

Orthodox Youth in Russia Today (1969)
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The U.S.S.R. (Union of Soviet Socialist Republics) has a constitution. This constitution says that people are free to worship any way they want. This means that people are allowed by law to gather in churches and pray. At the same time it is forbidden to have any kinds of church clubs or church societies to help the poor or the sick, to have schools for children, or homes for old people. Every parish must have a group of people who are responsible for it, and they have to pay very high taxes. If the Communist Government wants to close a church, they will suddenly tax it much higher than before and if the parish cannot pay such a tax, the church is closed. The church cannot print any books or magazines or newspapers for the people. Worst of all, it is strictly forbidden to teach religion to children. There can be no Sunday Schools; the priest cannot preach sermons to children; he cannot visit homes and teach children there; nor can any lay person do any of these things. Breaking these rules is punished by imprisonment. Quite recently these rules have become more strict and it is forbidden for children from 3 to 18 years old to attend church services, to receive Holy Communion, to go to Confession. The church warden and the priest are responsible for carrying out this rule. If they do not turn children away, the church may be closed.

At the same time teaching against religion, against belief in God, is carried on all the time and everywhere. Movies, theaters, radio and TV programs, newspapers, magazines, books for adults and children teach that there is no God, that religion is a foolish, old fashioned way of thinking. This is called "anti-religious propaganda." It is part of the education given in public schools and begins as early as kindergarten.

In one kindergarten, just a few minutes before a hot lunch was to be served to the children and when they were quite hungry, the teacher said: "Would you like to ask God to give you food?" The children said, yes, they'd like it, and the teacher suggested that they pray. So the children began to pray for food. Then in a minute the teacher said: "Well, God has not answered your prayer, has He? But I shall now ask our kind Soviet Government to give you food. Let's see what gives us!" And she opened the door into the refectory and there was the children's hot lunch all ready and served...

Besides all these laws which aim to destroy religion, there are many other things that are done to persecute the church. Sometimes it is announced that a church building disturbs traffic, and the church is torn down. Or a church will be turned into a movie theater, or storage house, -- because "This is in the best interest of the community."

People who are active in church are accused falsely of all kinds of crimes: dishonesty, spying, etc., and then they are condemned to many years of hard labor. If a person is known to attend church he will not get a good job, a student will not be accepted in college, and a professional person will make no progress in his profession. Things are especially difficult for young people. In schools the boys and girls who have been seen

in church are mocked publicly. “Student trials” are sometimes staged by the Communist Youth at which the student who showed religious faith is violently condemned.

You would think that after all this has been going on for fifty years that nothing more would remain of the church. And yet this is not true. The churches that have remained open are crammed full, and young people attend as well as old ones. Baptisms have to be performed over as many as 20 or 30 babies, at a time. Weddings too are celebrated for many couples at the same time. Some of the most famous people, like Boris Pasternak, author of the book *Doctor Zhivago* or the scientist Dr. Pavlov were not afraid to attend church. Though the church is not allowed to help the poor and sick in any organized way, much help is given in the parishes to anyone who is in need.

People who have traveled recently in Russia and have attended church services there cannot forget them: the tightly packed churches, the crowds of people standing shoulder to shoulder, thousands of voices singing as one the Lord’s Prayer or the Creed, people praying with tears in their eyes. Quite recently a woman from Russia came on a visit to the United States. On several Sundays she attended one of our churches here. Back home when people go to church, it means so much for them that they are willing to risk anything, to give up anything for it. Here it is just something you do on a Sunday morning.