

**Religious Repression and Religious Freedom in Russia:
The Roles of Mikhail Gorbachev and Ronald Reagan in Ending the Soviet War on Religion**

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Any discussion of religious freedom cannot neglect what happened in Soviet Russia over the last century, and its status and reverberations still today. Simply put, there was no greater threat to religious liberty in the last 100 years (and arguably ever) than atheistic communism, beginning with the Bolshevik Revolution in 1917. From Russia, the religious repression metastasized into Central and Eastern Europe, Asia, Africa, and even the Western Hemisphere. The repression still continues today in communist countries like China, North Korea, and Cuba—where this tragic remnant of a revolution launched a century ago remains.

On the plus side, the original source of this repression is no longer what it once was; Russia has changed for the better, and certainly in regard to religion. Mikhail Gorbachev, the final Soviet leader, had denounced the “war on religion” orchestrated by his Bolshevik predecessors. To Gorbachev’s great credit, he reversed that war and helped spark a religious revival in Russia in the late 1980s and 1990s. Gorbachev’s significant efforts in that regard have not been appreciated, especially by conservatives in the United States and the West. His efforts are all the more notable given his personal religious views, which remain agnostic, if not atheistic.¹

In addition to Gorbachev’s efforts, no other political leader pushed for Russia to embrace religious freedom quite like President Ronald Reagan—Gorbachev’s Cold War counterpart.

Reagan’s actions in that respect were quite remarkable. Among the most interesting were those

¹ This is a subject I’ve dealt with in careful detail in an article for *Christianity Today* and will explore in much greater detail in my next book. As to the former, see: Paul Kengor, “Red Herring: Mikhail Gorbachev’s Not-Quite Conversion,” *Christianity Today*, April 4, 2008.

that occurred during Reagan's May-June 1988 trip to Moscow, where at times the president sounded more like a preacher.

This paper examines the efforts of Gorbachev and Reagan to end the longest running and most brutal threat to religious freedom in the last 100 years, and, in turn, to attempt to spawn a boom in religious liberty where this crushing repression once prevailed. The mutual work of these two men must be remembered and appreciated. Russia today is far from perfect, but the prospects for religious freedom there are better by leaps and bounds. Even under Vladimir Putin, where there has been an unfortunate retrenchment in certain civil liberties, particularly freedom of the press, religious liberty in Russia remains vastly improved.

Here, I will first provide an overview of the Soviet war on religion, followed by an examination of Gorbachev's moves to reverse that war and a look at Ronald Reagan's fascinating but largely unnoticed actions during his 1988 trip to Moscow. Reagan's steps both sparked and reinforced moves by Gorbachev to free religion in Russia.

The Soviet Assault on Religion

“All the biblical descriptions of hell and the pains of Dante's Inferno are nothing in comparison with the tortures in Communist prisons.”

That was the witness of the Rev. Richard Wurmbrand in testimony before the Internal Security Subcommittee of the U.S. Senate, May 1966. Wurmbrand, the late author of the international bestseller, *Tortured for Christ*, would have known. He spent agonizing days and months and years tortured for his faith in Romanian prisons by communist authorities who literally screamed at him that they were the devil himself. What he experienced bordered on the demonic. His communist captors relished the pain they inflicted upon him and his Christian brothers.

Sadly, Wurmbrand's horrors were hardly unique. Communist governments everywhere had a special contempt for religion. Their assault was aimed not just on Christians but against Jews (especially), Muslims, and other faiths. It targeted Lutherans, Presbyterians, Baptists, Catholics, Russian Orthodox, whoever, whatever; the communists were equal opportunity discriminators. For every tortured Richard Wurmbrand in Romania, there was a Cardinal Mindszenty in Hungary, a Cardinal Wyszynski in Poland, a Natan Sharansky or Walter Ciszek in Russia, a Vasyl Velychkovsky or Severian Baranyk or Zenobius Kovalyk in the Ukraine, a Moaddedi clan in Afghanistan, a Methodist missionary or follower of the Dalai Lama in China, a jailed nun in Cuba, or a Buddhist monk forced to renounce his vows or in Pol Pot's Cambodia. Wherever they went, from East to West, from Africa to Asia, from Phnom Penh to St. Petersburg, communists shared one tendency: They all pursued an all-out assault on religion.

And yet, much of this historical reality is unappreciated still today, especially within the academy. "Under the [communists], there was this persecution of the church," observes Dr. Richard Pipes, Harvard professor emeritus of Russian history. "And it's quite true that the subject has received little to virtually no attention from scholars."²

The subject also has stark contemporary relevance worthy of scholars' attention: The war on religion was pursued as recently as the 1980s in Eastern Europe and the USSR. It defined Cambodia in the late 1970s, where in four years Pol Pot's Khmer Rouge killed 2 to 3 million people out of a population of 5 to 7 million, and silenced or liquidated over 90% of the nation's 80,000 Buddhist monks. This war on religion has set the tone for Cuba for the last half-century-plus, a nation only 70 miles off America's shore. The war is very much alive, obviously, in China, where Christians worship in underground churches, or in jail cells; because China is

² Dr. Richard Pipes, Harvard professor emeritus of Russian history, speaking at Grove City College, September 27, 2005.

religiously unfree, one of every five people in the world are spiritually shackled. And the onslaught rages on in the prison-state of North Korea.

What were the rotten roots of this campaign, of this long war on religion? The roots reside in the perverse ideology of Marxism-Leninism, and specifically the takeover of Russia by Vladimir Lenin and his Bolsheviks in October 1917. That Bolshevik coup in the Romanov era (The Romanov czars were a very pious family.) changed history forever. It also altered the path of the Russian faithful forever.

Karl Marx had dubbed religion the “opiate of the masses,” and insisted that “Communism begins where atheism begins.”³ In the *Communist Manifesto* itself, Marx declared that “Communism abolishes eternal truths, it abolishes all religion, and all morality.”⁴ Marx was no fan of religion. But he was a choir boy compared to Lenin and Stalin.

“All worship of a divinity is a necrophilia,” said Vladimir Lenin, a hateful man given to excoriating statements. “There is nothing more abominable than religion.”⁵ In a November 1913 letter, the Bolshevik godfather wrote that “any religious idea, any idea of any God at all, any flirtation even with a God is the most inexpressible foulness ... the most dangerous foulness, the most shameful ‘infection.’” Russia scholar James Thrower says that in this letter the type of “infection” Lenin was referring to was venereal disease.⁶

Lenin seemed torn between whether religion was more like a burning, oozing sexually transmitted disease or more akin to the vile, unimaginable act of having sexual intercourse with a

³ The “opiate of the masses” remark is well-known. The source for the quote, “communism begins where atheism begins,” is Fulton J. Sheen, *Communism and the Conscience of the West* (Indianapolis and NY: Bobbs-Merrill, 1948). Sheen, who spoke and read several languages, translated the quote into English from an un-translated Marx work.

⁴ Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, *The Communist Manifesto* (NY: Penguin Signet Classics edition, 1998), 74.

⁵ See: J. M. Bochenski, “Marxism-Leninism and Religion,” in *Religion and Atheism in the USSR and Eastern Europe*, eds. B. R. Bociurkiw et al., 11 (London: MacMillan, 1975).

⁶ Quoted in James Thrower, *God’s Commissar: Marxism-Leninism as the Civil Religion of Soviet Society* (Lewiston, NY: Edwin Mellen, 1992), 39. Another translation of this quote comes from Robert Conquest, “The Historical Failings of CNN,” in *CNN’s Cold War*, ed. Arnold Beichman, 57 (Stanford, CA: Hoover Institution, 2000).

stiff human corpse. He simply believed that religion was beyond contempt, his only struggle being how best to adequately describe its vileness. Like a cankerous sore, it needed to be stanced. Those who transmitted it must be quarantined, and the houses where they gathered must be shut down.

Of course, oftentimes this led to extreme violence on behalf of the atheist state. Lenin relished the opportunity. On December 25, 1919, Christmas Day in the West, Vladimir Lenin issued the following order, in his own writing: “To put up with ‘Nikola’ [the religious holiday] would be stupid—the entire Cheka must be on the alert to see to it that those who do not show up for work because of ‘Nikola’ are shot.”⁷ That was, in effect, what Lenin and his disciples spent the next decades doing to religion and the religious: murdering them.

But Lenin and his apostles were not merely playing defense. They also went on offense, looking for ways to move the atheist ball downfield. Along with Leon Trotsky, Lenin spearheaded the creation of groups with names like the Society of the Godless, also known as the League of the Militant Godless, which was responsible for the dissemination of anti-religious propaganda in the USSR.⁸ The promotion of atheism became a central tenet and goal of the atheist state.

To that end, many policies and proclamations were necessary to launch this Bolshevik war, including these steps all started under Lenin by the end of 1918:

All land and buildings owned for multiple centuries by the Russian Orthodox Church were confiscated by the state; and all schools were taken from the Church. Communists favored nationalization of everything. The Church and its property fell under that purview. Indeed, so

⁷ See: Alexander N. Yakovlev, *A Century of Violence in Soviet Russia* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2002), 157.

⁸ See: Daniel Peris, *Storming the Heavens: The Soviet League of the Militant Godless* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1998).

would faith itself. In a way, the Christian faith was first nationalized and then co-opted and transmogrified into the Marxist-Leninist faith. Marxism-Leninism replaced the Russian Orthodox Church and all other conventional faiths; it became the new state religion.

The Bolsheviks also immediately forbade religious instruction to anyone under 18 years of age, and children were encouraged to turn in their parents if they taught them about God. The parental/husband-wife relationship was infringed upon in multiple intrusive ways. Marriage was transformed into a strictly civil, secular ceremony; weddings, baptisms, and funerals were converted into bizarre “communist” ceremonies;⁹ and the Russian Orthodox Church’s long-standing prohibition against divorce was lifted, leading to an explosion in divorce rates and havoc upon the Russian family.¹⁰

Particularly ugly, Lenin’s cronies ensured that churches were destroyed or reconstituted into communist clubs, workshops, storage houses, offices, and obscene atheistic museums.¹¹ The Church of the Archangel Michael, a beautiful red-brick church crowned with five cupolas, built in 1740 on the southwest edge of Moscow, was used to store grain.¹² The Cathedral of Christ the Savior, positioned on the banks of the Moscow River near the Kremlin, Moscow’s most ornate church, was dynamited to make room for a new *sacred* “Palace of Soviets” desired by Stalin.¹³ Of the 657 churches that existed in Moscow on the eve of the 1917 revolution, only 100 to 150

⁹ Soviet officials instead substituted secular civil ceremonies infused with communist ideology, known as “red weddings,” “red baptisms,” and “red funerals.” In red baptisms, infants were given social “god-parents” who undertook to ensure the child was brought up to become a worthy “builder of communism.” The parents of new-born children would promise to raise their children “not as slaves for the bourgeoisie, but as fighters against it.” Young mothers would declare: “The child belongs to me only physically. For his spiritual upbringing, I entrust him to society.” See: Thrower, *God’s Commissar*, 64; Jennifer McDowell, “Soviet Civil Ceremonies,” *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion*, 13: 3 (1974): 265-79; and David E. Powell, “Rearing the New Soviet Man,” in *Religion and Atheism in the USSR and Eastern Europe*, eds. B. R. Bociurkiw and John W. Strong, 160-65 (London: MacMillan, 1975).

¹⁰ W. Bruce Lincoln, *Red Victory: A History of the Russian Civil War* (NY: Simon and Schuster, 1989), 476-77.

¹¹ On the anti-religious museums, see: “A Restored Look for the Long-Ignored Churches of Russia,” Associated Press, July 23, 1976, B3.

¹² Hedrick Smith, *The Russians* (London: Sphere, 1976), 396.

¹³ “A Restored Look.” July 23, 1976, B3.

remained by 1976, according to official Soviet statistics. Of those, the Moscow Russian Orthodox Patriarchy said only 46 still held services by the mid-1970s.¹⁴ Among those 46, few to none were free to say what they wanted. They were monitored by full-time, state-employed “church watchers,” whose job was to report those who came to the church to pray.

The task in this war on religion was immense. The USSR was a huge country that spanned 12 time zones. Within the Orthodox Church alone, there were over 40,000 churches and some 150,000 priests, monks, deans, and bishops.¹⁵ Whereas churches could be reduced to rubble, recalcitrant priests would need to be carted to Siberia, or sometimes simply executed. That was likewise true for stubbornly faithful sisters. Nuns were deliberately housed in special sections of the gulag with prostitutes.¹⁶

Within the Russian churches themselves, there were tons of holy church relics, gems, and precious stones. The Russian Orthodox Church was ancient and also very liturgical and sacramental. It had many icons and jewels, all of special value, whether financial or spiritual. The Bolsheviks saw only a financial value, and thus, initiated a forced confiscation of these items. Naturally, this culminated in fierce battles with the church, leading to the Moscow and Petrograd church trials of 1921-22. These were mere show trials by the state apparatus, employed to make priests and bishops look greedy. The verdict was predetermined.¹⁷

To the communists, the vast volume of church buildings, material, and people was symptomatic of why the attempt to purge religion had to be an ongoing, aggressive, and proactive process. God and his faithful were intractable foes. The war on religion would not be

¹⁴ “A Restored Look.” July 23, 1976, B3.

¹⁵ Lincoln, *Red Victory*, 474.

¹⁶ On this, see Alexander Solzhenitsyn, *The Gulag Archipelago, 1918-1956* (NY: Harper and Row, 1974), 37-8.

¹⁷ Solzhenitsyn, *Gulag*, 29, 325-27, 345-51.

an easy one, but it was, the Bolsheviks believed, a righteous one that had to be pursued at any cost. They were hellbent on making it a success.

To that end, the Bolsheviks achieved many ambitious goals. Scholar Gerhard Simon reported that the Catholic Church organization in the USSR was completely destroyed by the 1930s.¹⁸ Fittingly, in 1937, Pope Pius XI and his Vatican officially described communism as a “violent, deceptive” form of “perversity,” a “poison,” a “deluge which threatens the world,” a “collectivistic terrorism ... replete with hate,” a “savage barbarity,” and a pernicious “plague”—and Marxists as “the powers of darkness.” The Catholic Church declared communism a “satanic scourge.”¹⁹

Overall, throughout the Soviet Union, religious faith was the state’s eternal enemy. And the communist leadership happily made itself a giant national nightmare for believers of all stripes. A defiant Tanya Khodkevich, the poet, bravely captured the despair of believers:

You can pray *freely*
But just so God alone can hear.²⁰

For those two trenchant verses, Tanya Khodkevich received a 10-year prison sentence in the gulag—five years per verse.²¹ She was but one in a sea of dissidents and martyrs in the 20th-century communist world.

What the Bolsheviks created, and spread elsewhere, was genuinely pernicious. Only after this awful system fell to the ash-heap of history were Soviet citizens free to correctly

¹⁸ Gerhard Simon, “The Catholic Church and the Communist State in the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe,” in Bociurkiw, *Religion and Atheism*, 212-3.

¹⁹ The Catholic Church stated these things in the influential 1937 encyclical *Divini Redemptoris*.

²⁰ Solzhenitsyn, *Gulag*, 37.

²¹ Solzhenitsyn, *Gulag*, 37.

characterize it. “It was,” said Boris Yeltsin’s foreign minister, Andrei Kozyrev, after the Soviet collapse, “an evil empire, as it was put.”²²

It had been so put by the Western figure most committed to its demise: Ronald Reagan.

Mikhail Gorbachev’s Reversal

Mikhail Gorbachev never said whether he agreed with Ronald Reagan’s unforgettably scathing characterization of his homeland, but he surely conceded that Reagan had a point. After the dissolution of the Soviet Union, Gorbachev himself candidly admitted that communists had carried out a “war on religion.”²³ He lamented that his Bolshevik forebears, even after their brutal civil war ended in the early 1920s, had “continued to tear down churches, arrest clergymen, and destroy them. This was no longer understandable or justifiable. Atheism took rather savage forms in our country at that time.”²⁴

Gorbachev called off the savagery. When he first came into the general secretary position in March 1985, he introduced *perestroika* [economic “restructuring”] and *glasnost* [political “openness”], his two signature initiatives for reforming an Evil Empire. *Glasnost* endeavored to create a new form of political “openness” in the area that we understand as First Amendment freedoms: freedom of the press, speech, assembly, and religion.

Gorbachev would make good in his vow to loosen those freedoms. In fact, as Reagan later noted, those freedoms, once uncorked, exploded out of the bottle far faster than Gorbachev imagined. “As is always the case,” said Reagan, “once people who have been deprived of basic

²² Andrei Kozyrev, “This Week with David Brinkley,” *ABC News*, August 25, 1991.

²³ Mikhail Gorbachev, *Memoirs* (NY: Doubleday, 1996), 328.

²⁴ Mikhail Gorbachev, *On My Country and the World*, (NY: Columbia University Press, 2000), 20-1.

freedom taste a little of it, they want all of it. It was as if Gorbachev had uncorked a magic bottle and a genie floated out, never to be put back in again. *Glasnost* was that genie.”²⁵

This was especially true in the religious sphere, where what flowed from *glasnost* ultimately seemed less magic and genies than the workings of the Holy Spirit. Gorbachev’s loosening of the cork led to an explosion of religious freedom in Russia so furious that there weren’t enough priests to staff parishes and shepherd the faithful.

Ironically, the winds of *glasnost* had become so powerful that they soon swept Mikhail Gorbachev right out of power. That moment came, alas, on December 25, 1991, Christmas Day in the West. Gorbachev that day called Ronald Reagan’s successor at the White House, President George H. W. Bush. He wished Bush a merry Christmas and told him he was resigning his post as leader of the Soviet Union, giving way to President Boris Yeltsin’s Russian Federation. With that move, the Soviet Union was officially over. It ended, providentially perhaps, on Christmas Day in the West.²⁶

The freedom of religion begun under Gorbachev was further amplified under his successor, Boris Yeltsin, and even under Vladimir Putin. Both Yeltsin and Putin had no qualms about publicly proclaiming themselves Christians and openly practicing the faith. American missionary Fred Mueller remarked on how religious freedom had become so open in Russia by 1992—the year after Gorbachev resigned—that he was able to walk into a Russian public school or college, knock on a classroom door, ask the teacher if he could come in and share the Christian gospel message with students, and was frequently able to do so. “We had freedoms

²⁵ Reagan, “Address to the Cambridge Union Society,” Cambridge, England, December 5, 1990, quoted in Frederick J. Ryan Jr., ed., *Ronald Reagan: The Wisdom and Humor of the Great Communicator* (San Francisco: Collins, 1995), 19.

²⁶ Christmas Day for the Russian Orthodox Church that year was January 7, 1992. Francis X. Clines, “Gorbachev, Last Soviet Leader, Resigns; U.S. Recognizes Republics’ Independence,” *New York Times*, December 26, 1991.

then in Russia that didn't even exist in America," recalls Mueller, "particularly in public schools."²⁷

This is all a great and indisputable credit to Mikhail Gorbachev. Yet, at the same time, Gorbachev's freeing up of religion should not be analyzed in a vacuum or apart from Ronald Reagan's crucial prodding, particularly the president's actions up to and during his May-June 1988 trip to Moscow.

Ronald Reagan's Mission Trip to Moscow

Gorbachev's changes were a wonderful thing, but they were not immediate. Among those who believed they were not happening fast enough was President Ronald Reagan.

Reagan never ceased to raise the matter of religious freedom with Gorbachev each and every time they met, beginning at their first summit in Geneva in November 1985. He would do so at each of their four summits: Geneva, Reykjavik (October 1986), Washington (December 1987), and Moscow (May-June 1988). Reagan did so persistently and emphatically, to the point that it annoyed Gorbachev, who at times replied angrily. That was especially the case with Reagan's repeated pushing on the matter of Russian Jews jailed for their faith or not permitted to emigrate. And Reagan had good reason.

Even though Gorbachev had taken over the Soviet dictatorship in March 1985, militant atheism was still a staple of Soviet society. One such indication was a front-page editorial in *Pravda*. *Pravda*, of course, was the leading government-run newspaper in the Soviet Union; it spoke for the ruling Communist Party that had monopoly control of Russia. Titled, "Fostering Committed Atheists," the editorial underscored an "urgent need" to "foster committed atheists" in the Soviet Union. Such was deemed vital for fruitful "communist building." As *Pravda* noted

²⁷ Interview with Fred Mueller, March 28, 2001.

(correctly so), “atheist education is an inalienable constituent part” of the “transforming force” of Marxist-Leninist ideology. The editorial commended the good work of the 27th CPSU [Communist Party of the Soviet Union] Congress in taking that lead. Gorbachev was general secretary of the CPSU. The editorial was proof that religion in Russia was still enduring a good scourging.

The president of the United States was acutely aware of this fact. In a November 30, 1987, speech, Reagan blasted Moscow for ongoing abuses of basic civil liberties, particularly religion. Reagan’s tough language at that moment rattled many in his administration and in Washington generally because the Washington Summit was scheduled for the next week, where Gorbachev would come to town and sign the historic INF [Intermediate Nuclear Forces] Treaty. This would be, arguably, the greatest nuclear-weapons treaty in history, abolishing a literal entire class of nuclear missiles. The world badly wanted and needed this treaty. Reagan badly wanted it. No one wanted that treaty jeopardized, Reagan included. And no one wanted strong words from Reagan jeopardizing the treaty.

Nonetheless, Ronald Reagan believed that human rights were just as important as missile cuts, if not more. Religious freedom was more important still, rising above all others, because it concerned the eternal, the soul. The soul was eternal; the state was not. Reagan gave voice to that thought in an August 1983 address in Atlanta, where he quoted Notre Dame’s Father Theodore Hesburgh, who said “that every ... person is a *ressacra*, a sacred reality.”²⁸ Thus, Reagan believed, it was a “profound truth” that the “soul,” more than the “physical,” was “truly important.”²⁹ Individuals are incomparably more important than a temporal state.

²⁸ Reagan, “Remarks at the Annual Meeting of the American Bar Association,” Atlanta, Georgia, August 1, 1983.

²⁹ Reagan, “Remarks at the Annual Convention of the National Association of Evangelicals,” Orlando, Florida, March 8, 1983. Also see: Reagan, “Remarks at the Annual Convention of the National Religious Broadcasters,” January 30, 1984.

While reducing the number of nuclear missiles in the world was crucial, the soul was more so. The soul survives a nuclear exchange; the body does not.

With those priorities in order, Reagan, on November 30, 1987, went to the Heritage Foundation, where he gave some pointed remarks in advance of the Washington Summit just days away. “Few moves on the part of the Soviet government could do more to convince the world of its sincerity for reform,” Reagan began—with the audience likely expecting words on missiles to follow— “than the legalization of the Ukrainian Catholic Church.”

Yes, legalization of the Ukrainian Catholic Church. This was a high priority in Reagan’s mind. No less important than the status of the INF Treaty.

He continued: “One of the truest measures of *glasnost* will be the degree of religious freedom the Soviet rulers allow their people—freedom of worship for all.” Unless and until those reforms were initiated, Gorbachev’s *glasnost*, as good as it was, was merely “a promise as yet unfulfilled.”³⁰

Reagan’s promise on “the witness of faith”

Reagan would turn up the thermostat as the Moscow Summit, scheduled to start at the end of May, approached. On the afternoon of May 3, 1988, a presidential press conference was held that was unlike any held before. At 2:44 PM, in the East Room, the president of the United States appeared with four Russian dissidents: Iosif Begun, Reverend Matveiuk, Mykola Rudenko, and Father Shibayev. All were religious leaders in their native land, Jew and Christian alike. President Reagan’s mere hosting and featuring of the men was a testimony to their importance in his mind and eternal order. He said that while the White House had felt the presence of many significant people over its many decades, from statesmen and diplomats to

³⁰ Reagan, “Remarks at a Luncheon Hosted by the Heritage Foundation,” November 30, 1987.

presidents, none were “more important, none of greater faith and moral courage, than these four men.”³¹ They had suffered for their faith under communism in Russia. In Ronald Reagan’s mind, and perhaps in the councils of Heaven as well, there was no greater glory. Reagan informed the White House press corps: “The presence of these four men here today is testimony to the fact that our witness here in the West can have an impact.”

What kind of witness? What sort of witness was this political leader talking about? He was referring to a spiritual witness. But also meant a witness to freedom. A witness to faith and freedom. And yet, Reagan’s understanding of “our witness” also foretold a plan that the world would witness as the month went on and as he traveled from Washington to Moscow.

With such a plan in sight, the president publicly made a vow to the four men: “I promise that the witness of faith that you have brought here today will not be confined within these four walls, or forgotten when this meeting is ended.” How would it not be forgotten? “I will carry it in my heart when I travel to the Soviet Union at the end of this month,” promised Reagan. “And I will say that the most fitting way to mark the millennium of Christianity in Kiev Rus would be granting the right of all the peoples and all the creeds of the Soviet Union to worship their God, in their own way.” It was a truly extraordinary pledge for a president to make.

But there was hope amid the suffering of these four witnesses; their travails had not been in vain. Reagan noted that there were “encouraging signs” for religious freedom in the USSR. These signs were especially positive given the Soviet past, a past based on an atheistic revolution that had devoted itself “to reshaping man” and that had denied “one of the most basic teachings of the Judeo-Christian belief: that after God shaped Adam from dust, he breathed into him the

³¹ Reagan, “Remarks at a White House Briefing on Religious Freedom in the Soviet Union,” May 3, 1988.

divine principle of life.” And yet, said Reagan, “While every positive step taken by the Soviets is welcomed, we realize that this is just the beginning.”³²

Reagan loved parables. He often stressed that Christ taught in parables. He shared a parable about the potential for faith in godless Russia; it was based on a story of a godless Russian soldier who, in the end, found faith. Reagan shared the story with the four dissidents and the press corps:

I have to add a little something here. Recently, a woman wrote a letter and enclosed in the letter was a copy of what can only be called a prayer. But the story of that—it’s in that single page—of a young Russian soldier in a shellhole in World War II, knowing that his unit was going to announce—or going to advance the attack, looking up at the stars and revealing for the first time that he had been taught all his life that there was no God. But now he believed there was. And he looked up at the heavens and spoke so sincerely and said, ‘Maybe before the night is over I’ll be coming to You. And I hope You will forgive what I believed for so long, the foolishness, because I know now there is a God.’ And that letter was found on the body of the young soldier who was killed in the coming engagement. I thought sometimes of taking it to Moscow with me—maybe the General Secretary might like to read it.³³

“Well,” the president closed, “thank you all very much. God bless you.” He would, in fact, take that letter to Moscow and share it with Gorbachev.³⁴

President Ronald Reagan was heading to Moscow with more than just political purposes. He had a spiritual purpose as well.

Onward Christian Soldier

Reagan carried those cross purposes with him to Moscow for his fourth summit with Mikhail Gorbachev, which occurred from May 29 to June 2, 1988. As this section will show—

³² Reagan, White House Briefing.

³³ Reagan, White House Briefing.

³⁴ “1988 US-Soviet Summit Memcons,” May 26 – June 3, 1988, filed at Ronald Reagan Library.

and this is a mere sample of numerous examples³⁵—Ronald Reagan constantly talked and shared his faith in Moscow during the trip.

On May 29, President Reagan’s plane touched down in Moscow. He was inspired by a greeting sent by Patriarch Pimen of Moscow, who was not there to greet Reagan physically, but was there spiritually. Pimen proclaimed that “God’s heavenly will” was about to bring them all together: Reagan, Gorbachev, and their peoples.³⁶

Soon, the Reagans were staring at the Grand Kremlin Palace building. They ascended the Grand State Staircase and its huge number of steps. They met the Gorbachevs as they strolled into the Kremlin’s magnificent St. George’s Hall.

Appropriately, it was a Sunday—God’s day. In Ronald Reagan’s long experience, beginning with his boyhood, that meant God. On Sunday, you talked about God. And Reagan would make no exception for the Evil Empire. If he was there at the Soviets’ invitation, as he indeed was, they were going to hear the “G”-word from the American head of state. After making a few short opening, welcoming remarks, Reagan looked up at the legion of Kremlin atheists and offended their sensibilities immediately. “Thank you,” he closed, “and God bless you.”³⁷

Igor Korchilov, Gorbachev’s translator, immediately noticed the vampiric reaction by his comrades. He said they visibly blanched at Reagan’s utterance of such blasphemy in Lenin’s house. “The heretofore impregnable edifice of Communist atheism was being assaulted before

³⁵ For an extended analysis, see my book: Paul Kengor, *God and Ronald Reagan* (NY: HarperCollins, 2004), 281-320.

³⁶ Statement of Moscow news agency TASS in English, May 29, 1988, printed as “Patriarch Prays for ‘Success’ of Summit,” in *FBIS* [Foreign Broadcast Information Service], FBIS-SOV-88-104, May 31, 1988, 20.

³⁷ Igor Korchilov, *Translating History: Thirty Years on the Front Lines of Diplomacy with a Top Russian Interpreter* (NY: Scribner, 1997), 155.

their very eyes,” Korchilov later said of Reagan’s malfeasance.³⁸ They were horrified at the president’s words. But it was something they had better get accustomed to—quickly.

Later that Sunday, at 3:26 PM, the leaders of the two superpowers had their much ballyhooed first one-on-one meeting, which lasted a little over an hour. The conversation went back and forth, with Gorbachev going first. When it was time for Reagan to speak, he promptly went to the issue foremost on his mind: religion in Russia. He didn’t let a believer go unaccounted for—Protestants, Ukrainian Catholics, Jews, Muslims. All of them, said the American president, had a right to their God and their church, synagogue, or mosque of their choice.³⁹

As if to both pressure Gorbachev and offer him a carrot at the same time, Reagan told the general secretary that if he enhanced religious freedoms in his country, he would also bolster his image around the world and be viewed as a “hero.”⁴⁰

In a very Gorbachev-like response, the general secretary conceded that there had been “excesses” against religion a long time ago in Bolshevik Russia, but there was no “serious problem” today. This prompted a debate. Reagan was not satisfied with that answer. Perhaps as a model of what could be, the president underscored the First Amendment of the U.S. Constitution and invited the Soviet leader to look there to see how religious liberty could and should be protected. Gorbachev retorted, as did Reagan. In fact, Reagan made good on the thought he had shared earlier in the month with the four Russian religious dissidents and the White House press corps in the East Room. He shared with the general secretary the letter about the young Russian soldier in the shellhole in World War II. He read it to Gorbachev in that May 29 one-on-one.⁴¹

³⁸ Korchilov, *Translating History*, 155.

³⁹ “1988 US-Soviet Summit Memcons,” May 26 – June 3, 1988.

⁴⁰ “1988 Memcons,” May 26 – June 3, 1988.

⁴¹ “1988 Memcons,” May 26 – June 3, 1988.

The discussion of religious faith went on so long that it took up literally a quarter of the entire conversation, a remarkable fact that deserves pause.⁴² With all the issues dominating the world and superpower relations, from trade to treaties, from embargos to nuclear weapons, the one issue that began and dominated the two leaders' first one-on-one at the 1988 Moscow Summit was religious freedom. That was totally Reagan's doing, and it was just the start of a fusillade for freedom to come.

Day Two

Day two of the Moscow Summit began the morning of Monday, May 30. President Reagan would deliver three sets of formal remarks that day, first at the Danilov Monastery, then at Spaso House, and then during toasts that both he and Gorbachev would make to one another and their delegations during dinner later in the evening.

Among these, Reagan seemed most inspired by the first event, a visit to the recently restored historic monastery named for St. Daniel, a Russian prince canonized by the Russian Orthodox Church. Founded in the year 1282, the Danilov Monastery had recently celebrated its 700th anniversary. It stood as an oasis of orthodox Christianity in a spiritual desert and as a monument to the endurance of faith.

Prayers for the intercession of St. Daniel had not been enough to stop the Bolsheviks, whose rampage against things religious brought the monastery into their crosshairs. In 1929, the monastery was shut down under decree from Stalin's government. The monks and their novices were expelled and the facility was turned into a prison managed by the NKVD. [The NKVD was the predecessor to the Soviet KGB.]

⁴² Two-and-a-half pages of the nine pages of transcript recorded by the official note-taker were comprised simply of this discussion of religious rights.

Also not escaping the Bolsheviks' enmity were the glorious bells hung in the monastery. The Bolsheviks despised church bells. The ringing of the bells was like an infernal wail to their ears. They wanted them destroyed, dispatched into silence just like the monks and priests and nuns carted off to the gulag.

The scorn for church bells is evident today in surviving correspondence from January-February 1930 between Alexander Likhachev, a Soviet official, and Ivan Tovstukha, personal secretary to Stalin. The pair were examining the ongoing "problem" of the ringing of church bells in villages. Such noise was strictly prohibited. Who were the cretins responsible for this counter-revolutionary activity? The good comrades discussed removing the remaining church bells altogether and recasting them into "useful things."

Bells throughout the USSR were undergoing a process of "melting," where the devils in the Kremlin recast them into tools of the atheist regime. Literally countless bells, which had once chimed the words of God, were melted down. Soviet officials hoped that all of Danilov's bells would be among them.

The most impressive among them was the 13-ton "Bolshoi" bell, centered by a magnificent 700-pound clapper. Stalin and the boys licked their chops at the opportunity to destroy that one. Perhaps it could find reincarnation as a tractor on a giant collective farm, or as a train car to transport religious dissidents to Siberia.

But while the bells and voices inside the Danilov Monastery would be silenced, they would sing again. In the 1980s, the doors were re-opened. In 1988, the restoration of the monastery was complete, three years into the Gorbachev era and just in time for a visit from the American president.

And now, on the afternoon of May 30, 1988, President Reagan arrived at Danilov. He arrived early, in fact, in order to examine restored icons preserved at the monastery.

Reagan's speech started at 2:35 PM. He began by commending "this beautiful monastery" and addressed "in spirit" the estimated "35 million believers whose personal contributions made this magnificent restoration possible." He was touched by the icons, which were not only part of his visit but part of his prepared remarks. "It's been said that an icon is a window between heaven and Earth through which the believing eye can peer into the beyond," said Reagan. "One cannot look at the magnificent icons created, and recreated here under the direction of Father Zinon, without experiencing the deep faith that lives in the hearts of the people of this land."⁴³

The American president expressed his and fellow Americans "hope" for a "new age of religious freedom in the Soviet Union." He said that they hoped the monastery was "not an end in itself but the symbol of a new policy of religious tolerance that will extend to peoples of all faiths." He said that Americans "feel it keenly when religious freedom is denied to anyone anywhere." It was their prayer, said the president, "that the return of this monastery signals a willingness to return to believers the thousands of other houses of worship which are now closed, boarded up, or used for secular purposes."⁴⁴

Reagan pushed that "soon all the Soviet religious communities that are now prevented from registering, or are banned altogether, including the Ukrainian Catholic and Orthodox Churches, will soon be able to practice their religion freely and openly and instruct their children in and outside the home in the fundamentals of their faith." In that respect, he wished that the reinvigorated monastery would be a "first" in a wider "resurgent spring of religious liberty."

⁴³ Reagan, "Remarks to Religious Leaders at the Danilov Monastery in Moscow," May 30, 1988.

⁴⁴ Reagan, "Danilov Monastery Remarks."

Invoking Gorbachev's language, but elevating it higher, the president hoped that "*perestroika* will be accompanied by a deeper restructuring, a deeper conversion, a *mentanoya*, a change in the heart, and that *glasnost*, which means giving voice, will also let loose a new chorus of belief, singing praise to the God that gave us life."⁴⁵

Amid this room of dissidents who had suffered under communists in their native land, Ronald Reagan then boldly cited a man who had long been *persona non grata* in the USSR—a Alexander Solzhenitsyn. Reagan called Solzhenitsyn one of Russia's "great writers and believers," and quoted a "beautiful passage" from the author of *The Gulag Archipelago*. It was a passage, said Reagan, that was "about the faith that is as elemental to this land as the dark and fertile soil." It read:

When you travel the byroads of central Russia, you begin to understand the secret of the pacifying Russian countryside. It is in the churches. They lift their belltowers—graceful, shapely, all different—high over mundane timber and thatch. From villages that are cut off and invisible to each other, they soar to the same heaven. People who are always selfish and often unkind—but the evening chimes used to ring out, floating over the villages, fields, and woods, reminding men that they must abandon trivial concerns of this world and give time and thought to eternity.

It had to have been a stroke of Providence that the president's speechwriter invoked the sound of bells at the Danilov Monastery. Reagan was an American who was keenly aware of where he was speaking and its meaning, but even he surely was not aware of the deeper transcendent meaning of the chiming of bells in that particular house.

The president finished prayerfully, asking the assembled: "In our prayers we may keep that image in mind: the thought that the bells may ring again ... clamoring for joy in their new-found freedom."⁴⁶

Spaso House

⁴⁵ Reagan, "Danilov Monastery Remarks."

⁴⁶ Reagan, "Danilov Monastery Remarks."

From Danilov, Reagan was off for a 4:30 speech in the ballroom of the U.S. ambassador's residence at Spaso House. Located one mile west of the Kremlin, Spaso House and the square on which it is located are named for the church that stands beside the diplomatic residence—the Church of Salvation on the Sands, erected in 1711. In Russian, “Spaso” means salvation.⁴⁷ And it was that, appropriately, that Reagan was hoping to advance in Spaso House that afternoon.

Unlike the Danilov attendees, the assembled at Spaso House were not a group of monks, but they were Soviet dissidents, with a number of persecuted believers present. Reagan began warmly by telling the assembled “why I so wanted this meeting to take place.” “You see,” he told the dissidents, “I wanted to convey to you that you have the prayers and support of the American people, indeed of people throughout the world.” He wanted all of them to be “encouraged and take heart.” He wanted to speak to them “not as a head of government but as a man, a fellow human being,” and told them, “I came here hoping to do what I could to give you strength.”⁴⁸

From the outset of his administration, Reagan told them, he had stressed that “an essential element in improving relations between the United States and the Soviet Union is human rights and Soviet compliance with international covenants on human rights.” He pointed to some “hopeful signs” in the Soviet Union. He told the dissidents that the United States applauded these changes. “Yet,” he continued, “the basic standards that the Soviet Union agreed to almost 13 years ago in the Helsinki accords, or a generation ago in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, still need to be met.” Reagan quoted the words of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights: “Everyone has the right to freedom of thought, conscience, and religion.”

⁴⁷ I thank Bob Morrison for informing me of this very meaningful translation.

⁴⁸ Reagan, “Remarks to Soviet Dissidents at Spaso House in Moscow,” May 30, 1988.

Reagan ended his remarks with some stirring and very personal words. “Coming here, being with you,” said the American president, “looking into your faces, I have to believe that the history of this troubled century will indeed be redeemed in the eyes of God and man, and that freedom will come to all. For what injustice can withstand your strength, and what can conquer your prayers?”

That was an interesting statement. Though not entirely clear, it was likely another of Reagan’s predictions that freedom would win out over communism—and would do so with prayer, with God’s help.

Speaking of which, Reagan then shared something equally remarkable: Could I play a little trick on you and say something that isn’t written here? Sometimes when I’m faced with an unbeliever, an atheist, I am tempted to invite him to the greatest gourmet dinner one could ever serve, and when we finished eating that magnificent dinner, to ask him if he believes there’s a cook. Thank you all and God bless you.⁴⁹

It was on that abrupt higher note that the president closed. His closing parable must have been a surprise even to this dissident audience, but religious believers would recognize it. The president’s point was that human beings, their planet, their universe, are not merely here by random chance but by design, by a Designer, by a Creator. Elaborate, magnificent things don’t just magically appear; they are created.

While those in that room might have been taken aback by what they had just heard from the president of the United States, Mikhail Gorbachev would not have been. Ronald Reagan had actually ended their first one-on-one with this same story.⁵⁰

God’s gift of liberty

The ending to Reagan’s Spaso House speech was certainly unconventional. He would make statements like this in literally every speech or toast he gave during his Moscow trip, and

⁴⁹ Reagan, “Spaso House Remarks.”

⁵⁰ “1988 Memcons,” May 26 – June 3, 1988.

never without a “God bless you” at the end. Because of space limitations, I will provide just a few more examples.⁵¹

Reagan’s grandest moment came on day three of the summit, May 31, at Moscow State University, alma mater of Gorbachev and the Harvard of the Soviet communist state. The president spoke to a large group of students via formal remarks and a follow-up Q&A. There, he spread a faith and freedom gospel—the two “twin beacons” that Reagan deemed indispensable and inseparable. In his 1981 Christmas address on martial law in Poland, Reagan proclaimed that these twin beacons “brightened the American sky.”⁵² He hoped that might illuminate the Moscow sky as well, emanating from his podium at Moscow State University.

In his address, Reagan deployed the word “freedom” 24 times, plus added references to “liberty” and “life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness.” The word “life” appeared 13 times in his remarks. In perhaps the strongest passage of the speech, he told the young people:

Go to any American town, to take just an example, and you’ll see dozens of churches, representing many different beliefs—in many places, synagogues and mosques—and you’ll see families of every conceivable nationality worshiping together. Go into any schoolroom, and there you will see children being taught the Declaration of Independence, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable rights—among them life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness—that no government can justly deny; the guarantees in their Constitution for freedom of speech, freedom of assembly, and freedom of religion. [...] But freedom is more even than this.[...] Freedom is the recognition that no single person, no single authority or government has a monopoly on the truth, but that every individual life is infinitely precious, that every one of us put in this world has been put there for a reason and has something to offer.

Reagan told the students about freedom of religion and how central it was to America’s being. He told the Soviet students that Americans “are one of the most religious peoples on Earth.” Sounding like Tocqueville in his *Democracy in America*, Reagan told the young Russians that if they came to America, they would find “dozens of churches” and “families of

⁵¹ Again, for more examples, see my extended analysis in Kengor, *God and Ronald Reagan*, 281-320.

⁵² Reagan, “Address to the Nation on Christmas and the Situation in Poland,” December 23, 1981.

every conceivable nationality worshipping together” in “any American town.” But more than that, said Reagan, these Soviet students should know what Americans know about religious freedom. What do Americans know? “They know that liberty, just as life itself, is not earned but a gift from God.” And this was a gift to Americans, said Reagan, that Americans wanted to share; they “seek to share that gift with the world.”⁵³

These were words that these students at this university were hardly accustomed to hearing. Moscow State University was a college where graduates, in receiving their diplomas, had to recite a profession of faith to the state. Such was part of the process of receiving a diploma. Atheism had been a mandatory course at the school.

Reagan also said in the speech that “today the world looks expectantly to signs of change, steps toward greater freedom in the Soviet Union.”

The president’s speech had also included words like “soul” and “God” (twice each), and ended with these words for the communist faithful to take to heart and soul: “We do not know what the conclusion will be of this journey, but we’re hopeful that the promise of reform will be fulfilled. In this Moscow spring, this May 1988, we may be allowed that hope.... Thank you all very much, and *da blagoslovit vas gospod*—God bless you.”

The president had unflinchingly shared the gospel of faith and freedom. And most satisfying, Reagan had spewed this counter-revolutionary, anti-Marxist-Leninist blasphemy in front of a giant marble bust of Lenin, which throughout the speech had towered behind Reagan on a high yellow pedestal. It was the political dinosaur in the room, grimly staring down at the

⁵³ Reagan, “Remarks and a Question-and-Answer Session With the Students and Faculty at Moscow State University,” May 31, 1988.

freedom-crusading president. Reagan later quipped that when the students gave him a standing ovation, he turned again and looked at the Lenin statue and saw it weeping.⁵⁴

In addition to the students being impressed, so was Gorbachev's translator. "It was a real tour de force by the president-turned-professor," said Igor Korchilov. "It was one of the finest examples of oratory I had ever heard." He compared Reagan to "a real professor," lecturing Russians in what was essentially an American civics lesson.⁵⁵

The civics lesson had ended, but Ronald Reagan's Sunday school lesson would continue.

Giving Voice

Reagan later returned to Spaso House, where he would host a state dinner for Gorbachev in the Chandelier Room. There, he gave a toast to the general secretary and the Soviet delegation. It wasn't what they expected. The president of the United States made a striking religious statement, speaking mystically of what he called "the voice:"

Mr. General Secretary, ... I believe ... we both hear the same voice, the same overwhelming imperative. What that voice says can be expressed in many ways. But I have found it in vivid form in Pasternek's poem "The Garden of Gethsemane." Listen, if you will, to Pasternek's account of that famous arrest:

'There appeared—no one knew from where—a crowd of slaves and a rabble of knaves, with lights and swords and, leading them, Judas with a traitor's kiss on his lips.

'Peter repulsed the ruffians with his sword and cut off the ear of one of them. But he heard: "You cannot decide a dispute with weapons; put your sword in its place, O man."

'That's the voice. "Put your sword in its place, O man." That is the imperative, the command. And so we will work together that we might forever keep our swords at our sides.'⁵⁶

There's an excellent chance that Gorbachev had no idea what Reagan was talking about, maybe knowing only it had something to do with Christianity and putting swords/weapons away

⁵⁴ Reagan later recounted this detail in a September 1990 conversation with Gorbachev. Source: Korchilov, *Translating History*, 355.

⁵⁵ Korchilov, *Translating History*, 172.

⁵⁶ Reagan, "Toasts at a State Dinner Hosted by the President at Spaso House in Moscow," May 31, 1988.

for the sake of peace. Of course, the point was indeed to put away swords. But Reagan could have easily expressed that ambition without also expressing this separate ambition grounded in Gethsemane, without sharing an account from the gospel of Jesus Christ. He wanted to share the gospel as well.

Reagan concluded his remarks by raising his glass to the general secretary and all the men and women gathered at Spaso House that evening: “May this lovely home never lack for visitors and shared meals and the sounds of spirited conversation and even the peal of hearty laughter. Thank you, and God bless you.”

“Something we’re not used to”

Reagan’s major appearances during the Moscow Summit were now over. His trip, however, was not completely finished. He had inserted religious messages wherever he could during the trip. And he was not about to say goodbye without dropping another.

The final day of the five-day summit was June 2, a Thursday. It ended with a brief farewell ceremony, held at 10:07 AM, again at St. George’s Hall at the Grand Kremlin Palace. Reagan invoked the spirit of St. George. “Mr. General Secretary,” he said to Gorbachev, “it is fitting that we are ending our visit as we began it, in this hall, named for the Order of St. George. I would like to think that our efforts during these past few days have slayed a few dragons and advanced the struggle against the evils that threaten mankind—threats to peace and to liberty. And I would like to hope that, like St. George, with God’s help, peace and freedom can prevail.”

Reagan reminded the Gorbachevs that he had arrived on a Sunday. He, thus, reflected upon a Russian proverb: *Troitsa: ves’ les raskroitsya*. The president spoke it in Russian. For those Russians who did not know this Russian proverb, the English-speaking American president translated: “At the Feast of the Trinity, the whole forest blossoms.”

The general secretary's translator conceded that the Russian saying was totally foreign to the atheist officials present, including Mikhail Gorbachev, who gazed at Reagan with a bemused and confused stare. That was okay with the president. They could think about it. It was now part of the official closing transcript.

For his final benediction, Reagan opted for simpler language he had repeated again and again during the trip, and which every Russian within the sound of his voice now understood unmistakably: "Thank you and God bless you."⁵⁷

The Impact

Ronald Reagan seemed pleased with his Moscow trip. Back in Washington, he noted that he had been "dropped into a grand historical moment."⁵⁸ He certainly had, which is why he seized the moment, and seized it in ways that most would never have expected of a president.

Of course, Reagan's work in Moscow could not end even as he left physically. He would remain there in spirit. He prayed for the Soviets, and urged others to do so.⁵⁹

That prayer was answered. Religious faith in the USSR indeed began to flourish. Some changes and openings had been already underway under Gorbachev, whereas other reforms now suddenly accelerated.

Did Reagan's actions in Moscow and prodding in advance of the trip prompt those changes? Perhaps. As a possible barometer of Ronald Reagan's influence, consider some of the religious changes Gorbachev made, and their timing. Many of the general secretary's major initial changes took place in the spring of 1988, beginning in April and going through June. That was the exact period when Reagan turned up the heat in advance of and during his Moscow trip.

⁵⁷ Reagan, "Statement at Closing Ceremony for Moscow Summit," June 2, 1988.

⁵⁸ Quoted by Lou Cannon and Don Oberdorfer, "The Scripting of the Moscow Summit," *The Washington Post*, June 9, 1988.

⁵⁹ Reagan, "Remarks to the Student Congress on Evangelism," July 28, 1988.

Reagan had said more about Russian religious freedom—publicly, privately, forcefully, passionately—than during any other time. And he often did so by telling Gorbachev and the Soviets that they could expect agreements with the United States based in part on advances in Soviet religious freedom. Those were agreements that Gorbachev wanted badly; that the Soviets wanted badly.

In April 1988, just weeks prior to Reagan’s arrival for a summit for which he was already aggressively pushing religious freedom, Gorbachev met with the top leaders of the Russian Orthodox Church, including Patriarch Pimen. The 77-year-old Pimen had headed the Orthodox Church since 1971. Gorbachev received Pimen and five members of the Holy Synod at the Kremlin on April 29, 1988. Held in the Great Catherine Hall, it was the first meeting between the Communist Party leadership and Church leadership since World War II.⁶⁰

After that meeting and through 1988, Gorbachev gave the green light to the reopening of hundreds of Orthodox churches. He also supported the opening of monasteries, including the Danilov Monastery. In another televised event—this one broadcast to 150 million viewers on *Vremya*, the main evening newscast—Gorbachev held a ceremony in which the Kremlin museum returned religious relics to the Church, sacred items that had been seized in the Moscow church trials in the 1920s.⁶¹

Then there were the numerous significant events that took place as Ronald Reagan was in and leaving Moscow that June. During Reagan’s stay, Soviet authorities announced that the state would partly return the Kiev Pechersky Monastery. The 11th-century monastery had been closed

⁶⁰ John-Thor Dahlburg, “Russian Orthodox Patriarch Pimen Dies at 79,” *Los Angeles Times*, May 4, 1990.

⁶¹ Hedrick Smith, *The New Russians* (NY: Random House, 1990), 395-6.

by the NKVD in the 1920s.⁶² Through the first two weeks in June, just as the Moscow Summit was finishing, Gorbachev allowed two weeks of unprecedented commemorations marking the millennium of the Orthodox Church.⁶³ The ceremonies attracted religious leaders worldwide. In a powerful moment, the Orthodox Church canonized nine new saints, the first since the revolution of 1917. The ceremonies included varied religious services, debates, symposia, press conferences, and exhibits, showcasing relics, artifacts, icons, and treasures, drawing huge numbers of both believers and non-believers.⁶⁴

This time, the state did not seize relics. Nor did the state seize bells, and melt them into more “useful things.” To the contrary, the bells rang out throughout Russia.

During these remarkable first days of June 1988, Patriarch Pimen presided over a special service in the blue-and-gold Epiphany Cathedral remembering the day in June 988 (1,000 years earlier) when Prince Vladimir of Kiev converted his pagan state of Rus. Joining him were hundreds of church leaders representing denominations and nations worldwide, including Archbishop of Canterbury Robert Runcie and Jan Cardinal Willebrands, John Paul II’s representative from the Vatican. The high point came two Sundays after Reagan first arrived, when an All Saints Days Mass was held in the Trinity Cathedral at the Danilov Monastery. Amid the millennium celebrations, the Church even convened a general council of bishops, which was only the third such gathering permitted in the USSR since World War II.⁶⁵

Many more changes would take place. In the 1988-89 period, the Russian Orthodox Church began opening parishes at a furious pace all over the Soviet Union. Some 2,000 were

⁶² Thom Shanker, “1,000-year-old Church Pins Hopes On New Era Of Soviet Openness,” *Chicago Tribune*, June 6, 1988; and Michael Parks, “Talks Set on Ukraine Church Status: Catholics, Russian Orthodox to Take Up Sensitive Issue,” *Los Angeles Times*, June 5, 1988.

⁶³ Smith, *The New Russians*, 395-6.

⁶⁴ Wallace L. Daniel, *The Orthodox Church and Civil Society in Russia* (College Station, Texas: Texas A&M University Press, 2006), 36-7.

⁶⁵ Shanker, “1,000-year-old.”

opened or reopened; with at least 200 being altogether new parishes. The expansion was so quick that there were not enough priests to fill the parishes. And church leaders could finally, for the first time, minister to hospitals, run publications, appear on radio and television, and even be elected to the Congress of People's Deputies.⁶⁶

Ronald Reagan may have had examples like these in mind when by the end of 1988 he was regularly commenting on how things were beginning to improve in Russia—although still not enough for him.

* * *

These were truly blessed changes. In the end, who gets credit for them matters less than the freedom that so many gained for themselves and their souls.

Ultimately, people win. Souls win. Heaven wins. And what Ronald Reagan and Mikhail Gorbachev did together was a great thing.

This much we know for certain: A 70-year-old brutal “war on religion,” as Mikhail Gorbachev had aptly described it, orchestrated by what had been an “Evil Empire,” as Ronald Reagan aptly described it, peacefully ended under the leaderships of Mikhail Gorbachev and Ronald Reagan. The religious repression in Russia was finally over. The bells could ring once again.

⁶⁶ On this and Gorbachev's changes, see: Smith, *New Russians*, 395-6; and Parks, “Talks Set.”