3 Religion and Youth in the Soviet Union

David E. Powell

Everyone must be perfectly free not only to belong to whatever religion he pleases, but he must be free to disseminate his religion and to change his religion.

V. I. Lenin, 'K derevenskoi bednote' (1903)

The mass atheism of the Soviet people, the freeing of the broad masses from religiousness, the fashioning among them of a scientific world-view, is one of the notable achievements of socialism, persuasive evidence of its progressive historical mission. But all of this does not provide a basis for complacency. Despite the continuing process by which religion is dying out, life demonstrates that it still possesses the ability to preserve its positions, sometimes even experiencing a revival, so to underestimate it would be a mistake.


It is necessary to fight for each child, so that he will become a full-fledged member of society and will live a full-blooded, happy life. This struggle is of an extraordinarily humane character.


Attempts to persuade young people in the Soviet Union to reject the teachings of organised religion and to embrace instead the doctrine of 'scientific atheism' can be traced back to the very beginnings of the Bolshevik regime. Indeed, several months before Lenin and his followers engineered their *coup d'état* in October 1917, the Provisional Government took the first decisive step toward establishing a secular society. On 20 June 1917, responding to repeated suggestions...
from the Duma, political moderates and the All-Russian Teachers’ Congress, the Provisional Government decided to place the nation’s 37,000 parochial schools under the direct control of the Minister of Education.1

This ‘progressive’ measure was seen by officials of the Russian Orthodox Church as politically unwise and morally repugnant. The All-Russian Congress of Clergy and Laymen issued a protest, and the Holy Synod denounced the new policy as ill-advised and inimical to the future influence of the Church. According to the Synod, the Provisional Government’s decision ‘deprives the Orthodox Church of one of the means of exerting a religious enlightening influence upon the Russian people, who, because of the great historic significance of the Orthodox Church in the Russian state, are accustomed to drawing the seeds of faith and their ideals of life from the church.’2

The Bolshevik Revolution only reinforced the determination of Church leaders to see the schools returned to their supervision. Convinced of the wisdom and morality of their proposal, and convinced that the new regime would be short-lived, Orthodox officials made no effort whatsoever to compromise or even to influence Lenin’s attitude toward religion. The All-Russian Sobor (Council) of the Russian Orthodox Church demanded that parochial schools be placed forthwith under the control of the church, and that religious instruction be compulsory in all schools.3

But the new regime did not comply, despite the Bolsheviks’ status as a minority and despite the efforts of numerous domestic and foreign adversaries to remove them from their precarious hold on power. On 4 December, 1917, Lenin and Trotsky and their associates issued a decree nationalising all land – including the enormous properties which had belonged to the church and to the monasteries. Another law nationalised all schools, including church secondary schools, theological seminaries and academies; this step, of course, went far beyond the decisions taken by the Provisional Government. On 23 January (5 February) 1918, the Bolsheviks issued yet another decree, separating church from state and school from church. As John Shelton Curtiss has written, this document ‘established the principle of the completely secular state, made religion a private matter, and deprived all religious bodies of their property, their legal status, the right to maintain schools, and all subsidies from the government.’4 (Four weeks later, the State Commission on Education declared piously that, because ‘the state is neutral in matters of religion, . . . the government cannot take upon itself the religious