

Soviet Sociology of Religion

JERRY G. PANKHURST

Significant information about religion and atheism in the Soviet Union may be derived from the published reports of Soviet sociologists who carry out surveys and other forms of data collection concerning religious attitudes and activities. On the one hand, all information gained from such sources must be carefully interpreted, for the Soviet sociologists are part of the "scientific atheist" establishment which is devoted to stimulating and encouraging the "overcoming of religion" or the "withering away of vestiges of religion in the consciousness of the people". Such ideological goals cannot but cause a bias in the way in which the sociologists see the religious situation and interpret it.¹ On the other hand, however, because sociological information about religion is gathered in order to affect the further secularization and "atheization" of Soviet society, the authorities are aware that it must be at least accurate enough to serve the purposes of planning action against religion and religious "vestiges". Even though many non-communists reject such action as unacceptable for states to support, or repugnant on simple moral grounds, the information which goes into planning anti-religious activities may be used, as well, to help in sympathetically understanding the situation of believers.

There is no doubt that Soviet sociologists of religion are devoted to the task of facilitating the militant struggle against religion in their country. Virtually every book or article begins with a recitation of the Communist Party's latest directives concerning the creating of the "new Soviet person" or the encouragement of a scientific materialist worldview among Soviet citizens. Even though the highest political leadership seldom refers to the struggle against religion *per se*, references to the "development of the socialist form of life" or to the creation of a society with "mature socialist relations" and "authentic freedom" suffice as authoritative justifications for the scientific sociological investigations of religion.²

The Soviet sociologists build upon the major emphases of the pre-revolutionary Marxist atheistic movement and the immediate post-revolutionary policy of the new Soviet state to undermine religion. As the philosopher George Kline has pointed out,³ nineteenth century intellectual traditions were translated into at least three major Russian Marxist orienta-

tions toward atheism at the turn of the century. First, the work of Georgi Plekhanov stressed the importance of popular scientific education in the overcoming of religion. Since he saw religion primarily as "bad science" or erroneous knowledge about the world, he expected that it would be eliminated through scientific-materialistic education.

By contrast, Lenin stressed the need to engage in direct battle against the religious organizations in order to take away the means by which religious ideas and activities were continually reproduced in Russian society. He was particularly emphatic in saying that the activities of the clergy must be curtailed and the clergy as a group must be discredited. This indicated his militant atheistic stance.

The third emphasis in pre-revolutionary Marxist atheism was provided by the so-called "God-builders" movement. Spearheaded by Maxim Gorky and A. V. Lunacharsky, the God-builders wanted to replace traditional theistic religion with a religion which centred on reverence for the perfect person and society; these were supposed to crown the revolutionary task in the era of full communism. Although the Bolshevik Party condemned the ideas of the God-builders, the theme of semi-mystical sentiments focussed upon the glorious future of mankind has been present in greater or lesser amounts throughout the Soviet era, and is currently represented in many parts of the programme to establish and nurture secular rites and ceremonies in Soviet society.⁴

These three points of emphasis — scientific materialistic education, militant atheism, and God-building — are reflected in the sociological studies being produced in the USSR today. They attempt to improve the materialistic propaganda which is so prominent in Soviet education, they seek means to undermine the influence of the religious groups and the clergy upon the individual, and they try to strengthen the acceptance of socialist rites and "new traditions".^{5*}

The need to gather information on the religious attachments, attitudes and activities of workers and peasants was established as part of state policy as soon as the end of the Civil War allowed some regularization of affairs, according to the Leningrad sociologist of religion, V. D. Kobetsky.⁶ The first efforts in this direction were carried out under the auspices of the party's Agitation-Propaganda Department (Agitprop). Subsequently, throughout the 1920s and 1930s, Soviet social scientists completed a series of historical, ethnographic and sociological studies of Russian Orthodoxy and various smaller religions. The atmosphere of "cultural revolution" in which these studies were carried out was charged with the anti-religious propaganda of the League of Militant Godless and the major church-closing campaign of 1928-33, which culminated in the dark days of the 1930s. Therefore, interpreting the results from this period requires special attention to the surrounding circumstances. Nevertheless, some of the researchers of the time

*See Christopher Binns' article in this issue, pp. 298-309 — Ed.

were developing methods and approaches which would resurface later, after the death of Stalin and the initiation of Khrushchev's de-Stalinization campaign. Like other sociological research, the study of religion was dormant during the period from the beginning of World War II through the mid-1950s. What was called sociology at the time was little more than Stalin's own ideological and ersatz philosophical writings, and, although there seem to have been some continuing efforts to collect data on religion, the atheist publications of the period are propagandistic, not social scientific.

Publications that Western social scientists would acknowledge as being guided by the principles of scientific sociology began to appear in the late 1950s, but the full development of the sociology of religion itself began only with the establishment of the Institute of Scientific Atheism in 1964. A decision of the Central Committee's Ideological Commission in December 1963 mandated greater attention to working out "contemporary problems of atheism", and led to the founding of the Institute as a guiding and co-ordinating organization for such efforts. This decision came in the midst of the major anti-religious campaign of 1958-64, and the location of the Institute in the Academy of Social Sciences, which is attached to the Central Committee of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union, reflected the concern of the highest Party officials for the struggle against religion. While the Institute encompassed from the start all disciplinary approaches to questions of "scientific atheism", sociological researchers were given a prominent role in carrying out large-scale general studies of religion, in developing local research on the success of scientific-atheist work, and in working out methods for use by local groups of propagandists and researchers. The Institute now co-ordinates most sociological research on religion in the USSR.⁷

Since its inception, the Institute of Scientific Atheism has developed a large network of research offices (*opornye punkty*) which design and carry out studies at various locales. The staff of the research offices gather periodically to evaluate their procedures and the results of their work, to plan further research, and to discuss major questions of interest in the study of religion.⁸ In addition, representatives of major universities and educational institutes and of the USSR Academy of Sciences and the Leningrad Museum of the History of Religion and Atheism also participate in these conferences, and co-operate in Institute studies. In an attempt better to study what one Soviet sociologist of religion has called the "most interesting part of the Soviet Union" — that is, Ukraine — the Institute of Scientific Atheism has recently established a branch in Kiev. More than a research office, this branch is reportedly initiating a full range of studies on religious and atheist patterns in this sensitive region.

As a large collective of social scientists — including historians, ethnographers, psychologists and philosophers of atheism, as well as sociologists — who are totally devoted to the study of religion and atheism, the Institute of Scientific Atheism is unique in the USSR, and its record over the almost two

decades of its existence shows a substantial improvement in methodology and techniques of investigation. The Institute symbolizes the large investment of resources by the Soviet State in the ideological goal of overcoming religion and stimulating the "atheist upbringing" of the Soviet population.

Consistent with the State and Party's interest in this area, however, is their imposition of significant controls on research publication and the views expressed by recognized scholars. For the most part, the range within which clear differences of viewpoint and approach develop in the USSR is that bounded on one side by orthodox Soviet Marxist scholarship and on the other by ideological and propagandistic self-justification. Fortunately, the proportion of writing which fits into the latter category has been decreasing over the last two decades, and the proportion devoted to legitimate, if narrow, scholarship has been increasing significantly.

When related to significant substantive questions about the place of religion in society, apparent differences of viewpoint held by the sociological writers tend to be very subtle. For example, although sociologists may indicate in private that they believe that religion is not likely completely to disappear in the future Soviet society (some might say that its organizational base will disappear), such an idea is not acceptable for fullblown debate in scholarly publications because it goes against Marxist tenets concerning the inevitable withering away of religion. When only subtle hints of differences of opinion on such issues are the most that can be put into print, clear schools of thought cannot develop very easily. This is an aspect not only of the censorship that is exercised over publication itself, but also of the canalizing of perspective which occurs in the training of Soviet sociologists.

In addition to co-ordinating research on religion, the Institute of Scientific Atheism is also the major location for advanced training in the sociology of religion and atheism. In the process of working on major research projects, sociologists may defend graduate (candidate or doctoral level) dissertations at the Institute. Sophisticated training is also available in major universities of the Soviet Union, most notably in Moscow, Kiev and Leningrad, and in the major pedagogical institutes in Moscow, Leningrad, and elsewhere. Many higher educational institutions have a department (*kafedra*) of atheism, which may work with a group of sociologists in the training of younger sociologists of religion. Also important as training institutions are the USSR Academy of Sciences (Moscow, Leningrad and Novosibirsk) and the republic academies, especially the Ukrainian Academy in Kiev and the Belorussian Academy in Minsk. Frequently, joint responsibility for instruction or the writing of a dissertation is shared by two institutions, as between an institute and a university or between a university and a unit of the academy.

Obviously, the better the training of the Soviet sociologists of religion, the better will be their research.⁹ Furthermore, insofar as the Soviet sociologists ground their methods on sound social scientific practice, then the informa-

tion they provide about religion will be more comprehensible and more reliable for use by others, including non-official and non-Soviet readers. While there may be no data that is without its biases, the more that is known about the methods of gathering and reporting the data, the better basis one has to understand its meaning. Therefore, the increasing methodological sophistication of the Soviet sociology of religion has led to considerable growth in knowledge about religion in the USSR, and such knowledge may inform both adversaries and advocates of religion.

There appears to be a new initiative to develop scientific sociology in the Soviet Union,¹⁰ and, under the right circumstances, this effort may have considerable significance for the future of the specific sociology of religion. After a campaign to eliminate "bourgeois influences" in sociology in the 1970s, the end of that decade and the beginning of the 1980s have witnessed a reinvigoration of applied sociology. The current efforts are circumscribed by fairly clear ideological limitations, but in a technical sense there are signs of significant progress.¹¹

The sociology of religion and atheism in the USSR may share in such technical progress, but it seems to have been considerably curtailed in the latter 1970s and 1980s. There is no evidence yet available that serious study of religion has fully re-established an active research agenda comparable to that which was carried out at the end of the 1960s and beginning of the 1970s. At that time, large surveys and various other forms of empirical research were common. However, just as there has been an increase in anti-religious pressure on the part of the Soviet State over the past few years, there also seems to have been relatively little new research into religion initiated during these years. Part of the reason for the scarcity of new research projects has been the repeated reorganization of the Institute of Scientific Atheism under two new heads during the last few years. (One died after only a year in office.) On the other hand, as general sociology is an object of considerable debate at the highest level of the State and Party leadership, there is reason to think that the relative lack of recent empirical research activity in the sociology of religion is related to high-level concern over the utility of such research and the potential for ideological misuse of data. Clearly, the future of the Soviet sociology of religion will depend heavily upon the attitude of the new Soviet leadership as it emerges from the Brezhnev era.

¹While this is not the appropriate place to elaborate on the problem of bias, it is widely accepted among social scientists that some degree and form of bias is virtually always present in social research or any other form of knowledge about society. An understanding of the nature and the tendency toward bias, in whatever direction, allows the interpreter better to assess the accuracy and meaning of social science data.

²The quoted passages are taken from the speeches of L. I. Brezhnev before the Twenty-Fifth Congress of the CPSU (1976) as cited by the prominent sociologists of religion, I. N. Yablokov and V. D. Kobetsky. I. N. Yablokov, *Sotsiologiya religii*, Mysl, Moscow, 1979; V. D. Kobetsky, *Sotsiologicheskoye izucheniye religioznosti i ateizma*, Izdatelstvo Leningradskogo Universiteta, Leningrad, 1978.

³*Religious and Anti-Religious Thought in Russia*, The University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 1968.

⁴Christel Lane, *The Rites of Rulers: Ritual in Industrial Society — The Soviet Case*. Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1981. For a Soviet view, see D. M. Ugrinovich, *Obryady: za i protiv*, Politizdat, Moscow, 1975.

⁵Two recent books in English provide useful perspectives on the wide range of Soviet sociological studies of religion. See William C. Fletcher, *Soviet Believers: The Religious Sector of the Population*, Regents Press of Kansas, Lawrence, Kansas, 1981; and Christel Lane, *Christian Religion in the Soviet Union: A Sociological Study*, State University of New York Press, Albany, New York, 1978,

⁶*Sotsiologicheskiye . . .*, pp. 8-9; also see V. D. Kobetsky, "Issledovaniye dinamiki religioznosti naseleniya v SSSR" in *Ateizm, religiya, sovremennost*, Nauka, Leningrad, 1973, pp. 116-30; and in the same volume, G. V. Vorontsov, "Iz istorii partiinogo rukovodstva propagandoi ateizma v SSSR (1921-1929 gg.)," pp. 103-116.

⁷L. A. Anufriev and V. D. Kobetsky, *Religioznost i ateizm (Sotsiologicheskiye ocherki)*, Mayak, Odessa, 1974, pp. 7, 18.

⁸See the description of the work of the research offices by V. Pivovarov, "Bases in Action", *Current Digest of the Soviet Press*, Vol. 26, No. 43, pp. 2-4. Originally published in *Nauka i religiya*, No. 8 (1974), pp. 21-23.

⁹General sociology has been criticized in a late-1980 editorial in *Kommunist*, the party's ideological journal, for "incidences of ignoramuses and hacks working under the guise of sociologists. Lacking the required methodology and research techniques, they draw up primitive questionnaires and distract people from their work without so much as a by-your-leave. . ." The article relates such incompetence to poor sociological training, and it calls for much greater efforts in this regard. While the general tone of the article is positive, this criticism underscores the importance seen in applied sociology by the Soviet leaders. See the English text of the editorial, "Sociological Research: Results, Problems and Tasks", *Soviet Sociology*, Vol. 20, No. 1, Summer 1981, pp. 3-27.

A more extensive discussion of the training of Soviet sociologists of religion (and more detailed consideration of other parts of this paper) may be found in the author's Ph.D. dissertation, "The Orthodox and the Baptists in the USSR: Resources for the Survival of Ideologically Defined Deviance", The University of Michigan, 1978, pp. 52-75.

¹⁰See "Sociological Research . . ." This article was given wide circulation among Soviet sociologists through its republication in the principal sociological journal, *Sotsiologicheskiye issledovaniya*, No. 1, 1981, pp. 3-15.

¹¹See Jerry G. Pankhurst, "Factors in the Post-Stalin Emergence of Soviet Sociology," *Sociological Inquiry*, Vol. 52, No. 3 (1982), pp. 165-183.