

# Religion is Dangerous

by Desmond Ford

Its raining. Great! It reduces the fire hazard. It brings life and growth to plant, beast, and man. But Noah's contemporaries had less enthusiasm. Rain! The ancients said there was no such thing. If it keeps up, there **will** be a flood.

So it is with everything that's good. If it's useful and has strength, its dangerous. Watch out! The tongue, electricity, fire, sex, politics, religion. Especially religion. You can refuse to use electricity, you may be able to run from a little fire, but there is no dodging religion. It's ubiquitous. That's not the same as iniquitous, it just means its everywhere.

Let me illustrate. <sup>Two years ago I was in</sup> ~~I've just come back from~~ Russia. and the marks of religion there are everywhere. Not the Christian religion, but the religion of Lenin. As soon as the first Communist dictator died, Stalin had him deified. Statues were erected everywhere, and photographs were multiplied like the leaves of Autumn.

I had heard about the pulling down of Lenin's statue in one or two places. But there are plenty left. From city to city I traveled, and village to village. I could never avoid Lenin. He was watching me all the time, always with the same look on his face, striving to express both wisdom and benevolence, but not entirely convincing to Christian skeptics.

Even when I spoke in an old folk's home in Russia—sorry, a place of retirement for loyal government workers—as I <sup>was</sup> open my mouth to talk I almost shut it again immediately without speaking a word. For there's <sup>was</sup> Lenin looking at me from the wall, and I was about to damn him to his face.

And like every visitor to Moscow I ultimately end up at the Kremlin. And there is Lenin's mausoleum. I won't forget it. Not because of the impressiveness of the little stretched out midget man looking like at exhibit at Madame Tussaud's—but because I had to pay eleven rubles to park my camera before descending the steps of the Mausoleum in company with a long line of tourists. Why? In Russian terms, the camera was not worth as much as I paid to cloak it. (I who had not used a camera for thirty years had requested Roy to get one that any fool could use, but also one so cheap that it wouldn't matter if the fool lost it in traveling. Result: camera (Roy was it \$19 or 29?)

Anyway I was obviously not to be allowed to photograph the Russian god. No need to. He was everywhere—as I said, ubiquitous as well as iniquitous.

The Russians couldn't dispense with religion. They had to have one, and Lenin won the popularity poll among the politicians. Or was it just crafty old Stalin paving the way for his own deification? I think the latter. He started by changing the name of a well-known city to Stalingrad, and later with the cooperation of the German armies bathed it in Russian blood.

Yes, there is no dodging religion. Some make a religion of evolution. It can do everything, they say. And when I hear of its deeds, I am impressed. Sounds mighty like God to me, doing his work of creation with untold miracles.

Would you believe it? During the terrible purges by Stalin when whole categories of people were swallowed up by prisons or the grave regardless of innocence—in those very days many Communists refused to believe that Stalin even knew about it. Their god could do no wrong. Many Communists were slaughtered while fervently worshipping their murderer.

Approximately 2,000 chants and lyrics were written offering praise to the crafty Georgian tyrant. Never a family or group celebrated the least occasion without first drinking to the health of the chief murderer of all time. During the thirties and forties one could not enter an office building, a theater, a school, etc., without being confronted by Stalin at the door. And once beyond the door there were busts and photographs (lying pictures, for the real Stalin did not reveal the wisdom and benignity that his doctored pictures did.)

The heart must have something to love, and the mind demands a philosophy in which it can rest. The human mind cannot abide an uninterpreted world. Even more than the hands, the mind is a great tidier—tidies up the loose ends it finds, if it can.

Take Arthur Koestler's experience for example. If you haven't read his *Darkness at Noon*, please do so. But in his essay in the volume *The God that Failed*, he tells how as a young man Communism gave peace and joy to his inquiring mind. After poring through party propaganda he says:

Something had clicked in my brain which shook me like a mental explosion. To say that one had "seen the light" is a poor description of the mental rapture which only the convert knows (regardless of what faith he has been converted to). The new light seems to pour from all directions across the skull; the whole universe falls into pattern like the stray pieces of a jigsaw puzzle assembled by magic at one stroke. There is now an answer to every question, doubts and conflicts are a matter of the tortured past—a past already remote, when one had lived in dismal ignorance in the tasteless, colorless world of those who **don't know**. Nothing henceforth can disturb the convert's inner peace and serenity—except the occasional fear of losing faith again, losing thereby what alone makes life worth living, and falling back into the outer darkness, where there is weeping and gnashing of teeth. *The God That Failed*, page 23

One of the dangers of this honeymoon with a new credo is that difficult facts which thereafter refuse to conform to the pattern are ignored or rationalized away. Everything must fit the pattern, and, if the facts interfere, so much the worse for the facts. No ugly facts are going to rob me of my new found peace, yes even ecstasy. Not to mention the feeling of superiority that is now mine having entered the ranks of the chosen. Koestler tells us about this also.

Gradually I learned to distrust my mechanistic preoccupation with facts and to regard the world around me in the light of dialectic interpretation. It was a satisfactory and indeed blissful state; once you had assimilated the technique you were no longer disturbed by facts; they automatically took on the proper color and fell into their proper place. Both morally and logically the Party was infallible.... *Ibid.* page 34.

He tells us in another place that once one is immersed in the ambiguity of a deep-sea aquarium, it is almost impossible to distinguish substance from shadow.

Eric Hoffer's classic, *The True Believer*, which sketches the characteristics of fanatics and extremists has a section called "Make Believe," (page 64), in which he shows the necessity for tyrannical groups to dress up the facts until a palatable illusion has been created. For example, he tell us that "in Russia, where even the building of a latrine involves some self-sacrifice, life has been an uninterrupted soul-stirring drama going for thirty years." (*Ibid.*). This was written, of course, years before Perestroika and Glasnost.

In his autobiography *Chronicles of Wasted Time*, Malcolm Muggeridge tell of his experience in Russia during the 1930's and his own disillusionment. He particularly stresses how many Western liberals had been deceived by Communism and came to believe it was the source of all truth, equality, and hope, not to mention glory. After writing an account of what he himself had experienced in the heart land of Communism, he found with disappointment that it did little to clear up misconceptions and propaganda lies:

People continued to regard as an open question whether there was forced labor in the USSR, and whether the confessions of the Old Bolsheviks to have worked for the British Secret Service, and so on, were genuine. Shaw's picture of Stalin as the Good Fabian, and Dr Hewlett Johnson's of him as building the Kingdom of Christ, continued to carry more conviction than mine of a bloodthirsty tyrant of unusual ferocity even by Russian standards. People, after all, believe lies, not because they are plausibly presented, but because they want to believe them.

So, their credulity is unshakable. *Chronicles of Wasted Time*, page 274.

This tendency of the indoctrinated to resist the implication of facts as large as Greenland is further illustrated by Koestler as he sketches a dialogue between a Communist party official and a member who is beginning to have doubts:

"The last congress of the Party," Rubashov went on, "stated in a resolution that the Party had not suffered a defeat and has merely carried out a strategic retreat; and that there is no reason whatever for changing its previous policy."

"But that's rubbish," said Richard.

"The Party can never be mistaken," said Rubashov. "You and I can make a mistake. Not the Party." *Darkness at Noon*, page 47.

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If one looks at the apologetic doctrinal literature of any group under challenge the same tendency is usually seen. The smaller the group is, often the larger this tendency shows itself. Consider the writings of Jehovah's Witnesses and Mormons for example.

The typical Mormon Elder has a typical strategy in seeking to make or keep converts. He affirms that he wishes to give his testimony and gives it. A personal conviction is made to supplant all need of evidence from Holy Writ.

A few days ago a friend showed me an article by a man I greatly admire. I know him to be a fine Christian and an excellent scholar. But he has been put under some pressure it seems to try and establish a denominational tenet that is not believed by many, if not most, of his fellow scholars. So this article admitted that clear statements from Scripture did not exist to support the doctrine but he suggested that analogies from Holy Writ could be given substance by historical experience of believers this side of the Cross. In support he showed that believers at the time of the Cross found they had been misled by traditional opinions and how but for the continued guidance of the Spirit they could not have maintained faith in Jesus of Nazareth.

But it seems to me dangerous to ever suggest that the experiences of men and subjective convictions can substitute for the silence of the Word. In the case of the first generation of Christians they did have a mass of Old Testament passages which now made perfect sense after the Son of God Himself participated in divine Revelation. Apostles were led by the Spirit to so interpret the Old Testament messianic passages and those interpretations have become part of the Canon of Scripture. They are part of that revelation which according to Jude 3 was made "Once for all time." To suggest that the testimony of modern Mormons or experiences of nineteenth century Christians can rival God's revelatory words and deeds at the launching of the Christian church seems a highly dangerous position to take. (~~See *The Adventist Review*, September 24, 1992, pages 8-10.~~)

New Age exponents are also vocal on the part played by experience and the manner in which "God" is manifested by all that happens and all that is. This, of course, is but modern pantheism though it is not without its modicum of truth. God **does** speak through nature and events, but the interpretation is only sure if based on Scripture. It is the objective testimony of the Word intersecting in the heart with the subjective testimony of the Spirit that constitutes authoritative truth. Nothing less, and nothing else.

There is another danger quite apart from the primary one of twisting truth to fit one's beliefs. When one joins a club, be it political, scientific, medical, or religious, one longs to find acceptance in that group and therefore any tendency to question the decisions of the "club" is usually discouraged. Scott Peck in his *People of the Lie* has emphasized this fact over and over. From his chapter "Mylai: An Examination of Group Evil," we quote:

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... the role of follower is the role of child. The individual adult as individual is master of his own ship, director of his destiny. But when he assumes the role of follower he hands over to the leader his power: his authority over himself and his maturity as decision-maker. He becomes psychologically dependent on the leader as a child is dependent on its parents. In this way there is a profound tendency for the average individual to emotionally regress as soon as he becomes a group member. (page 223)

Peck reminds his readers that "probably the most powerful of... group cohesive forces is narcissism." page 225. In other words, a member becomes proud of his group and does all he can to foster esprit de corps. Anything that would take away from the glory of this new family must be shunned. Propagandists exacerbate this tendency by fostering hatred of some external enemy. ~~And~~

Yet another factor which hampers the free expression of truth in a group is any awareness of group failure.

In the healthy organism, failure will be a stimulus to self-examination and criticism. But since the evil individual cannot tolerate self-criticism, it is in time of failure that he or she will inevitably lash out one way or another. And so it is with groups. Group failure and the stimulation of group self-criticism act to damage group pride and cohesiveness. Group leaders in all places and ages have therefore routinely bolstered group cohesiveness in times of failure by whipping the group's hatred for foreigners of the "enemy." *Ibid.*, page 226.

It is natural to belong to groups, but it is another of those privileges which has inevitable inherent dangers. Not only for the member of a group, but for the leaders in particular, temptation can come with overwhelming force to ~~submerge values~~. Politics rather than principle can determine decision making. Again we quote Koestler:

It is said that Number One has Machiavelli's Prince lying permanently by his bedside. So he should: since then, nothing really important has been said about the rules of political ethics.... Politics can be relatively fair in the breathing spaces of history; at its critical points there is no other rule possible than the old one, that the end justifies the means. *Darkness at Noon*, page 90.

Here Christians must step warily and prayerfully. Worldly men are governed by worldly principles and they know no other, but for Christians to follow in their steps is to crucify Christ afresh. The group which we call "the church" has a lofty position of privilege which brings a correspondingly lofty elevation of responsibility. C. S. Lewis was so right when he affirmed that nobody is closer to hell than he who stands at the altar. For such meditation on the temptations of Christ ~~are~~ <sup>is</sup> a necessary prophylactic. He refused to accept the devil's ways of doing business. But the church through the ages since His crucifixion has not been as steadfast as he.

Rather than take the devil's way of speedy elevation to success, our Lord suffered terribly. He knew these same temptations would assail his body—the church—again and again. Men will join

any club that offers free bread or shows them wonders. It is the hasty but carnal way to material achievement—it comprehends the lusts of the flesh, the lusts of the eye, and the pride of life.

But the temptation for church leaders goes beyond mere compromise and worldliness. The greatest temptation is to play God, and to pretend to make the decisions that only He can make. It was to this that one well-known writer who spanned the last two centuries alluded when she declared that the very “worst of papal errors is the claim to be able to judge and punish heresy.” E. G. White, *Great Controversy*, page ?

Thus a Roman Catholic bishop of long ago could declare:

When the existence of the Church is threatened, she is released from the commandments of morality. With unity as the end, the use of every means is sanctified, even cunning, violence, simony, prison, death. For all order is for the sake of the community, and the individual must be sacrificed to the common good. Dietrich von Nieheim, Bishop of Verden *De Schismate Libri III*

John Oman in his significant book, *Vision and Authority*, is sadly correct when he writes:

Claims to be masters of other people's judgments, impatience with what we take to be other people's errors, desire to dominate by unproved assertion, all proclaim that the difference from the old days, when the most emphatic argument was the faggot, is more in loss of power than in change of spirit. page 191.

Recently John Warwick Montgomery has written *Damned by the Church*. Montgomery contends that much evil as well as much good has come from the church over the centuries. He itemizes four areas of failure in the universal church. (Quote book—Roy can we get it?)

Because of our rebellion against God ambivalence characterizes all that we experience. Even the best is tainted by the worst. And among the human “clubs” of earth, the church is the best. But it too is tainted. Shall we then in misanthropic spirit withdraw from church association and worship in solitary contentment with our own imaginary personal impeccability? No, a thousand times no!

Again we quote Oman (quote 306-307 bracketed)

“Now abideth faith, hope, and the greatest of these is love.” This being the case Christians will remember that decay and annihilation overtake all human institutions. Only that which devotes its chief energies to the eternal verities—faith, hope, love—can endure the vicissitudes of time and be ready to face eternity.

not a good  
Roy do you still have this?