bodies that there were no serious problems with religious freedom in the Soviet Union.

Part III addresses the relationship between Soviet disinformation and the often inadequate response of Western Christians. The World Council of Churches has been notably one-sided in its approach to East-West relations. It gained a reputation "for, being pro-leftist and anti-Western. Stories of persecutions were not readily acknowledged. At the Vancouver General Assembly in 1983 the WCC remained silent on religious oppression in the Soviet Union. Dr. Hill comments that this silence angered many participants. And at that same assembly, the WCC refused to condemn the USSR for invading Afghanistan. But evangelicals have also fallen for the Soviet Union's disinformation tactics. Dr. Billy Graham's controversial visit to Moscow didn't help the beleaguered Christians. While in Russia, he said, "I came to preach, not to get involved with any political issues." He seemed to have accepted the official disinformation story line. Dr. Hill spares neither the right nor the left. He certainly does not view all Russian church officials as Soviet agents. But he comments that this "should not blind us to the overwhelming evidence that the Kremlin often does use Soviet church leaders for propagandistic purposes." Western Christians showed a lack of discernment and courage when the persecuted church desperately needed support. "The great paradox of religion in the Soviet Union," says Dr. Hill, " – understood by neither the Right, which often sees only KGB agents in the registered churches, nor the Left, which frequently imagines more freedom than actually existed – is that a genuine spirituality has existed within a deeply compromised and registered religious establishment."

Part IV discusses the meaning and significance of Glasnost. The positive influences of Glasnost are reviewed. Evangelicals have unprecedented opportunity for spreading the gospel. "Television is airing religious programs, theaters showing religious movies, and prisons and public auditoriums allowing evangelists to conduct services." There is a tremendous spiritual hunger in the Soviet Union.

The author hopes that his study will aid Western Christians to come to grips with the complex history and the current realities of the Christian church in the Soviet Union. In his final chapter he provides advice to Christians in the West on how to best help their fellow believers. Included is a list of Christian organizations, which are involved with a bona fide ministry within the once communist Soviet empire.

Dr. Hill, executive director of the Institute on Religion and Democracy in Washington, DC, earned a Master's degree in Russian studies. He also spent some time in Russia

for his research. A must reading for anyone who wants to gain an understanding of the dynamics behind the current political and religious developments in the former Soviet Union's post-Gorbachev era.

The Soviet Union on the Brink; An Inside Look at Christianity and Glasnost by Kent R. Hill,
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