

# Sakharov and Solzhenitsyn: Dialogue on the Good Society

by Joe Mesar

In an unprecedented display of ecumenical solidarity, a Russian group of 28 Christian clergy and laymen last month published an open appeal to Soviet authorities for a "a rational way of co-existence between the state and Christian congregations in our country" . . . . The petitioners urged the state to recognize the rights of all religious societies to publish and sell their literature, to hold services outside of churches and to make religious instruction an alternative to the atheism that is taught in Soviet schools. . . . The fact that organizers were able to persuade leaders of the Seventh-day Adventists, Pentecostals and other "churches in the catacombs" to join people from Orthodox and Catholic churches was significant.

—*Newsweek*, July 26, 1976

Adventist participation in this appeal for religious freedom is especially significant because the church is not in the habit of challenging government policy in any setting. To hear that Adventists have publicly protested their government's actions is, therefore, startling news—particularly since these members have spoken out in the

restrictive atmosphere of the Soviet Union. Whether or not the sentiments expressed in published reports represent the attitude of the majority of Adventists in Russia, they do give some indication that our members there are struggling with what to do when their Christian conscience collides with their responsibility as citizens.

Adventists in the U.S.S.R. live in circumstances which have been addressed in the work of two recent Nobel Prize winners from their own country. During the last decade, Alexander Solzhenitsyn and Andrei Sakharov have been among the world's most respected voices on behalf of freedom of belief and expression. Their common commitment to freedom is based on two profound, but quite different points of view about the character of the ideal Russian society. Moreover, the alternatives these men articulate are so fundamental they cannot be ignored by persons of conscience wherever they live.

Of the two, Solzhenitsyn is much better known in the West. He first attracted public attention in 1962 with the publication of his novel *One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich*. In this book, with its account of the routine horror of the Siberian work camps, he drew on eight years of prison life and three more spent in exile. *Ivan Denisovich* was originally sanctioned by Nikita Khrushchev as part of his program of

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de-Stalinization. However, this official approval of Solzhenitsyn's writing was short lived. In 1965, many of his private papers, including the unpublished novel *The First Circle*, were seized by the secret police. The government began a campaign of harassment and surveillance against Solzhenitsyn; he was denounced in the press and popular literary journals and, in 1969, expelled from the Soviet Writer's Union. Awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1970, he could not travel to Sweden to accept it for fear that he would be unable to return to Russia. Four years later, after publication of *The Gulag Archipelago* in the West, Solzhenitsyn was deported.<sup>1</sup>

Andrei Sakharov's background is strikingly dissimilar. While Solzhenitsyn was serving time in the labor camps, Sakharov was part of a top-secret research team at the prestigious Lebedev Institute of Physics in Moscow. More than any other scientist, he was responsible for the theoretical breakthrough that led to the production of the first hydrogen bomb. This achievement gave the Soviet Union an important military and strategic advantage in the cold war, and Sakharov was rewarded accordingly. He became the youngest member ever elected to the Soviet Academy of Sciences and received all the material benefits conferred on a person of his status. His standing in the Russian scientific community was probably greater than that enjoyed by Oppenheimer or Teller in the United States.

Because of his position at the pinnacle of his profession, Sakharov's criticism of his own government carries enormous weight. On the other hand, precisely because he was an insider, his initial opposition to the state was cautious, often lacking the sweeping moral force and bitter humor that animates Solzhenitsyn's work. Since 1970, he has moved into open conflict with the authorities, beginning with his founding of the Committee on Human Rights. His efforts to end torture and imprisonment of dissidents won him the Nobel Peace Prize in 1975.<sup>2</sup>

**B**ecause both men have been internationally acclaimed, the differences in their thinking have often been obscured by events. For example, relatively few Westerners know that Alexander Solzhenitsyn is a Christian. His religious convictions lend a moral urgency to his critique of Soviet policy. His principal remedy for his

country's evils is not political reform, but spiritual renewal. His writing stresses the need for Russia to return to the Christian virtues of repentance, sacrifice, forgiveness and love.

Solzhenitsyn's protest against his government is grounded on one simple, unyielding claim: the state is held together by a network of lies. Not only does the state deceive its people, but it demands their conscious participation in its deceit. Citizens are expected to acquiesce in ethical judgments about each other that run contrary to their consciences—for example, signing petitions condemning innocent people for one sort of unorthodoxy or another. Most destructive of all is the metaphysical lie. Men and women are called upon to repudiate their private system of values altogether, in particular to deny the symbols and power of religious belief.<sup>3</sup>

This dishonesty does not result from ordinary human frailty. Rather, it is built into the system. "In our country the daily lie is not the whim of corrupt natures but a mode of existence, a condition of the daily welfare of every man. In our country the lie has been incorporated into the state system as the vital link holding everything together, with billions of tiny fasteners, several dozen to each man."<sup>4</sup>

The results of this cooperation with tyranny have been real and terrible. Solzhenitsyn cites the 66,000,000 Russians who have been killed in civil wars and political executions in the twentieth century, not counting the casualties of the two World Wars!<sup>5</sup> Close to 40 percent of the population, Solzhenitsyn says, still lives in conditions of poverty.<sup>6</sup> Thousands of churches have been razed, their art work and relics sold outside the country. Russian history has been distorted or obliterated.<sup>7</sup>

In the face of all this damage, and the almost absolute power of the government, what is to be done? Solzhenitsyn's answer is direct: Stop supporting lies. "When oppression is not accompanied by the lie, liberation demands political measures. But when the lie has fastened its claws in us, it is no longer a matter of politics! It is an invasion of man's moral world, and our straightening up and refusing to lie is also not political, but simply the retrieval of our human dignity."<sup>8</sup>

Each person must draw the line as to where the falsehood intrudes on the conscience. But

once drawn, resistance to pressure must be total, even at the cost of great sacrifice. This is not necessarily an activist position. It does not ask people to always say what they think. It merely enjoins them never to say anything they do not believe.<sup>9</sup>

Solzhenitsyn is skeptical about the ability of an intellectual elite to take the steps necessary to change the direction of the nation. New moral leadership is required, and it can only be

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provided by a spiritual vanguard purified by the ordeal of suffering, by what he calls “a sacrificial elite.” No one will object to the use of the term elite in this context, he observes wryly, for it is a distinction earned only at the price of great pain.<sup>10</sup>

Solzhenitsyn wants the church to lead the community of sacrifice. He condemns the compromises of the Russian Orthodox bishops during World War II, when institutional survival was maintained in exchange for support of Stalin’s regime. This agreement did not prevent subsequent religious persecution or guarantee freedom of worship. While the Soviet leaders now allow a measure of tolerance “insofar as they need the church for political decoration,” Solzhenitsyn has repeatedly urged Orthodox believers to end this subservient relationship.<sup>11</sup>

The artist is also central to the process of renewal. Literature creates a common spiritual fabric that can be a barrier against the spread of lies. In fact, art can do more to counteract false ideology than an alternative political program. All political solutions, whatever their merits, are based on expediency. A writer in his attempt to speak the truth is not limited by the assumptions of political debate.<sup>12</sup>

As courageous men and women declare their

opposition to the official picture of the world, others will come forward to confess their sins of dishonesty and submission. In this way, a movement of national repentance will occur. Because of the demands of the system, all Russians have participated in the evil done to their countrymen. A community of guilt exists. As more individuals repent, the community itself will be cleansed.

To be genuine, national repentance must cause a transformation of policy. For Solzhenitsyn this means an inward focus, a turning away from international adventures, and the goal of a zero growth economy. It means a return to the soil, and settlement of the vast Russian Northeast with the excess population of the large cities. Solzhenitsyn sounds remarkably like Thomas Jefferson, or Ellen White for that matter, when he comments that closeness to the earth is a source of spiritual strength. As the nation turns inward, he reasons, so will its people, rejecting the idol of material acquisition for the old values of goodness, beauty and purity of heart.<sup>13</sup>

Andrei Sakharov shares his friend’s anger at the actions of the Soviet authorities, but he has a very different vision of Russia’s ideal future. His first semipublic protest detailed his objections to the official endorsement of Trofim Lysenko’s theories of genetics. Sakharov and most reputable biologists considered Lysenko’s views erroneous and dangerous, but they were more concerned with the way state support of Lysenko had crippled scientific inquiry. Here Sakharov strikes one of his dominant themes: freedom of access to information is essential to progress.<sup>14</sup> He makes his point as a loyal Socialist. In order to operate a system of central planning, economic managers need accurate, sophisticated data. If it is not forthcoming, socialism’s supposed advantage in efficiency is lost.<sup>15</sup>

Sakharov’s intimate involvement with the development of atomic weapons has led him, like many of his Western counterparts, to publicly warn of the dangers of nuclear war. In his 1968 book, *Progress, Coexistence and Intellectual Freedom*, Sakharov advocates convergence between the socialist countries and the democratic West. The worldwide problems of poverty, hunger, destruction of the environment, and the

threat of thermonuclear war demand worldwide solutions and international cooperation. The desirable end of convergence will be some form of world government, democratic in its politics and socialist in its economic organization. Sakharov sees this process happening in four

steps. First, internal reforms must take place in the Soviet Union. Second, progressive forces in the United States and Russia will create a constituency for a cooperative relationship between the two countries. Then, the superpowers will unite to assist in the economic development of

## Mesar Interview With an

To obtain background on the Seventh-day Adventist Church in Russia, Joe Mesar interviewed M.P. Kulakov, a member of the General Conference Committee who came to the United States for the 1976 Annual Council. Kulakov also represented Russian Adventist believers at the 1975 General Conference session in Vienna, where he was one of six delegates from the Soviet Union. He offered the following observations:

*On himself:* My grandparents on both sides were among the earliest Adventists in Russia. My paternal grandfather lived in a small peasant village on the river Don. In 1906, he was elected to the Duma (Russian Parliament). While at the capital of St. Petersburg (now Leningrad), he attended a series of lectures on Daniel and Revelation. As it happened, the speaker was not an Adventist at all, but a man who translated the church's books into the Russian language at the publishing house in Hamburg. This translator was so impressed with the contents of the literature that he went to Russia on his own to lecture about biblical prophecies. After this encounter, my grandfather wrote away to Germany for more books about Adventist doctrine. Meanwhile, he began to keep the Sabbath. When an Adventist minister eventually came to his village 15 years later, his entire family was baptized.

My father was one of the pioneers of the church in Russia. He had been educated in economics and accounting before becoming a minister. Because of this background, he was asked to work as an auditor for the church at the center in Leningrad. Some years later, he

served as pastor of the church there, and it was at this time that I was born.

*On the history of Adventism in Russia:* The first Adventists in my country were German immigrants. In 1886, when the first Adventist minister came to Russia, he found a group of believers in the Crimea already observing the Sabbath. The growth of the church has been slow but steady since that time.

At present, we have about 30,000 members in the Soviet Union. Most of our people live in European Russia, particularly in the Ukraine, Latvia and Estonia. We have a number of large congregations in these areas; some churches have as many as 700 members in regular attendance. In Asia, where I worked for 20 years, we have about 3,000 members. The church is growing in this area as well, partially because of the high birth rate. Adventists in this region, like their neighbors, have large families, sometimes with as many as ten children. The membership in Moscow, on the other hand, is large but more stable, with a higher proportion of the elderly.

*On the ministry:* Most of our large churches in the Soviet Union have full-time ministers. In smaller towns and rural areas, however, the pastors support themselves with other occupations. Young men are trained for the ministry by participating in the activities of the local church and by counsel and Bible study with the older clergy in their district. I received my training through this process.

Some ministers have had extensive education at Russian universities. For example, two of my close friends and coworkers were trained as architectural engineers. They are well versed in Russian Orthodox theology and can discuss its relation to Adventist belief

the Third World, devoting 20 percent of their gross national product for this purpose. Finally, by the end of this century a structure for merging the two societies will be devised.

The group that will lead the world to this more mature state will be the intelligentsia.

Their concerns already transcend national boundaries. Since the nature of their work requires freedom of thought and research, they are best equipped to promote these values for society at large.<sup>16</sup>

Sakharov recognizes that some nations and

## Adventist Pastor from Russia

with fluency. Our most promising young ministers have similar backgrounds. But, in general, one of our greatest needs is to have pastors who are knowledgeable about theology.

*On young people:* We are working very hard to see that our young people remain in the church. They are encouraged to join church choirs or to develop ability in public speaking. At the different seasons of the year, the church sponsors festivals for a whole area, giving the youth an opportunity to meet other Adventists and to lead out in special programs. Also, whenever there is a wedding in one of our churches, we invite all the young people in the vicinity to attend. At one recent wedding, there were over 1,200 people at the reception dinner.

Our young men and women are given different materials to help them study the Bible. We have a number of old American textbooks that cover Bible doctrines. In addition, a few copies of Ellen White's books translated into Russian are available to our members.

In our country, all young men are required to serve in the military. A number of Adventists fought in the Soviet army in World War II. At present, we make arrangements to ensure that sincere Adventists are allowed to keep the Sabbath while on military duty.

*On religious freedom:* The law permits all religious believers to confess their faith in any manner they choose. Discrimination between religious groups is forbidden. Adventists, and all other denominations registered with the state, have the right to worship in churches as often as we like. Besides Sabbath services, we have meetings on Sunday nights to assist new members and, in some places, on Friday eve-

ning as well. We may invite guests to worship with us at these times. Printed songbooks and Morning Watch devotional writings will soon be distributed to aid our people in the worship experience.

Church property in the Soviet Union is owned by the state, but it is assigned to the local congregation, which is responsible for the upkeep of the building. In some cities, we share our facilities with other church groups. While churches are not allowed to tax their members, we raise enough money through free-will offerings to sustain our work.

*On the membership:* Most of our members are working people, peasants and artisans, or are retired and living on pensions. However, we do have a number of professional people in the church—engineers, doctors, dentists, even a psychiatrist. A few Adventists, including my oldest daughter, have attended university. In some instances, these students have taken correspondence courses to avoid conflict with Sabbath observance.

*On Russian culture:* Some Adventist young people, particularly those in the European republics, are quite familiar with Russian literature and music. Many of the books of authors like Dostoevsky and Tolstoy raise questions of truth and religious value that are helpful in reaching an understanding of the Christian gospel. I am familiar with the work of the novelist Leskov. In his writing, he indirectly presents issues of religious belief in stories about the problems people face in everyday life.

*On Adventists in America:* I have been very impressed with the loving kindness of the Adventists I have met here and with their concern over the progress of the work in Russia.

political philosophies will not join this emerging world consensus. Among the “extremist ideologies that reject all possibility of . . . compromise,” he lists Fascism, racism, militarism and Maoism.<sup>17</sup> These forces must be isolated and controlled.

Sakharov’s statement, while clearly going beyond actual Soviet policy, is couched in the language of a responsible critic. While he does not hesitate to call his own government to task, particularly in its treatment of dissenters, he is careful to support its position when he agrees with it, on the war in Vietnam, for example. *Progress* was circulated in *samizdat*—the informal network of Russian underground literature—

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during 1969 for comment and discussion. At that time, Alexander Solzhenitsyn wrote a reply which he shared personally with Sakharov, and a dialogue between the two men began.

While praising the author’s courage and the scope of his ideas, Solzhenitsyn’s response, published in 1973, offers a different vision of the good society. That alternative is best described as Christian authoritarianism. Sakharov, he argues, like most secular men, has set up false gods, the idea of unlimited progress, the faith in science to provide answers to human problems, the reliance on the leadership of an informed and enlightened elite. The promise of progress is illusory. The chief job of modern science has been to counteract the damage done by earlier technologies. Sakharov’s credo just does not take into account the pervasive presence of sin in the world. Evil is present in all classes and nations and social systems. Without a spiritual revival to combat personal wickedness, new structures of government can only be of limited benefit.

Indeed, the specific solution Sakharov advances—convergence with the West—will actually be harmful. America is a nation that has lost its spiritual vigor, that is riddled by greed and corruption, that has lost its desire to defend human rights. Without moral reform in the two societies, merger would exacerbate the evils they both contain, producing a culture “immoral in the warp and woof.”<sup>18</sup>

Besides, despite all the efforts of thinkers with an internationalist bias, national feeling and patriotism have not disappeared. Nor is Solzhenitsyn persuaded that the disappearance of these emotions would be a good thing. National identity gives a people a sense of history, a common language, makes great literature possible. Its demise would lead to a numbing standardization of thought and culture. “Does not national variety enrich mankind as faceting increases the value of a jewel?” Solzhenitsyn asks.<sup>19</sup> The conflict between nations he ascribes to the clash of ideologies, brittle doctrines not related to true national interest in any way.<sup>20</sup>

He is also dubious about the value of a democratic, multiparty system. An enthusiasm for popular elections is inconsistent with Sakharov’s desire for rule by the intelligentsia. The democratic process seldom elevates the most outstanding scholars to positions of leadership. Parties are based on the clash of competing interests. They can only represent a part of the people, and thus can only obtain a limited perspective on truth. To get elected, they must excite popular passions, thereby decreasing the prospects for national repentance and self-limitation.

In Russia’s case, the nation has no tradition of democratic practice. Therefore, Solzhenitsyn proposes instead a transition into another form of authoritarianism, one founded on Christian principles. Autocratic regimes are not evil per se. In Russia, he claims, people survived for centuries at least as well as at present, and the arts flourished under the Czarist government. The problem with Communist rule is not the fact that the people are not consulted about decisions, but that there is no higher standard against which to measure the use of power. Christian authorities may possess the same unlimited freedom of action, but their conduct is restrained by their duty to God and the sense of their own capacity to sin.<sup>21</sup>

Solzhenitsyn sums up, "After the Western ideal of unlimited freedom, after the Marxist concept of freedom as acceptance of the yoke of necessity—here is the true Christian definition of freedom. Freedom is self-restriction! Restriction of the self for the sake of others!"<sup>22</sup>

In the face of this response, Sakharov has not retreated from his basic convictions about the shape of the world's future. He is, however, now more pessimistic about the speed at which the changes he envisions will take place. The current Soviet-American detente, he believes, is a facade, masking the persistent poverty and intolerance in Russia, not an honest step toward international democracy. The West must be firm in its dealings with the socialist nations in order to prompt genuine reforms, not just cosmetic concessions.

Although he admits his earlier predictions have not come to pass, Sakharov continues to believe that convergence is the only alternative to disaster. Solzhenitsyn's call for national repentance may cleanse the country of its guilt for past wrongdoing, but it cannot prevent the repetition of these atrocities in the present. This posture, contends Sakharov, leaves no practical role for all those who do not profess religious faith. Furthermore, Solzhenitsyn's advocacy of purification by sacrifice is suicidal. We have had more than our share of martyrs, Sakharov retorts. What we need now is patience and discipline, and a commitment to the gradual introduction of democracy.<sup>23</sup>

Where do Adventists stand in this dialogue? Our first impulse would probably be to agree with Solzhenitsyn. He is, after all, a Christian, and the ideas he articulates are familiar to us—the emphasis on individual renewal, not structural change, the fear of international union, the distrust of scientific wisdom, the belief that political decisions should be informed by moral considerations.

Yet, some tensions lurk beneath the surface of Solzhenitsyn's analysis. Is he willing to concede that other nations need to adopt an inward focus as a means to restoring their lost values? Would he be happy, for instance, if the United States followed the policy he outlined for the U.S.S.R.—military strength only for defense and noninterference in the internal affairs of other

countries? By contrast, Sakharov's views seem more conducive to international protection of civil liberties and to worldwide support for Russian dissidents.

More importantly, is Solzhenitsyn's Christian authoritarianism consistent with our concept of religious freedom? In theory, the Christian ruler is accountable to higher values. But, how, as a practical matter, is this accountability enforced? The Czars never let their consciences get in the way of political or religious persecution they considered necessary, as even Solzhenitsyn admits.<sup>24</sup> And what if the religious tradition to which the heads of state profess allegiance is itself authoritarian? In this situation, no channels of political or ecclesiastical influence exist to prevent capricious and arbitrary actions. This system gives opportunity for a redoubled repression aimed at both religious and secular opponents.

Sakharov offers the democratic response to this problem. The competition among the numerous minorities in society provides the best guard against domination by any one group. Since power is attained by persuasion and coalition, it is in everyone's long-range self-interest to keep the free flow of information and discussion alive and vibrant.

Sakharov's picture of the world has its own hazards, however. Solzhenitsyn's observation that the rituals of modern democracy are foreign to most societies is a powerful one. Attempting to impose them from the outside may lead to the tearing away of old and proud indigenous cultures.

Despite his Marxist training, Sakharov is a liberal in his views on intellectual freedom. As such, he absorbs all the weaknesses and evasions of the liberal position. The liberals' defense of freedom of expression borrows its primary metaphor from *laissez faire* economics. It posits a marketplace of ideas, where various notions compete against each other for acceptance. At bottom, liberalism offers a procedure for arriving at truth, not a set of propositions to be believed.<sup>25</sup> By contrast, most religious faiths proclaim an absolute, revealed truth. When these close off debate, they constitute an attack on the liberal process of an open competition of ideas. Thus, the basic intellectual assumptions of secular, liberal societies stand in conflict with the claims of religious faith.<sup>26</sup>

Which world view would Adventists find more congenial, or would some kind of synthesis accord best with what we stand for? The Solzhenitsyn-Sakharov debate raises this question for us, and other questions, too. Our historical position in favor of the separation of church and state is based in large part on American constitutional principles. What is the effect of applying these ideas in nations with authoritarian regimes, particularly where the government imposes extensive regulation of religious affairs? Is the concept of absolute separation sound even in a democracy? Does divorcing religion from politics mean that the two spheres are separate but equal? Who decides where the realm of political control ends and the arena of religious concern begins?

We typically approach these questions with the same perspective we bring to most church/state issues—what is best for the survival and growth of the church. But this outlook is a limited one, for it dulls our senses to the evils the state inflicts in other contexts. Solzhenitsyn (and the Bible) warn that the church may sacrifice the integrity of the gospel to survive as an institution.

Whatever the limitations of either Solzhenitsyn or Sakharov, they have forged their ideas in relation to a strong commitment against injustice and at considerable personal risk. So have our brothers and sisters in Russia. Without this kind of courage, our vision of the ideal society will soon lose its persuasive power and appeal.

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