

A letter to a worker in Kiev on religion

David North
5 January 1991

Dear Comrade Golubev:

Thank you for your recent letter. In reply to your question, I must state that we are atheists and share the attitude of materialists toward religion and all other forms of spiritual superstition.

A scientific understanding of the universe in which we live, not to mention the planet we inhabit, cannot be obtained on the basis of religion. Moreover, religious superstitions are cynically manipulated in the interests of social and political reaction. This is done not only by “God-fearing” Baptist ministers in the United States, Hindu zealots in India, and Shi'a ayatollahs in Iran, but also by Stalinist bureaucrats who hope that a revival of Russian Orthodoxy will assist the process of capitalist restoration.

That being said, let me stress that the ideological struggle against religion must be conducted with patience, tact and sympathetic understanding for the sensibilities of those who believe in a deity. Religion cannot be abolished by decree and those who are believers must be free to pursue their faith without threats and persecution.

For your further information, allow me to bring to your attention a passage from an article written by Trotsky in 1925 on the origins of religion:

The problem of religion has colossal significance and is most closely bound up with cultural work and with the socialist structure. Marx in his youth said: ‘The criticism of religion is the basis of any other criticism.’ In what sense? In the sense that religion is a kind of fictitious knowledge of the universe. This fiction has two sources: the weakness of man before nature, and the incoherence of social relations. Fearing nature or ignoring it, being unable to analyze the social relations or

ignoring them, man in society endeavored to meet his needs by creating fantastic images, endowing them with imaginary reality and kneeling before his own creations. The basis of this creativeness lies in the practical need of man to orient himself, which, in turn, springs from the conditions of the struggle for existence. Religion is an attempted adaptation to surrounding environment in order to meet the struggle for existence. There are in this adaptation practical and appropriate rules. But all this is bound up with myths, fantasies, superstitions, unreal knowledge.

In the conclusion of this article, Trotsky insisted that religion will only lose its influence over man when the human race has freed itself from all forms of oppression. “Religion,” he wrote, “translates the chaos of nature and the chaos of social relations into the language of fantastic images. Only the abolition of the earthly chaos can end for ever its religious reflection. A conscious, reasonable, planned guidance of social life, in all its aspects, will abolish for all time any mysticism and devilry.”

In order to familiarize you with both the history of the Fourth International and its present-day program, I will send to you a Russian-language edition of the international perspectives resolution of the International Committee of the Fourth International as well as back issues of the Russian-language Bulletin of the Fourth International. Unfortunately, because of the great costs of sending literature by airmail, I must make use of surface mail which takes a good deal longer.

However, I am enclosing a copy of Trotsky’s final letter to the workers of the Soviet Union, which he wrote in April 1940, only a few months before his assassination by an agent of the GPU-NKVD. Please

make it known to your friends: despite the passage of so many years, it remains a document of great political significance.

The fate of workers in the USSR as well as in the capitalist countries depends, above all, upon the forging of the unity of the international proletariat. The answer to the crimes of Stalinism is not to be found in the restoration of capitalism within the USSR, but in the program of world socialist revolution.

With best wishes for the New Year.

Fraternally,

David North,

on behalf of the editorial board of the *Bulletin of the Fourth International*



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