

Communism's Struggle with Religion in Lithuania

The author of this article is well acquainted with the problems of occupied Lithuania. Because of personal and political reasons he asked his name to be withheld (Ed.).

Introduction

Marx's statement that religion is the opiate of the people, guides all of Communism's activities with regard to religion. In addition, Communism is so firmly entrenched in its materialistic position, that it could never consent to the existence of any spiritual life along with it. The war with God, with religion and with the Church is therefore, one of Communism's major and most essential hallmarks.

For Communism, religion is a misleading and backward remnant of capitalism. In the ideological sphere, religion is a foolish explanation of nature's power and secrets. The more educated a man is, the more faded and foolish religion seems to him. The more science progresses, the more false religion seems to become. According to the communist reasoning, religion in the economic sense is the desire for well-being on the part of the exploited, the weak, and the subjugated. In other words, every person wants to be happy on this earth, but because of the unjust economic system, a large part of the population lacks this state of well-being and has lost all hope of ever attaining it. Because of their despair and disappointment, men dream of happiness at least after death. This unfortunate and hopeless state of the poor is systematically exploited by the wealthy, who seek to hold and increase their wealth at the expense of the poor by distracting their attention from the woes of this life and promising them happiness and justice in the life after death. That is why Communism fights religion in the name of "scientific and social justice."

Every Church, in the eyes of Communism, is no more than a capitalist-imperialist organization which exploits the uneducated and the weak. Communism, therefore, believes that its worst ideological and social enemies are the Church and all religion. The gap between religion and Communism is too wide and radical to be ever reconciled and bridged. It is, however, difficult to destroy faith when it is deeply rooted; this requires a long period of time and an excellent strategy.

From the very beginning, Communism has never wavered from its aim to destroy and extract the idea of God's existence (the basis of all religions) from the consciousness of the people. The intensity, strategy, and methods of this struggle have changed with time, but always according to a certain fixed plan, so that the final and ultimate goal - the destruction of religious superstition — would be realized more quickly.

Methods Used in the War with Religion

Communist propaganda about religion presents two conflicting views in that (1) religion and all that is connected with it is considered the evil which communists have to fight and destroy, while (2) Communism pretends to maintain a tolerant and correct position in its intercourse with religion (this is particularly directed towards the foreign nations). Therefore, despite the years of persecution directed against believers and particularly the clergy, communists still emphasize that:

"Marxism-Leninism strongly denies, in its struggle with religious superstition, the use and the justification of force in order to hinder and prevent the functioning of religious organizations."¹ "The history of our revolution offers no example of anyone who has suffered because of his religious beliefs.

"In the Soviet Union, there have not been such religious persecutions. In essence they are impossible. The Church's hierarchy was not brought to court because of their religious activity, but because of their acts against the people. The clergy, as such, has never been persecuted in the Soviet Union."³

What methods, then, were used to fight religion? The communists are united in their evaluation and opinion of religion, but in practice they are inconsistent. On one hand, religion is regarded as a dangerous weapon in the hands of exploiters and, as such, should be liquidated with physical force according to the revolutionary teachings of Communism. On the other hand, Lenin stressed in 1905 that only spiritual means should be used in the struggle with religion:

"We demand the complete separation of Church and State so that we could fight religion and the clergy only with spiritual weapons—that is, only with our press and with the living word."⁴

Later Lenin himself thought differently: he demanded that religion, the enemy of revolution, be completely destroyed without necessarily using spiritual weapons. The beliefs of the present communist leaders are not far behind the theses of Marx and Lenin. For example, the Central Committee of Communist Party of the USSR resolved in 1954 that:

"In bourgeoisie societies, the Church is the means used by the ruling class in enslaving and exploiting the working class."⁵

Bronč-Brujevič states it even clearer:

"We never forget, and cannot forget, that religion is in its own way a spiritual narcotic, which through its religious philosophy would poison, hypnotize, blind, deafen, and degrade the people."⁶

The more perfect is the religion, the more perilous it seems to Communism. Thus one can explain why the entire force of the battle was directed against Christianity, and especially the Catholic Church. Forty years of experience illustrate that Communism fights religion using both physical and spiritual means. By combining the communistic doctrine regarding religion and its means of destroying it, we arrive at the clearest picture of the so-called communist religious policies. Communist strategy and methodology have not been very consistent through time. At first, they expected to destroy the Church very easily. It was predicted that once the economic strength of the Church would be removed and its organization disrupted, religion would gradually dissolve and die by itself. When this did not happen, they resorted to physical violence and terrorism. (In 1922 alone, 2 Russian metropolitans were killed, while 84 bishops and over 1000 clergymen sentenced to hard labor. In 1923, 6 metropolitans and 54 bishops were deported; later, 150 Russian bishops were in hard labor camps on the Arctic Islands.) When even this did not eradicate the faith of the masses (in 1937 a written questionnaire indicated that 30% of the city-dwellers and 60% of the farmers were believers, the communists realized that it was more fruitful to use the Church for their purposes, rather than trying to destroy it. The faithful should be admitted to the Party, rather than to be left in a hard-to-manage and disorganized body. The communist leaders realized that through the years of persecution, the Church had gained spiritual strength. Thus it was unwise to enlarge its great number of martyrs.

According to the constitution of the Soviet Union and of all the satellite nations, the Church is separated from the State. After many attempts to destroy the Church, however, the communists once more managed to bind it to the State by establishing a Cult Commissar, whose duty was to control the activities of the registered religious groups and to see that the laws of the State governing religious groups were observed by the faithful. If one does not know the details, one can come to the conclusion that a "modus vivendi" — a certain coexistence — has been established between the Church and the Communist State. In reality, however, this is just one of the phases of the war for the complete subjugation and annihilation of the Church.

Having taken the Church into their hands, the communists tried to use it for their propaganda purposes — for the so-called propaganda of peace. In the context of these facts, the conference of the highest officials of the Churches within the Soviet Union, begun on May 9, 1952, becomes more understandable. All of its participants declared themselves to be opposed to the agitators of war and urged all men of good will to work for the establishment and maintenance of peace. In this light one must also view the declarations and statements of the Lithuanian diocesan priests regarding Gizenga, Lumumba, Cuba, and other pertinent propaganda issues such as freedom of religion. Very often, the clergy read newspaper reports of statements which they were supposed to have made to the press — statements made in their name but without their knowledge.

Where the Church is already controlled by the communists, it has to serve the Party propaganda machine, promoting collectivization, the increase in work out-put, the actualization of the 5- and 7-year plans, and the other plans and decisions of the Party. The Party, on the other hand, controlling the Church, can more easily reduce its influence on the masses to a minimum, as well as limit the activity of the clergy.

But even when the Church is made the ally and collaborator of Communism, atheistic propaganda is not stopped; on the contrary, it is even more intensified. The Party devotes much attention and financial support to this propaganda. According to the Soviet Union's constitution, all that the Church legally has is freedom of practice. However, those who utilize this "alleged freedom" are persecuted and terrorized by various means.

The Church in occupied Lithuania has lived through all phases of persecution. The first Bolshevik occupation lasted one year (1940 -1941). During this period, the goals of the occupant with respect to religion and those practicing it became increasingly clear: they were aimed at completely destroying the Catholic Church. This work was interrupted by the outbreak of the German-Russian war, which began on June 22, 1941. One occupation was replaced by another. Although the German occupation also was unkind to the Church and did not return all that the Russians had taken away or destroyed, nevertheless, the Church could function in one way or another despite the difficulties and limitations imposed by war-time regulations. When the Germans lost the war and the Russian occupation returned to Lithuania, one could easily predict that the persecutions and suppressions of religion would be continued with heightened intensity and cruelty.

The period of the second Russian occupation (from 1944 until the present) can be divided into three distinct periods with respect to religious persecution.

The War and the Post-War Years (1944-1954)

In this period, the outstanding characteristic of Communism's struggle with religion was physical and moral terrorization. After the war the Russian occupants felt unsafe because of the intensive underground activity, and thus were unable to direct mass terrorization against the Lithuanian people. But in the latter part of 1945 and in the beginning of 1946, massive deportations and intensified attacks against the partisans were begun in Lithuania; these attacks lasted until 1949. At that time, terrorism was also redoubled against the clergy. They were accused of associating with the partisans ("nationalistic bandits" in communist terminology) and of sympathizing with them. All these accusations were merely excuses for eliminating the clergy. Priests were arrested and exiled, churches were closed, and the faithful were mocked and persecuted. One German woman, who returned from Lithuania to Germany, well conveys the spirit and atmosphere of Communism's battle with religion in Lithuania:

"When I came to Lithuania, I found refuge with the pastor. He sheltered me even though the Russians had forbidden Lithuanians to shelter any Germans or to aid them in any way. (At this time, many Germans from the Karaliaučius region came to Lithuania, escaping from starvation.) The pastor was a very good man, helping everyone whenever he could. Obviously, the communists did not approve of this. No day would pass without them coming under all sorts of pretexts, visiting and questioning him: why were the candles burning in the Church in the evening, why is he hearing confessions — always why, why, why. . . They would accuse him of lighting the candles on purpose, as a signal to the partisans, of using the confessional for intrigue with the partisans. But the communists' hatred for him became even greater when he refused to bury four communists and MVD agents, killed by the partisans, in consecrated ground.

On February 6, 1949, before retiring, the pastor checked whether the rectory doors were locked. Approximately at midnight, I was awakened by the noise of trucks. After a few minutes I heard the hammering of rifles against the door. I knew that something evil was going to happen, so I dressed and went downstairs. There I already found the rest of the inhabitants of the house and the pastor, surrounded by the automatic rifles of twelve NKVD men. They cursed him in words that I could not understand and threatened him with their fists. One of them ripped the cross from his neck. Then they began to search the house. They gathered the books of the Church and other books, pictures, the Church's flags— ripping and kicking everything and yelling: "Partisan bandits ..." The pastor just looked on and said nothing. His face was slightly pale, but there was no trace of fear in his face.

After they completed the search, the NKVD requested food and drink. When the table was set, they jeeringly invited the pastor to join them in the "last supper". The pastor touched nothing but the NKVD stuffed food into their mouths with both hands and toasted the pastor's health, ridiculing him.

When this orgy ended, dawn was already breaking. The pastor was allowed to take along only a few pieces of clothing as he left with the NKVD. Later he was deported to Siberia and only wrote once from there, complaining about the impossible living conditions."

This is a characteristic episode from the period of terrorization of the clergy. In the period of 1946 - 1949 alone, 180 Lithuanian priests were deported to Siberia and sentenced to hard labor.

The Communists tried to use bishops as political tools for their purposes. When the NKVD was unable to suppress the numerous partisan bands in 1946, the Commissar of the Interior requested that the bishops renounce the resistance movement and urge the partisans to surrender. When the bishops refused to do this, the NKVD began to threaten and then to act. The first victim was Bishop V. Borisevičius of the Telšiai diocese, who was arrested in 1946 and sentenced to death in a closed trial on January 3, 1947. At the end of 1946, his assistant, Bishop P. Ramanauskas was arrested and deported to Siberia. In the same year, both Bishop T. Matulionis of the Kaišiadoriai diocese and the Archbishop of Vilnius, M. Reinys, were exiled to hard labor camps in Siberia. Archbishop Reinys died in the Vladimir prison on November 8, 1953. By 1947, only one bishop remained in Lithuania — Bishop K. Paltarokas of Panevėžiai.

When persecutions immensely decreased the number of clergy, the communists began to close down churches and declared them to be government property. In 1940 there were 721 parish churches and 265 chapels. Today there remain only 580 churches and all of the chapels have been closed. This trend is most clearly seen in the larger cities: in Vilnius, of 37 churches only 8 remain; in Kaunas — of 29 only 8 remain. The others were converted into museums, warehouses, and so on. In 1941, during the German occupation, the bishops reopened the priest seminaries in Telšiai, Vilkaviškis, and Vilnius. But when the Russians occupied Lithuania for the second time in 1944, the communist regime again closed the seminaries, leaving the one in Kaunas open. This was the only functioning seminary in Lithuania. The number of students was limited at first to 150, then to 60-75, and finally to 45. Even this seminary is not permitted to function in peace; it

constantly experiences difficulties such as the deportation of the faculty to Siberia, interference with the internal order, constant searches of the students, and many others. It is very difficult to enter the seminary because the entrant needs an official document from the government. This document is very difficult to obtain, hence many candidates cannot enter the seminary, and some of those who do enter are sent by the government to interfere with the work of the seminary.

By about 1947, all the monasteries and convents were closed and a large percentage of nuns and monks were deported to Siberia. The monks had to sign a document stating that they no longer belong to religious communities. Those who did not sign were deported. Convents were declared to be illegal organizations and membership in them was considered a crime against the State.

The Period of Relaxation (1954-56)

With the death of Stalin (March 5, 1953), there was a change in the climate of the war against religion; the physical terrorism gradually decreased. On November 10, 1954, Khrushchev caused a sensation by announcing a decision of the Communist Central Committee to cease anti-religious actions such as denouncement of priests, insult to the feelings of the faithful, and talks on religious themes by incompetent individuals. The statement further declared that in the future, the fight against religion and the Church will have to be led by people especially trained for such tasks and using strengthened ideological means.⁷

In Lithuania, the Communist Party organ Tiesa interpreted this statement as follows:

"In the republic there are collective farm workers and laborers who, although actively participating in collective farm production and factory work and conscientiously carrying out their political duties, are still under the influence of religious belief. The Party teaches us to adopt an attitude of sympathy and understanding in dealing with these believers. It would be stupid and harmful to consider these or other Soviet citizens as politically questionable merely because of their religious beliefs. Religious superstition in man is only a remnant of the past. Therefore, we must regard the fight against religious superstitions as an ideological war of the scientific-materialistic philosophies against unscientific religious philosophies."⁸

In his attempt to strengthen his rule, Khrushchev used demagogical slogans such as the necessity to fight religion only with ideological weapons. Because of this, the Lithuanian Communists at first were at a loss as to what line to follow. In 1956, discussions on religious topics appeared in the communist press, where the religious were able to state, even if hesitantly, their own views. There were even opinions which clearly defended religion and the religious. For example, A. Vengrys, candidate to the Academy of Science wrote:

"Faith as such does not make for bad collective-farm workers, bad laborers, or generally bad citizens of our socialist homeland. Each of us has among his acquaintances believing people who are industrious, conscientious, and who admirably execute their duties. These people, needless to say, would achieve even greater results if they would not poison their minds with religious superstitions."⁹

Perhaps the most forceful official comment in the Communist press was made by L. Drotvinas, graduate student at University of Vilnius, who defended religion and criticized atheistic action. This statement is interesting in that it was made by a man who has gone through the Soviet educational system; it is therefore, worthwhile to quote it entirely as a typical example of the views held by the Lithuanian intelligentsia towards religion:

"The question of religion which was raised in Tiesa probably interests many people. In my opinion, this question should be looked at in relation to other social and economic questions from a historical perspective, namely: the place and significance of religion in the bourgeois and socialist systems; the relation of religion to mankind's progress (technology, science), ethics; the relation of religion to the creative initiative of man; can a man not believe in anything and still be creative?

In my opinion, religion still exists today in the minds of men together with the other evils of the old regime — alcoholism, licentiousness, cheating, etc. But their etiology is not the same, for these latter evils are often present in the non-religious, whereas a great majority of religious peasants lead a virtuous life . . . We should not forget that in the process of history, religion played a double role: art, music, and architecture owe much to religion, but religion did help to exploit man and bridled his initiative in the fight for freedom. We must also remember that in all periods there were spiritual leaders who led the masses in their struggle to gain freedom. In our own country, the positive significance of religion is that part of the older generation was educated in the religious spirit following the rules of not stealing, not lying. On the other hand, in my opinion, some of the citizens who are not religious are totally amoral.

To the educated, religion is not a hindrance. Today religion has been modernized to such an extent and has made so many compromises, that it cannot act as a retarding force in the development of science, technology, and art. Technological and scientific progress can be observed in countries where religion is a state institution and where scientists are religious. On the contrary, the art of the twentieth century has suffered a setback in comparison with earlier ages, even though it is definitely more atheistic today. Religion does not interfere with the initiative of the workers because it does not advocate that they do their job badly or refuse to do it at all. On the other hand, religion has not been replaced by other forms of cultural entertainment. The mass, the ceremony, the sparkle, the music, the hymns, and holy days are enjoyed by the people, especially by the older generation. Movies and other cultural entertainments did not and cannot replace religious ceremonies because they are too scarce and not always on sufficiently high cultural level. For a long time the atheists in Lithuania have been examples of individualism. They were few in number and had to fight against the clericalism defended by the State. Among the atheists today there are many deviates and therefore it can not be asserted which is definitely better—the man who goes to a church, or the man who goes to a restaurant. This question is too broad and too deep for a quick and easy solution . . . We must consider an educated man who goes to Church. The religious fanatic is as ridiculous as the anti-religious fanatic. One believes in superstitions, the other attacks them. It is not clear what and why the former believes, nor why the latter attacks him and is so deeply worried, since God does not exist."¹⁰

This, however, was the last free comment on the religious issue. It was immediately sensed that too much freedom had been granted; after a few instructions from Moscow, the press again carried only attack, ridicule, and degradation of religion and of the faithful.

During the period of relaxation (1953 — September 17, 1955) an amnesty was declared (except for a few categories of crime), after which a certain percentage of the deported were allowed to return to their homes. About 35,000 people (of the 275,000 deported) returned to Lithuania. Others did not have the right to return, but had to settle somewhere in Russia (usually in the Asian part of the country). At that time about 130 priests returned to Lithuania. A small part of these returned of their own free will to their former places of exile to serve the needs of the faithful. Two bishops, Matulionis and Ramanauskas, also were allowed to return to Lithuania, but were not permitted to resume their duties. They were told where to live and could not communicate with their priests or the faithful.

It must be stressed that those who returned were not rehabilitated, but remained "criminals" and their crime was constantly remembered in the press.

During the period of relaxation, on September 11, 1955, two bishops (Julijonas Steponavičius and Petras Maželis) were consecrated and assigned by the Holy See to the Vilnius, Panevėžys, and Telšiai dioceses.

Some churches were repaired during this liberal period and permission was given to build two new churches in Klaipėda and Švenčionėliai.

The Period of Forceful Contention and Conflict (1957 until the present)

The period of relaxation did not last long. Communist leaders were frightened by the dynamic qualities displayed by the religious; they resolved, therefore, to give the final blow to religion and to the Church in Lithuania.

From the very start of the great campaign against the Church, religion, and the faithful, the Communist Party employed all of its available resources. This campaign developed to a magnitude yet unprecedented in the history of occupied Lithuania. Massive physical terror was not used only because of practical considerations. Moral terrorization, however, is without limits. The Communists have realized that to prohibit religion completely would only serve the Church. Persecution and terror strengthen the faithful; the communists, therefore, seek to explode and divide the Church from the inside. Persecution usually develops strong personalities who are feared by the communists.

It was not only ideological differences which prompted the Communist Party to resume this forceful fight and spirited hostilities against the Church in Lithuania. After the liquidation of the forces of armed resistance, the establishment of the collective farm system, and the elimination of the "bourgeoisie", the Church remained the only bulwark of national and spiritual resistance. It is for this reason that the energy and machinery of the Party has been focused against the Church.

In this present period, the attention of the party has been directed at "scientific" atheistic propaganda. In 1956, Tiesa wrote:

"The fight with religious superstitions is an important and inseparable part of the work of the Party and of the total effort to educate the socialistic people in the spirit of Communism. The party, professional and youth organizations, and even cultural and educational institutions must take energetic steps to correct this situation. In the spreading of scientific atheistic propaganda, it is important to employ all the methods of ideological-political work: lectures, reports, interviews, the press, the radio, and the theater. In this endeavor of primary importance, it is necessary to put to use the best party and Communist Youth organization propagandist, scientific personnel, socialist intelligentsia, and farm specialists. Lectures must be given in every factory, collective farm, state farm, and brigade so that the immortal Marxist ideas would reach every working man through the light of science, "[11](#)

Thus began the "scientific" education directed towards the destruction of "religious superstitions". Special propaganda-agitator groups consisting of professors, physicians, scientists, authors, artists, and actors were formed to further the atheistic propaganda. In 1960, 779 such groups were already in operation.

The leadership of this anti-religious propaganda campaign is in the hands of the organization for the propagation of political and scientific news, which, as the communists boastfully claim, is aided by 15,000 lecturers and other members of various scientific and other professional groups. In 1960 alone, these people have given about 80,000 lectures throughout Lithuania.

Members of the Communist youth organizations have to be especially ardent propagators of atheism. According to directions from Moscow, they have to carry on an "aggressive" battle against "religious superstitions". The goal of the Communist youth is to explain the phenomena of nature to the common workers, to popularize facts of astronomy, biology, chemistry, physics, medicine, and other fields. They have to create "soviet traditions", such as pompous communist weddings, and so on.

To coordinate the atheistic propaganda in the cities "atheistic clubs" are organized. They unite all the atheists in the city, who are further divided into smaller groups or sections. They spread atheistic literature, publish articles in the local papers, have questions and answer sessions, organize atheistic circles in schools, prepare new propagandists, communicate with similar "atheistic clubs" in other cities, and share with them the methods and means of the fight against religion.

In the anti-religious campaign special attention is focused upon the youth. The seventh plenary meeting of the Communist Party's Central Committee on December 3 - 4, 1958, entertained one major idea — the reinforcement and vigorous strengthening of political and ideological indoctrination among the youth. Anti-religious propaganda was cast in a new form and made obligatory in all pedagogical institutions. Its enactment was delegated to the party and Communist youth organizations. Soon after the plenary meeting, the organ of the teaching profession, "Tarybinis Mokytojas", wrote:

"The formation of a materialistic attitude (Weltanschauung) in the students and scientific atheistic education is the paramount responsibility of every teacher. Teachers of biology, physics, chemistry, history, and literature can play an exceptionally important role. By revealing from its very foundations, the materialistic interpretation of the order in the universe and in human society, they can at the same time show, with vivid and pointed examples, how the slaves of religion try to falsify scientific truths and to fool the gullible public. It is necessary that the basic incompatibility between science and religion be clearly presented to the students, and that the detrimental effects of religious belief on scientific progress be clearly pointed out. Many of the above-mentioned factors of incompatibility are presented in history courses, which because of their subject-matter, cannot circumvent the topic of religion. It is very evident that all through history, the Catholic Church has played the most reactionary role. The present-day politics of the Vatican are also to be noted. Even a Lithuanian literature teacher can find much information on scientific atheism. It is evident that it does not suffice to analyze the reactionary activities of priests or other servants of the Church on the basis of one or two pieces of literature. This information must be presented in the present perspective. Religion must be exposed to show how the servants of the Church have fooled the laboring classes with superstitions, keeping them literally in the dark, how they have preached respect and reverence for the exploiters of the working class. Music and art can also be effective means of atheistic education through discussions of the personal life of the artists. Physical education instructors must also participate in this work."¹²

Having received such instructions, the press was flooded with comments of teachers, explaining how they are carrying out the proposed program. Discussions of Roman history present the origin of Christianity and of the legend of Christ. In courses on the history of the Middle Ages, Christianity's rise to power is discussed with an emphasis on its retarding and negative influence upon the course of civilization. Discussions of the politics of individual rulers reveal their base motives — to implement their expansive designs with the aid of the Church. Teachers of physical geography note the origin of mineral water streams and expose the "ridiculous" claim that they have curing power. In explaining the formation of seas and oceans, their creation by divine command can be ridiculed — the earth and the oceans obviously developed by themselves without intervention by any Creator.

These teachers' comments and explanations of methods to be utilized in the broad program of ideological assault upon religion have two objectives: they identify the teacher as an atheist and provide an incentive for others to do the same.

There are, however, some statements about the difficulty of atheistic education. Students often ask why religion is persecuted; in answer the teacher can only repeat his explanation. It is extremely difficult to explain to the students the age-long belief in the soul and its immortality.

According to the Party program, secondary school students are not to remain passive spectators only — they must become active apostles of atheism. For this purpose, special courses in atheism are given in addition to the regular curriculum in the schools. Atheistic clubs are formed and term papers on atheistic topics are assigned.

Although much anti-religious literature has been published, it is not widely read. Therefore group readings and discussions of this literature, led by teachers, are conducted in the schools.

In order that the teachers would not neglect these duties, specially selected officials of the Central Committee of the Communist Party travel throughout Lithuania holding conferences with the teachers. During these meetings, these officials examine the teachers regarding as to what they have accomplished in the struggle with religion and instruct them in the most efficient and effective methods of educating the youth in the spirit of atheism.

How can, the student resist bombarded on all sides with atheistic indoctrination and propaganda? What of support from the Church itself? Attendance at religious services is considered a crime. The students are followed and punished and expelled from school if caught. This means the end to all further education. The communist press has warned the teachers that students who attend Church cannot receive good grades since they believe in magic and superstition. Until now, the younger pupils gladly served as altar boys at Mass and other liturgical services. Lately this has been strongly forbidden: not only the pupils but the priests whom they assist have been punished. As for the parents—religious, devout parents attempt to counter-act the influence of the school. However, in doing so, they are in danger of losing their children. There have been instances when children, whose parents have supposedly "spoiled" them at home and have prevented them from becoming good communists and atheists, have been taken away from their parents by court order and placed in the custody of state institutions.

The communists understand well the strong influence of parents upon their children. That is why they attempt to separate children from this influence by various means. Boarding schools have been established where the pupils have to live if they wish to continue their education despite their own wishes and those of their parents. When visiting their children at such institutions, parents cannot talk freely with their children since they are always accompanied by a school official. Even

during vacation time, the children cannot return to their families—they are too busy with camps, hikes, and work on the collective farms.

The communists are much concerned with involving the parents in the common struggle with religion. A special school was established in Vilnius for the purpose of enlightening the parents and giving them an understanding of education based on the communist ethic. Courses are conducted twice a month at such schools. They consist of lectures, anti-religious films, excursions to atheistic museums and so on.

The program of atheistic indoctrination is even more stringent for the colleges and universities. They must turn out students who are not only confirmed atheists themselves, but who will also be ardent propagators of atheism. During the course of their studies, students are involved in various anti-religious activities. Those refusing to participate lose their scholarships and must leave the university.

Physicians

According to the Communist design, physicians have an important role to play in the dissemination of atheistic ideas. All physicians—from medical school professors to general practitioners—are recruited, for purposes of propaganda in particular. In 1959, professor V. Girdzijauskas declared:

"The purpose of lectures in medicine is not only to acquaint the audience with the science of medicine but to help in the creation of a materialistic attitude and philosophy in their minds. Medicine, as a branch of the physical sciences, is a strong weapon against ignorance and superstition. Therefore it is not strange that the greatest Russian physicians ... were materialists ... The lecturer confronts the issue of religion in every lecture. As he explains natural phenomena, he has to unmask unscientific, idealistic beliefs and demonstrate the incompatibility of medicine and religion." [13](#)

In the light of such directives, specialists in bacteriology were forced to demonstrate through research data the damaging effects of Church attendance, of the use of holy water, and the kissing of the cross. Experiments "found" that many infectious diseases are caused by the practice of such superstitious rituals.

Physicians are ordered to go to the villages and collective farms educating the workers not in matters of health but of atheism. In places where several physicians reside, they are to form groups of atheist lecturers which would visit the collective farms in their area and lecture on atheistic issues.

All Are Communists

Passive adherence to atheism is not enough today in Lithuania. All public officials, employees, teachers, physicians must publicly declare themselves to be opponents of religion. They are presented with the worn dilemma—how can they be good teachers, physicians, public officials, if they believe in God? This is irreconcilable with Darwin's teachings about the evolution of man, with the Marxist-Leninist teachings about the formation of the earth. They are unfit to teach in the socialist educational system. They cannot be efficient physicians since they do not believe in medicine and its therapeutic tools. Thus if one does not wish to lose his job or position, one must declare in public one's disbelief in God.

It is therefore not surprising to find in the communist press public confessions from the most unlikely people—people who never gave any indication of atheism. Many cannot avoid active participation in atheistic "missionary" work, as they are forced to choose between their jobs and public professions of atheism. The instinct of self-preservation, the need for "daily bread" and the future of the family determine the choice. However, public declarations and cooperation are usually only token gestures. As a Vilnius Radio broadcast on May 29, 1961, noted:

"It is really strange that even atheists allow their children to be baptized in Church. They give in to the influence of religious bigots. They allow themselves to be duped by superstitions ... This leads one to suspect that atheists only pretend to be such, holding far different beliefs than those they declare, if they baptize their children."

Ex-priests are especially valuable and useful for propaganda purposes. There are several, with J. Ragauskas being the most active, as he has produced much anti-religious literature. They go on lecture tours, speak over the radio, and in general perform the duties assigned to them by the Party. The public regards these puppets more with pity than with hate, wondering what their fate will be when they are no longer useful to Communism.

Anti-religious Propaganda Techniques

The Press

The magazine *Mokslas ir Gyvenimas* (Learning and Life), which first appeared in 1957, is devoted to anti-religious propaganda. In every issue there are several articles directed against religion, under the guise of scientific demonstrations of the foolishness of religious belief. Public professions of atheism are found here. But articles, ridiculing religion, the religious, and the clergy appear constantly in other Communist publications as well. Literary journals print short stories and sketches with anti-religious content. Novels and other fiction are full of atheistic ideas and anti-religious themes.

Original and translated books and pamphlets have been especially prepared for propaganda purposes. A. Sniečkus, the Secretary of the Lithuanian Communist Party, announced as early as 1949 that 650,000 copies of newspapers and magazines which reveal "the reactionary activity of the Catholic clergy" are being printed. In a period of four years, 1500 books have been published. Among them are 95 Marxist-Leninist classics. According to the 1950 issue of *Sovietskaja Litva* three million Russian books have been brought into the country. There is a group of translators at work in Vilnius, which translates Russian books into Lithuanian. Most of these translations consist of anti-religious literature in the most vulgar form, designed not only to spread atheism but to slanderously blacken the name of the Church. In recent years, even more literature of this sort has been released. Special exhibits of it have been prepared.

The Radio

The radio has been one of the most widely used means of spreading the atheistic doctrine. The Vilnius radio broadcasts special programs for this purpose. The so-called atheistic club answers questions on religious topics. Often, special reports are presented on selected Lithuanian clergymen, accusing them of nationalistic activity during the German occupation, of participation in the murder of innocent people and so on.

Films

Atheistic films have been produced such as "Pasaulio sutvėrimas" (The Creation of the World) and others. The film "Kalakutai" (The Turkeys) crudely satirizes saints and miracles. "Kryžiaus šešėlyje" (In the Shadow of the Cross), produced in 1961, is, as the Communist press styles it, a visual "act of accusation against religious morality and its defenders." It shows Archbishop J. Skvireckas thanking the Nazis for "the slaying of thousands of people, the burning of towns and villages." The film attempts to prove that the priests are not only collaborators of the Nazis and of thieves and murderers, but criminals in their own right. The clergy is presented as the descendants of the Knights of the Cross and the Allies of the Nazis. This film is shown throughout Lithuania.

Museums

Until now, there were only several anti-religious museums, undistinguished in the quality of their collection. In the beginning of 1962, the Vilnius radio announced that the central atheistic museum is being established in the former Church of St. Casimir in Vilnius. Its purpose is to organize circulating exhibits and to spread atheism by other means. A library of atheistic literature is being organized as an adjunct to it. The ex-priest Markonis was appointed as director.

Holidays

An additional weapon in the war with religion has been the use and misuse of the Catholic holy-days. For a long time the communists repeatedly denounced religious holidays as the relic of pagan rituals and thus as meaningless and the creation of the clergy. But the faithful, devoted to the feast-days of their saints, still attend Church in great numbers on such days. Then the communists began to paganize these feasts and to destroy their religious content, using them for their own purposes. Thus Easter became the celebration of the coming of Spring, Whitsuntide — the feast of the shepherds and animals, the feast of St. John — the celebration of the beginning of Summer. The communists had a more difficult time with Christmas and have not found a substitute for it as yet, although New Years Day is already the day of the Russian "Old Man Cold". When substitutes could not be readily found for certain feast days, another line of attack has been used. Festivals were held on those days and the young people are prevented from going to Church, since they have to help in their organization. Usually these festivals are held right in front of the Church and during the services. The children are kept busy all day on Sunday so that no free time would remain for going to Church.

To counter-act the importance among the people of baptism, confirmation, marriage and funeral services in church, civil ceremonies have been conceived as substitutes. Thus new "civil traditions", new ceremonies are being created. To popularize them, Councils for the Introduction of New Traditions have been established. These councils rule that baptism has to be replaced by "name giving" ceremonies, confirmation by "coming of age" rituals and so forth.

There are several famous shrines of the Blessed Virgin in Lithuania, which on special holidays are visited by thousands. Hundreds of priests help to minister to the needs of the faithful on these occasions. Lately priests have been forbidden to visit these shrines and the faithful are hindered in various ways — the roads are blocked, means of transportation denied, the pilgrims are searched and arrested to frighten off future visitors.

The Churches

The Lithuanian churches which have not been closed down yet are the property of the state. They are rented to the faithful for a certain sum. Since they are placed in the category of houses of amusement, rents are extremely high, around 10-50,000 old rubles. It was believed that these huge sums would restrain the faithful and churches would remain closed as houses of worship. However, through much sacrifice, the faithful have managed to raise these sums and keep open the churches. Lately rents have been raised 3-4 times. Knowing that after the currency reform the people have little money, the government hopes that the faithful will really capitulate now.

According to the latest reports, new action has been initiated against the churches recently. They are being converted into museums, warehouses and such. Many of the beautiful and artistic churches were considered architectural monuments and therefore protected and kept in repair by the government. Moscow has criticized this practice and now these churches have lost government protection. What is of more concern — it has been suggested that these churches should be torn down because they are shameful relics of feudalism.

The Clergy

The clergy is blamed for the lack of success of the anti-religious campaign and for the failure of atheistic propaganda.

"The Church and the clergy have for years cast a net of spider webs around the people — and it is very difficult to break this web."¹⁴

The communist press describes the situation in the following manner. When the communists came to power, they destroyed the harmful influence and authority of the Church, but the Church continues to preach despite its degradation. Evidently the preaching of the clergy continues to be an extremely irritating sty in the eye of the communists. The press even suggests imprisonment as an antidote.

The clergy are accused of closing their eyes to progress, to the new morality and ethics which flourishes in Lithuania. They whimper in the pulpits about the lack of virtue, about sins, about stealing, alcoholism, adultery. The priests have never ceased their campaign of slander and fear. Seeing that youth grows further and further away from the Church, they concentrate all their fire on the young girls. They paint for the mother a horrid picture of the looseness and immorality of their daughter's life, saying that this is a result of her lack of belief in God. In this manner, they openly insult Soviet society. The clergy is especially concerned with the new generation. They do not even bother to ask if the children or their parents want this religion in the first place. Every spring they gather all their forces and use all the means at their disposal to catechize the children. The mothers are urged from the pulpits to teach the children their catechism at home. Most of the priests do all they can to draw the children and young people away from the Soviet educational institutions, although this proves to be extremely harmful to them in the future.¹⁵ The priests are also accused of visiting the faithful and of urging them to fulfill the requirements of the Church. Such priests, who "disturb the freedom of conscience," are threatened with imprisonment. Even the Moscow press¹⁶ has found that the Lithuanian people are still very religious and zealously attend Church services during the holidays. The clergy has found a new means of maintaining contact with the people: they organize athletic clubs dances, reading groups and so on.

The communists, seeing that the people respect their spiritual leaders, especially the priests who have endured imprisonment and deportation to Siberia, have lately initiated a campaign of increased slander and vilification against the clergy. The clergy is accused of collaborating with the so-called "bandits" (partisans) who were once active in Lithuania and with the German Fascists. Using alleged documents, gathered during trials and interrogations, such as diaries and the minutes from the conferences of bishops, the communists extensively describe the activities of the bishops and priests before the war and during the German occupation. They emphasize how the Lithuanian clergy, together with the "bourgeois nationalists" fought against the "government of the people". Bishops and priests who have returned from exile in Siberia are especially attacked.

Various correspondents from the rural districts relate in the Communist press how even before the war the priests cheated the people, overcharging them for their services, how they refused to give the last rites if the dying refused to leave all their belongings to the church and the pastor, how they participated in the mass slayings of the people during the Nazi occupation, holding guns in their hands (in reality, those sentenced to be shot often asked for a priest and the Germans often allowed a priest to be present), how they collaborated with the Germans, how they organized, protected, and helped the "bandits" (partisans), how even now they use the donations of the people for their own purposes — to build houses, to buy automobiles or motorcycles. The clergy has been accused of every crime against morality, humaneness, and law known to man.

This campaign of slander often reaches unparalleled proportions. Places are mentioned where the priests in question have never been. Names of people who have never existed are used. Letters and documents are invented. The accused priests have no means of defending or justifying themselves. No newspaper will publish their statements. No court will consider their case. And if such a priest attempts to answer the accusations from the pulpit—he is denounced as a "hooligan" who dares to protest and deny communist "truth".

Police Methods and Restrictions

Propaganda is not the only method employed to destroy religion in Lithuania. It is reinforced and supported by various prohibitory measures.

The communists are very much concerned with destroying the organization within the Church and its ties with Rome. Therefore any communication with Rome is under constant surveillance and hindered. The apostolic administrator of the Vilnius and Panevėžys dioceses, Bishop J. Steponavičius, was removed from his post and banished to a remote Lithuanian district (Žagare). Similarly, the bishop of Kaišiadoriai, Archbishop T. Matulionis, was removed from his diocese to Šeduva, where he died. His assistant, Bishop V. Sladkevičius, was exiled to Nemunėlio Radviliškis, near the Latvian border. Recently P. Šidlauskas, appointed by the Vatican as the apostolic administrator of the Panevėžys diocese, was removed from his duties and expelled to Merkinė. They are forbidden to communicate with their faithful in their care and to perform their duties. Thus only one bishop remains in Lithuania who is exercising his duties — Bishop P. Maželis of the Telšiai diocese. But even he is continuously denounced by the press and accused of various crimes.

The administration of the Church is really in the hands of the Cult Commissar. Without his permission, no priest can perform his duties or assume any sort of post. Some priests are forbidden to perform their priestly duties. The Cult Commissar also controls the assignment of priests to parishes. He himself attempts to place selected priests in vacant positions. He seeks to place the control of the dioceses in the hands of reliable priests, who are faithful to the state.

The only seminary in Lithuania, situated in Kaunas and with only 45 seminarians allowed to attend it, is also under the strict control of the Cult Commissar. He assigns and fires the professors, he decides who may enter the seminary, allowing even those who are communist spies or at least loyal to the communist government. Lately attendance at the seminary is even more restricted and it seems that it will soon cease to function all together. Because annually more priests die than are ordained, soon the churches will be without priests and will have to close down.

The priests are strictly forbidden to teach children their catechism. They are only allowed to examine children prepared by their parents. If some woman is found teaching a group of children their catechism, she is brought to court and punished for organizing a "secret school". The parents of the children are also punished. Although there is no law prohibiting parents from teaching their children catechism, those who do so are persecuted and punished for "harming" their children.

Priests cannot visit their parishioners, collect offerings for the maintenance of the church, visit the sick (not unless the person would ask for a priest in writing). Those who visit the priest or maintain some sort of relationship with him are also subject to all types of unpleasantness. In this manner, the priest is completely isolated from the faithful. There have been instances when priests have been deported to Siberia for organizing excursions or giving candy to children and thus enticing them to attend Church.

Without permission from the government, a priest cannot visit another parish to serve the faithful there or to leave his place of residence in general.

There is no religious press. If anyone is caught attempting to circulate religious literature written by hand, he is punished for "circulating illegal literature, for the dissemination of superstition." No religious literature from abroad is allowed. Religious articles, such as medals, rosaries are also forbidden.

The priests are burdened by heavy taxes. The rectories which were built during the period of relaxation or thaw are now being confiscated as illegally built, using money donated to the Church and appropriated by the priests. Permission was granted in 1956 to build a new church in Klaipėda and building materials were received from government sources. The Lithuanians enthusiastically contributed donations and the church was soon built. However, the faithful were not allowed to use it and the priests were brought to court, accused of illegal use of building material and speculation in foreign currency (donations had been made by Lithuanian Catholics in the United States). The church was expropriated by the government and the priests were sentenced to four to eight years of imprisonment. This case was used to further slander the Lithuanian clergy.

Although attendance at Church is not prohibited by law, those, who do, are subject to various sanctions in school, office, and place of employment. The religious are diligently followed and controlled. The faithful, in order to escape this persecution, fulfill their religious duties in distant parishes, where none will recognize them. Those, who baptize their children, marry in church or bury their dead according to the rites of the Church, incur all sorts of unpleasantness.

As in other areas, the communists have managed to develop a system of surveillance, provocation, intrigue and betrayal in offices, factories, and collective farms. The workers are forced ' spy, watch, and betray co-workers and friends who practice their religion.

Results?

In the light of such intensive anti-religious propaganda, in which the entire Party and government is involved, and the extensive terrorization and persecution of the faithful, the question arises as to its results and success. Although the communist press often boasts that most of the people have shaken off their "religious superstitions", it is evident from continual complaints, that the battle with religion is not an easy one and that "religious superstitions" are still deeply embedded in the hearts and minds of the people. Hence the Party continually demands the intensification of propaganda, especially among the workers and the rural population. Actual reality differs from that depicted by the communist press. Religion is the concern of man's soul and the communists still lack effective tools for conquering and controlling it.

According to reliable sources, almost 100% of the newly-born are baptized, around 80% are buried with the rites of the Church, and about 60% openly marry in church, with a large percentage doing it secretly. Although attendance at Church services is severely hindered, reception of the Sacraments is quite heavily practiced. For example, in one church in Vilnius more than 1000 infants were baptized and 150,000 Communion distributed during 1960. During one of the holidays, about 30,000 Communion distributed in one of the churches in the province.

It is evident from complaints in the communist press, that anti-religious literature is hardly read by the people. Group reading is absolutely necessary. People, brought into anti-religious meetings and rallies, either are very passive or ask questions that the speakers cannot answer. The press complains that not only secondary school pupils but even students from the universities demonstratively attend Church wearing their student caps. Of course, not all do this, only the brave ones, who react against anti-religious propaganda at least in this manner. Parents are often accused of removing their children from the schools before they are affected by atheistic indoctrination. But they are punished for this, of course.

The practice of one's religion today in Lithuania demands much heroism, sacrifice, and courage. Those who have endured prison and the sufferings of Siberia are the most courageous. They know that nothing can be worse than that through which they have suffered.

However it would be a dangerous illusion to devalue atheistic propaganda and maintain that this anti-religious campaign has had no effect. Some of the young people raised in the atheistic spirit will become militant atheists. Others will remain apathetic and skeptical towards religion. Some will hide and guard their beliefs even more diligently and will never demonstrate them public. But a good number will nevertheless remain faithful to the religion of their parents. A young girl well expresses the feelings of the majority of Lithuanians towards religion in a letter signed "A Lithuanian Catholic Woman" and published in the newspaper Tiesa (Truth) of Vilnius so that the ex-priest J. Ragauskas could refute it. This young Lithuanian woman writes:

"I am a Catholic. My life has been closely connected with religion and the Church since infancy. No proofs that God does not exist will damage my faith. If I will have to, I will choose death rather than give up my faith. I, as a Catholic, eagerly attend church and meet many priests. But none are like the priests described by the press. They magnify and loudly proclaim every mistake made by a priest. Of course, among a great number of priests, one or two can be like the priests that you portray. But does this mean that all are like that? I am only twenty and all of my life is still before me ... I find much good in life today. I work and I go to school. ... But I cannot divide my heart in two when it all belongs to the Church. Religion is my very heart and to take away my religion is to tear out my heart."¹⁷

1. A. Kolosov. Religija i Cerkvov v SSSR (Boľšaja Sovietskaja Enciklopedija, Moskva 2. A. 1947). kol. 172.
2. V. D. Bronč-Brujevič, Voprosi Istorij Religii i Ateizma (Akad. Nauk SSSR, Institut Istorii II, Moskva 1954) p. 16.
3. Ibid. 18.
4. V. I. Lenin. Socialismus und Religion Ausgewahlte Werke, Wien-Berlin 1932, t. II, p. 397.
5. CP Central Committee resolution (Pravda. November 11, 1954).
6. V. D. Bronč-Brujevič, op. cit.
7. Pravda, August 10, 1954.
8. Tiesa, August 10, 1955.
9. Tiesa, October 21, 1956.
10. Tiesa, December 11, 1956.
11. Tiesa. August 19, 1956.
12. Tarybinis Mokytojas, December 21, 1958.
13. Mokslas ir Gyvenimas (Learning and Life), 1956, nr. 6.
14. Tiesa (Truth), January 8, 1961.
15. Švyturys (The Beacon), 1961, nr. 2.
16. Ogoniok, 1960, nr. 39.
17. Tiesa (Truth), December 22, 1960.