

From the Archives: Soviet Anti-Religious Propaganda Posters

One interesting recent addition to our collection (and one which is still ongoing) are the Papers of Mark Elliott, Director of the Institute of East-West Christian Studies at Wheaton College, which span his years of work, knowledge, and research into the situation of Christianity in the Soviet Union (1923-1991), both before and after its breakup.¹ As the editor of the East-West Church and Ministry Report for 25 years, Mark Elliott has kept his fingers on the pulse of the state of the Church under Communism and its emerging political replacements. Among the items in this large and fascinating collection is a group of anti-religious propaganda posters from around 1975. This provides a visual record of this time period, but also helps demonstrate the way atheism attempted to undermine the Church and the Christian message.

At the start of the Soviet Union, Communism had a very low view of religion. As David Powell wrote in 1975, "While they (Communists in the Soviet Union) were confident that religion would eventually die out (its disappearance was said to be 'demanded by history'), they sought to hasten this inevitable process. Over the half century that they have been in power, they have utilized a wide range of measures- from education and propaganda to legal restrictions, extralegal pressure, and outright terror- in their effort to achieve a secular society."² For most of the early years of the Soviet Union the view of religion as a primitive superstition used to control the masses or prevent social change, meant that its demise was a forgone conclusion. But by the 1970s it was clear something had gone wrong with this line of reasoning, the number of religious people in the Soviet Union was not decreasing, but young people educated in the new Soviet system were turning to religion in larger numbers.

Early views of Communist anti-religion propaganda tended to show the natural success of youthful Socialists pushing off the confines of primitive superstition and advancing through science, technology, and modern ideas to become the ideal “New Man.” One poster that typifies this view is that of a young man in red ink striding forward with confidence into the future, happy and free, while a small image of an angry Orthodox priest lurks in the background. The caption of the poster reads triumphantly, “Without God the Road is Wide!” Of course for a Christian response, one can’t help but think of Matthew 7:13-14, “Enter through the narrow gate. For wide is the gate and broad is the road that leads to destruction, and many enter through it. But small is the gate and narrow the road that leads to life, and only a few find it.”





“The New Man” was a Common Theme in Early Communist Propaganda, Such as this Poster with its Caption: “Without God the Road is Wide”

In the 1960's there was still a strong belief that religion would fade away as ridiculous superstition. Nikita Khrushchev began an anti-religious propaganda campaign in 1959, particularly aimed at the Russian Orthodox Church. Khrushchev is credited with a speech to the Central Committee of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union, referring to the Soviet Union's decorated hero and cosmonaut, Yuri Gagarin, who became the first man in space in April of 1961, saying, "Gagarin flew into space, but didn't see any god there." This eventually became a quote falsely attributed to Gagarin and is sometimes repeated as, "I looked and looked and looked, but I didn't see God" or reporting while in space, "I see no God up here." Transcripts of the space communications report that he never said this during his flight, and some have even suggested Gagarin was actually a faithful member of the Russian Orthodox Church.³ That did not stop the anti-religion campaign of 1975 from building on this image with a poster of a cosmonaut in space and the caption, "There is No God." For the faithful, Psalm 8:3-4 perhaps makes the best response to this line of thinking, "When I consider your heavens, the work of your fingers, the moon and the stars, which you have set in place, what is mankind that you are mindful of them, human beings that you care for them?"





Poster of a Cosmonaut in Space (referring to Yuri Gagarin)
With the Caption, “There is No God.”

In the 1970's another aggressive campaign was launched and headed by Yuri Andropov. It was intensified by the 1975 amendments to the existing anti-religious laws. Philip Walters notes of this period,

Towards religion the policy became one of 'divide and rule'- of granting concessions to registered congregations and even whole denominations, while dealing harshly with unregistered and dissident groups. As in the late 1930s, the perception was growing that severe persecution had simply driven believers underground rather than eliminate them altogether. There was also increasing evidence that in a climate of growing awareness of the importance of human rights, fostered by Khrushchev's liberalisations in various fields, the sufferings of religious believers were evoking sympathy amongst the non-believers in the population."⁴

The posters in this collection represent the Soviet Union's response to the failure to do away with religion in the new state. There was a view that simply expecting religion to fade away, or belittling those who were believers, was not effective. It was important to understand why people believed and win them by persuasion. Atheism was seen as having failed to focus on persuading people, or was irrelevant to people's daily lives. As such, the posters became subtler, and even criticized atheists for failing in their job. One example is a poster of an atheist asleep on his books, covered with a paper that reads, "Plan of Atheistic Work." The caption under him reads, "The atheist sleeps... while worship continues." Underneath an Orthodox priest blesses a praying congregation and the caption reads, "He offers prayer for the health of the atheist." While meant as a criticism, in some ways this image simply builds on what Jesus says in Matthew 5:43-45, "You have heard it said, 'Love your neighbor and hate your enemy.' But I tell you, love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, that you may be children of your Father in heaven. He causes the sun to rise on the evil and the good, and sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteous."





Poster of Atheism Asleep at its Job, While the Orthodox Priest
Prays for the Atheist to have Good Health

Posters were not the only approach taken by the Soviet propaganda machine. Education in state run schools was the primary method used, and this was supported by travelling atheist lecturers, television and cinematic productions, atheist clubs, and anti-religious museums, as well as printed literature and newspaper reports.⁵ However, these posters help give us a visual picture of the themes Soviet propagandists used to attack and undermine the faith of believers in the Soviet Union.

Another approach used by Soviet propagandists was to show religion, especially Orthodox Christianity, as empty ritual, keeping people from having an enjoyable life. A typical poster in the collection shows a young boy being dragged to prayers before an icon by an angry grandmother in a darkened room. He hesitates as he looks outside the window at a bright scene of young children with the red scarves of the Young Pioneers (part of the educational program of the Communist Party), playing drums and following a leader happily playing a trumpet. The caption reads, “You cannot see the light of God... For the grandson, what is the light of the lamp? There is no love for black icons. The grandson is drawn to the sports ground and the Pioneer’s beautiful sounding horns.” Of course a Christian response would be similar to 1 John 2:15-16, which says, “Do not love the world or anything in the world. If anyone loves the world, love of the Father is not in them. For everything in the world- the lust of the flesh, the lust of the eyes, and the pride of life- comes not from the Father but from the world.”





**“You Cannot See the Light of God...” Poster
Showing How Religion Oppresses the Joy of Children**

Yet another Soviet approach to the anti-religious propaganda program was to portray religion as a scam, used to frighten people into giving the Church money. The implication was often made that the Church was full of corrupt leaders who did not care for the people, but only sought to get rich off of them. One example of a poster in this genre shows a man and a woman kneeling and putting money into a offering box. Behind them on the wall is a fierce painting of devils taking people into the fires of hell. The caption reads, “You bring money to God’s temple, because in paradise you will be rewarded. You do not need earthly goods. They are the tools of Satan.’ This is the call of the Lord’s servants- to take the naïve by fear, while they revere their own here on earth, and not in paradise.” Far from using fear as a tactic to take money, in 1 Timothy 6:17-18, St. Paul instructs us, “Command those who are rich in this present world not to be arrogant nor to put their hope in wealth, which is so uncertain, but to put their hope in God, who richly provides us with everything for our enjoyment. Command them to do good, to be rich in good deeds, and to be generous and willing to share.”





Anti-religious Poster Showing Christianity Using Fear to Take People's Money

Some of the anti-religious propaganda was aimed to show Christianity as illogical and foolish, with no solid evidence to support its promise of heaven. One particularly interesting poster in the collection shows a fishhook dangling in the water. The hook itself is labeled as “Sects” and is baited with a ticket to heaven. The hook is surrounded by gullible fish, dressed like old men or women, with children in tow, gaping at the ticket that promises rewards after death. The caption reads, “Cleverly conceived lie: ‘You will die- and go up to the sky.’ You will die- but you will not come back again to refute this lie.” While the reality of heaven cannot be scientifically proven by the Church, Christians by faith hold to the promise of John 3:16, “For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life.”





Anti-religious Poster Showing People as Helpless Fish Tricked Into Taking the Bait of a Ticket to Heaven.

Christian work from outside the Soviet Union at this time often took the form of religious smuggling operations to bring Bibles and other Christian literature into the country for the believers who were struggling to maintain their faith in this difficult environment.⁶ Soviet propagandists also worked to degrade this type of activity and the work of the Church outside the Soviet Union in their posters. One example portrays a fat foreign capitalist dressed in a fur coat with his cameras walking in the snow. The caption reads, “A tourist camouflaged...” In the lower panel, we see the tourist hoisted on the bar of a border crossing, manned by a young, smiling soldier. The action has revealed the coat is hiding Christian literature, including one titled, “Life with God.” The large caption underneath reads, “And exposed.” The smaller caption of the poster reads, “To the agent of the evil enemy, this is a memorable lesson. We do not want guests with such luggage crossing our threshold.” However, Christians have always taken the importance of spreading the Gospel as part of their faith. As Romans 10:17 says, “Consequently, faith comes from hearing the message, and the message is heard through the word about Christ.”





Anti-religious Poster Aimed at Christians Smuggling Religious Literature from the West

David Powell, in his study on anti-religious propaganda in the Soviet Union pointed out five major flaws with the Soviet approach: propaganda seldom reached believers, faith is seldom undermined by reason, there was confusion and apathy among atheists, the propagandists lacked suitable knowledge and skill, and the propaganda was seldom relevant to people's daily life.⁷ He writes, "The conclusion seems inescapable that atheist propaganda is misconceived, misdirected, and clumsy. Those responsible for formulating and implementing antireligious policies base their efforts on an unsophisticated view of the task they face, and they lack much of the information needed to devise a more effective program. There has been little effort to explore the psychology of religious belief or the dynamics of persuasion and opinion change."⁸ Understanding how those who oppose the Christian message operate is just as important as understanding what makes evangelism and mission successful. By examining collections such as the Papers of Mark Elliott, the Church can better prepare and educate believers about living lives of faith under persecution. As Romans 8:35-36 reminds us, "Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall trouble or hardship or persecution or famine or nakedness or danger or sword? As it is written: 'For your sake we face death all day long; we are considered as sheep to be slaughtered.'"

The archives of the B.L. Fisher library are open to researchers and work to promote research in the history of Methodism and the Wesleyan-Holiness movement. Images, such as these, provide one vital way to bring history to life. Preservation of such material is often time consuming and costly, but is essential to helping fulfill Asbury Theological Seminary's mission. If you are interested in donating items of historic significance to the archives of the B.L. Fisher Library, or in donating funds to help purchase or process significant collections, please contact the archivist at archives@asburyseminary.edu.

End Notes

¹ All images used courtesy of the Archives of the B.L. Fisher Library of Asbury Theological Seminary who own all copyrights to these digital images. Please contact them directly if interested in obtaining permission to reuse these images.

² David L. Powell, *Antireligious Propaganda in the Soviet Union: A Study of Mass Persuasion*. Published by MIT Press, Cambridge, MA and London, England (1975), page 3.

³ Cf. <http://www.pravmir.com/did-yuri-gagarin-say-he-didnt-see-god-in-space/> Retrieved 7/5/2018.

⁴ Philip Walters, "A Survey of Soviet Religious Policy" in *Religious Policy in the Soviet Union*, edited by Sabrina Petra Ramet, Cambridge University Press, New York, NY (1993), page 23.

⁵ Cf. William C. Fletcher, *Soviet Believers: The Religious Sector of the Population*, The Regents Press of Kansas, Lawrence, KS (1981), pages 6-9.

⁶ See especially information on Brother Andrew and the Open Doors Ministry. Brother Andrew wrote a book in 1974 called *The Ethics of Smuggling* (Tyndale House Publishers, Wheaton, IL), which presents a Christian view of the practice as it was understood at that time. See also Brother Andrew's popular book, *God's Smuggler* (1967) which has been republished multiple times.

⁷ David L. Powell, *Antireligious Propaganda in the Soviet Union: A Study of Mass Persuasion*. Published by MIT Press, Cambridge, MA and London, England (1975), pages 141- 149.

⁸ David L. Powell, *Antireligious Propaganda in the Soviet Union: A Study of Mass Persuasion*. Published by MIT Press, Cambridge, MA and London, England (1975), page 149.

