

MUSLIMS IN THE FORMER USSR.

A rejoinder by P. A. Curtis Joseph

I am a regular reader of the Friday column in the VANGUARD "FACING THE KANBA". The issue of Friday, June 20, 1997, struck a deep interest in me because of being a reproduction of the BBC Worldwide commentary by Monica Whitlock about the former Soviet Union Central Asian republics, especially Uzbekistan, which had (and still have) large concentration of Muslims among the collapsed fifteen republics.

The insinuation that Atheism and Communism died with the USSR is very misleading. In the first place, we had the UNION OF SOVIET SOCIALIST REPUBLICS?, and not UNION OF SOVIET COMMUNIST REPUBLICS, WHICH WAS MADE UP FIFTEEN REPUBLICS AND 20 AUTONOMOUS REGIONS. No communist state has been established any where in the world. There is nothing like one man or one nation communism. There have been parties and states created by people who believe in communism of which the Soviet UNION was one. They just have to start with socialist planning because communism is a very long way off. And even no state (not even the USSR) has been able to reach the standard level of socialism.

What capitalism is to imperialism is what socialism is to communism. They are spring boards. While the world generally, and Africa in particular, has had taste of imperialism, communism is still a dream of a future world as ~~enacted~~ contained in the COMMUNIST MANIFESTO ~~as~~ put together by Marx and Engels in 1848. What is not in existence yet cannot be said to have died.

As for Atheism, it has been in existence many centuries before the communist ideology or the revolution that created the former Soviet Union was conceived. In 399 BC, Socrates was accused of being ~~one~~ or preaching ^{atheism} ~~it~~. The Greeks and Romans accused the early Christians of being atheists because they refused to worship their gods. They were

persecuted and killed most brutally in the Rome of Nero. So it was, until Emperor Constantine "converted" to christianity and got them acceptable in Roman Empire with the Edict of Milan in AD 313.

Between 1958 and 1971, I had visited all countries in East and West Europe (except Norway and Albania), all the fifteen ^{USSR} republics and some of the 20 autonomous regions and part of Asia and the far East. I took particular interest in Uzbekistan because of the historic Muslim connection. In 1962 at the capital Tashkent, I had an appointment with ~~with~~ the Chief Imam from whom I got first hand information about the functions and practice ~~and functions~~ of Islam in the former USSR.

As in any other part of the Soviet Union, education was completely free. Because religion had been separated from the state, all schools ~~do~~ ^{did} not teach religion. Each religious organisation had the right, freedom and responsibility to arrange teachings of the tenets or doctrine of their religion to their flocks within their institutions. No discrimination or Government interference at all. Health was free and unemployment was non-existence. All forms of crime had gone down to the barest minimum. Armed robbery, drug trafficking and gangsterism were no more. I was taken round the very large library where I saw old volumes of hand-written Korans. At the end of the about three hours encounter, I asked the Chief Imam to give me a written message to Nigerian Muslims who are not aware that the religion was very strong in that part of the Soviet Union. He wrote it in Arabic.

Back in Nigeria, I took it to the head of Muslim religious Broadcasting in the then Nigerian Broadcasting Corporation after discussing it with the Director General. Alhaji Ekemode (I do hope I remember the name correctly) was the one. He was very happy and praised me for taking such initiative to do that. It was read over the national network.

"Many things, including faith, have changed since the demise of the Soviet Union seven years ago." So appears in the article in the VANGUARD.

But contrary to what Monica Whitlock wants readers to believe, the changes that have taken place have made life worse for the vast majority of the people, especially for the young who can no more go to school and have enough health care, the workers who have been laid off and the elderly whose pensions are not paid; and even if paid cannot satisfy their needs with it. All the social welfare structures have collapsed. All what they took for granted before seven years ago have vanished and they are now being cajoled to resort to a new brand of prayers to bring them back. Same as we have resorted to in Nigeria to solve the economic hardships created for us by the military.

I was at Bukhara and ~~Son~~ Samarkand. Things are not the same again. Faith has taken the shape of Islam fundamentalism engineered from abroad. It started a war in ~~Tashk~~ Tadjikistan, one of the central asian states. The fundamentalists want to take over the Government. There's a halt to the fighting now through a peace or cease-fire brokered in Moscow which I fear may not endure because of Moscow's compounded economic problems since the collapse.

Strange enough, it was the christians that had problems in the Soviet Union because of the "marriage" between the Church (Russian Orthodox) and the former Czarist Government which the Socialists (Bolsheviks) overthrew in 1917. The Church was part and parcel of that oppression, suppression and mass poverty in the Russian Empire. The Central Asian states were colonies in the Empire and were granted automatic independence after the revolution succeeded. In fairness to the Czarist Russian Empire, and unlike other colonial empire builders, they made no fuss to impose their religion and culture on their colonies. So it was easy for the colonies to adjust. ~~quicker~~.

In 1922, Ukraine and Byelurussia joined Russia to create the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics. Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan joined in 1924. Kirghistan and Tadjikistan joined in 1929, and Kazakhstan in 1936. Then Armenia, Azerbaijan and Goergia joined in 1936, and Moldavia in 1940.

Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, the Baltic States, joined in 1940 through a Peace Pact signed between the USSR and Hitler Germany which the former thought would guarantee non-aggression by Germany. That was in 1939. But Hitler broke it in 1941 when the forces invaded the USSR in in 1941.

There were many Christian denominations in the USSR. The Russian Orthodox Church and Armenian/Gregorian Christians were most prominent. The Catholics, the Baptists and smaller ones. I saw the Patriarch of Orthodox Church in Moscow. I had a special invitation to the Monastery in Leningrad in 1967 from the Head, Metropolitan Nikodim. With all the adverse reports I had heard about religion in that part of the world, I could not believe what my eyes when I entered. There were monks from East Africa (blacks) who were there for training. Inside the Monastery was like something I read about the Arabian Kings palaces and from fairy tales. And there were priests from far and near.

Surprisingly there were some copies of extracts from articles I had written about international peace and the UBSR in the WEST AFRICAN PILOT in the fifties and sixties. These facts emerged when Metropolitan Nikodim was proposing my toast. I was the first Nigerian to join the international peace movement founded by the great French physicist, Julio Curie and his wife in 1951/52. And I was the founder and president of the Nigerian Council for Peace which was banned by the Military in 1966. That reception in the Monastery was great. There were lively exchanges of views about contribution to World Peace which should be the meeting point for all divergent human activities. ^{was} There a lot to eat and drink.

When I visited Armenia in 1964, the Capital, Yerevan, provided the very great opportunity to trace the ^{history} ~~origin~~ of the Armenian ^{the} Christians, also known as the Gregorian Christians, ^{to} Thadeus and Batholemew who fled the persecutions of Chritians in Rome in late 3rd century and joined the struggle ^{against} ~~and~~ the oppressive domination of Armenia by the Turks. There I saw a small Church that was built in AD 302, long before Rome tolera-

ted Christians, I could not see the head of the Church ~~who~~ who is called the Catholicus. But I met him in Moscow in 1965 and had very useful discussion with him.

As in other parts of Europe I had visited I met atheists, agnostic^s, humanists, deists etc. There was a big building in Leningrad which contained two museums. One mounted by atheists and the other by theists or believers. I think this was sequel to the amendment of the USSR Constitution in 1936 which gave freedom to the propagation of faith and to those on the opposite side. It is question of making one's ^{choice} ~~joice~~ without breaking bones.

That VAGUARD article says 70 years of Lenin's Communist insurgence that has collapsed now make the Muslims of Uzbekistan to find a new opportunity to revive a culture that was muzzled for that period "In a vast area of almost 2000 miles that was once an Empire of Islam." Arab colonisers brought Islam to Ezbekistan. Before then there were the Moguls, the Turks and other colonial adventurers and plunderers all over Central Asia and areas that later became the Soviet Union. They came with different cultures and religions for the main purpose of exploitation.

Which one does Monica and the capitalist apologists want the Uzbeks ~~to~~ return to? Czarist Russian Empire or Arab Islam Colonialism or Persian Zoroastrianism? ? ?

Seventy years of "Lenin's Communists Insurgence" witnessed unprecedented transformation of human beings with different faiths, colours, creed or nationalities into an economic force that turned deserts to arable land and unifying human and material resources for the benefit of all. Read what is in THE AMERICAN PEOPLES ENCYCLOPEDIA, Vol. 18 page 960G:ZI "In forty years the Soviet Union has become one of the world's industrial giants." (1962/63 Edition.

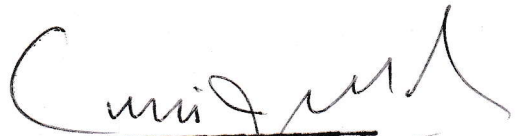
In a country or community where education is free, health care is free, where there ^s no un^memployment and religion is matter for individuals or groups of the same faith, there will ^{be} no commercialised God/Allah. No Kareshs or Jones or Moon or the false prophets who abound in Nigerian

societies now. They thrive because there is poverty, insecurity, bad ^{government} government, bad governance, hyper corruption, fear of ^{the} known and the unknown.

In the collapsed Soviet Union the types of religion that were banned and not encouraged to thrive were those who prevent people from the fruits of development in health care and use of facilities provided free by the state for healthy thinking and healthy living.

Now Uzbekistan Muslims are feeling the pinch of a different life. Most of those who now swell the number and learning how to pray may just be fake or those who hope and hope for a miracle until they pass off in penury.

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Nigeria is being inundated with ingenious misinformation and dis-information propaganda about the collapse of the Soviet Union. Islam is the new target. Most Nigerians are very tolerant of each other's religion. It is in some parts of the North that religious intolerance is rife, even among Muslims. It is in the North that they planned the annulment of the fairest and freest election in Nigeria which was won also by a Muslim. He is languishing in jail. His businesses suffer. What the Government is owing his company is not paid. Not as result of judgement imposed by the court. His Doctor was allowed to see him after eighteen months, but not allowed to carry out any simple medical examination. His wife was murdered in broad daylight for no offence. MUSLIM ON MUSLIM. IN THE NAME OF ALLAY ? ? ? ? ? ? ?
Over to you, Alhaji Abdul Salam Olatunde.


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I did not see or hear that this was published