

# Ideology and Atheism in the Soviet Union

WILLIAM VAN DEN BERCKEN

It is often assumed in the West that the Soviet Union is becoming a pragmatic state and that its official ideology has only a supporting role of propaganda in the political system. Or it is felt that, to the extent that ideology is a policy-determining factor in the Soviet Union, this is no more so than the extent to which "bourgeois" ideology functions as such in western politics.

These ideas arise from a fundamental misunderstanding of Soviet ideology. This ideology should not be considered in the same way as the ideologies existing in the West. It differs both in its social position and in the totality of its *Weltanschauung*. In this article we shall first describe the position of ideology in the Soviet state and then further explore the significance of atheism in that ideology.

## *What is Soviet ideology?*

Soviet ideology is often identified with the dialectic-materialistic philosophy and the historic-materialistic theory of society. The present Soviet communist ideology should not be understood, however, in terms of philosophy and social science but in terms of political étatism. Soviet ideology is a state ideology, a doctrine about the state and interpreted by the state, i.e. by those in power. The aim of Soviet ideology is to defend the interests of the state and to extend the influence of the state into all spheres of personal and social life. As far as its content goes, the ideology is entirely in line with its role as state doctrine. Its informative function lies in the justification of state politics, its emotive function is that of creating a sensitive bond between the citizens and the state (patriotism) and its imperative function covers the prevention of actions against the state. In the Soviet Union people are not judged politically according to knowledge of Marxist doctrine, but according to fidelity to the state; they are not condemned because of anti-Marxism, but because of anti-sovietism. Thus for both citizens and government the ideology is not primarily a set of truths or scientific values which are to be accepted as convictions, but is primarily a set of rules of behaviour, standards for

social behaviour and political action.

The étatic character of Soviet ideology lies not only in its application to the interests of the state, but also in its functional dependence on the state and party apparatus. Soviet ideology is maintained as a state ideology by political forces. The fate that Marxism has suffered in the Soviet Union is the fate that every doctrine suffers as soon as it is accorded a ruling position: it becomes structurally interwoven with the power apparatus and each strengthens the other. The dilemma of ideological politics or power politics that is often suggested in western sovietological studies is a false dilemma: it is not a question of either one or the other, but of ideology due to power politics or, what amounts to the same thing, power politics due to the ideology. The sequence is in fact the problem of the chicken and the egg.

The ruling power in the Soviet Union is at the same time the doctrinal authority of the ideology, and this is an essential characteristic of the Soviet ideology. It is in this respect that it differs from western ideologies, whose authority derives from the strength of conviction of their advocates and the individual approval of their adherents. And thus it also differs from a scientific theory which is valid only as long as it does not conflict with the facts. The validity of the Soviet ideology is not determined by scientific arguments, but by legal penal provisions on unauthorised interpretations of the doctrine; not by objective facts but by the official version of history which adapts the facts or ignores them.

The correct application of the ideology can be judged in the Soviet Union only by the political authorities, and it is this coincidence of political power and ideological authority that makes the Soviet Union (and every other communist state) an ideological dictatorship. The Soviet state is not only not a democracy, it is not even a normal dictatorship or a traditional autocracy. An ideological dictatorship resists a pragmatic explanation of its politics, resists the neutral presentation of news and "objectivisation" by the social sciences, resists the autonomy of art and the independence of the church, resists independent jurisdiction and a neutral stance of the citizens against the state. The Soviet state is an ideological monoculture, and that is a modern variation on an old type of state: the theocracy. Like the theocracy, the ideological dictatorship or monoculture is a state in which there is no division between political power and *weltanschaulich* authority and thus goes one step further than the modern military dictatorship, in which there is no division between the legislative, executive and juridical powers. The difference between this and a military dictatorship is, for example, that in an ideological dictatorship the citizens not only have no democratic rights, but they are obliged to say that they possess them in perfect form. The étatic system of values in the Soviet Union strives, according to its nature, towards an intellectual monopoly in society. For this purpose a thick net of

government control extends over the philosophical, cultural and religious activities of the citizens, which eventually leads to the total conformity of the citizens to the norms of the state. This means in effect what Michael Heller has called "the nationalisation of the individual".<sup>1</sup> In an ideological dictatorship the citizen is deprived not only of his political rights, but also of his intellectual autonomy. Man has to relate his views of life, his ethical, epistemological and aesthetic systems of values to the interest of the state. That means that the objectivity of his scientific work, the truth of his journalistic activity, the beauty of his artistic creations and the recognition of his moral objections is dependent on the authority of the state, or, in actual fact, upon the civil servant or party functionary concerned. Such intellectual dependence by the citizen on the state is more far-reaching than the physical bonds with the state (no rights of emigration or freedom to travel abroad). The value of the human being in Soviet society is measured by his value to the state. In this depersonalisation of the citizen, in his obedience to the state, lies the deepest meaning of the ideological character of the Soviet state.

### *Étatism and atheism*

As an ideological monoculture, the Soviet state cannot recognise any alternative or competitive ideologies as being equal in value, whether on political grounds or in the area of *Weltanschauung*. To do so would mean intellectual pluralism and the destruction of the essence of Soviet ideology. And yet there are still two systems of ideological values or patterns of thought in the Soviet Union that contest the state ideology: the nationalism of some member republics, and religion.

The national consciousness of Lithuania, Estonia and Ukraine, for instance, and the ethnic identity awareness of the Asiatic Soviet peoples are a threat to the Soviet state and interfere with its ideology, since they place pre-Soviet inheritance and non-communist values above the official ideology. This applies not only to the nationalism of the smaller nations in the Soviet Union but also to Russian nationalism. Soviet étatism and Russian nationalism are not, in fact, the same. The emotional expression of the former is Soviet patriotism which is not the same as Russian nationalism, and the cultural forms of expression are those of socialist realism and not of the Russian realism of 19th century literature or of other aesthetic trends in Russian art.

Russian culture and the historical Russian awareness of identity are as submissive to the norms of Soviet ideology and as subject to communist reinterpretation as the culture and history of the other Soviet peoples. There are of course similarities to be indicated between the old Russian and the present Soviet policies, which still does not mean that Russian nationalism is the ideology of the Soviet leaders. And even if Russian is

the official language of the Soviet state, that does not affect the fact that living Russian is stifled by artificial ideological language, as are the languages of the other Soviet peoples. In the Soviet Union it is not a case of russification but of sovietisation, and even the Russian people have been sovietised, albeit by their own leaders.

The national awareness of the various peoples in the Soviet Union is an added threat to the state if it is identified with religion, as is the case with Catholicism in Lithuania and with the Russian Orthodox Church in Russia. But religion is not only a threat to the Soviet state if it is a bearer of national feeling. Even without this function as a political symbol religion is a dissonance in the ideological monoculture of the Soviet Union. Religion refutes the absolute étatism of the ideology, combatting the monopoly that the state has on the *Weltanschauung* and its intellectual power over the citizens. Religion places God above the state.

The most important *weltanschaulich* field of tension between religion and the Soviet ideology is not theism, however. It is the vision of man and the ethic related to belief in God which leads to a fundamental tension between ideology and religion, between state and church. In the Soviet ideological system of values the ethical bounds of political action are not determined by the religious conscience of the citizens, but by the interests of the state. Since this interest is determined by the political leaders—for it is they who have the right to interpret the ideology—they also determine the choice of the means. The state leadership, in addition to being the highest ideological doctrinal authority, is also the highest moral authority in the land. The denial of any ethical values above the state and of the right of the citizen to his own ethical conscience is a prime consequence of the absolute étatism of the ideology. In the ideological ethic, man is degraded to a purely political object, a citizen of the state. In the religious view of man, however, the emphasis is shifted from the political citizenship to the person of the human being and his adherence to the state according to his conscience. Personalism supersedes étatism. The social thought-pattern arising from the religious view of man also clashes with Soviet ideology. The first extends beyond ideological lines of division and political borders, teaches forgiveness, reconciliation and a humane treatment of the foe and strives to bridge class opposition without force. The Soviet communist ideology, on the other hand, is based on a pattern of thought expressed in political enemy terms (“enemy of the state”) and on unbridgeable class antagonism. It propagates the “irreconcilable hatred” of the enemy and an “ideological struggle” instead of tolerance and the recognition of spiritual freedom. For the enemy within the country there is no consideration whatsoever: whoever criticises the state (“anti-sovietism”) is subjected to inhuman punitive measures: a sentence of many years in a labour camp, denial of contact with his family, deprivation of any form of privacy and the ridicule

Muslim life in the Xinjiang province of China. See article on pp. 244-49.  
(All photos courtesy Peter Morrison.)



Islamic bookstall outside the main mosque in Kashgar.



Uighur couple in Kashgar.



An Islamic funeral at the main mosque, Kashgar.



Muslims in Xinjiang: a mosque in the old city, Kashgar.



A small part of the vast crowd which gathered for a mass at Velehrad in Czechoslovakia on 7 July 1985. It is believed to have been the largest religious assembly in the country's history. For a description of the occasion, see pp. 261-68.

of his deepest beliefs. Against this contempt for man by the political system religion (and humanistic philosophy based on religion) upholds the value of the human being, his uniqueness, his conscience and his intellectual autonomy. The étatistic Soviet ideology turns against this personalised view of man in its fight against religion and religious anthropology. Atheism in the Soviet Union is primarily de-personalism; the first is in theory, the second is in practice. The struggle against the religious view of life is an intrinsic necessity to the Soviet ideology, and therefore independent of the political position of the church authorities concerned. Even if churches and religious communities have declared themselves to be loyal to the Soviet system, their belief is consistently opposed by atheistic propaganda and the practice of their religion is hindered. The apparent adaptation of a religious organisation to the political system is a necessary requirement if existence is to continue, but to the authorities religion remains an ideological foreign body, a philosophy detrimental to the construction of communism. The government's organisational concessions to the ecclesiastical authorities do not indicate acceptance of the principle of religion. On the contrary, the pacified church authorities are used against their will in the fight against religion. They cannot protest against a legal ban on religious education (called "religious propaganda"), against the persecution of believers for the distribution of religious literature, or against the closure of church buildings. Moreover, in international bodies they give support to the foreign policy of the Soviet government.

In its fundamental rejection of religion and in its active fight against it, Soviet ideology is unique among modern political ideologies. Neither democratic socialism, nor liberalism, nor present-day western communism (any more than Christian-democracy with regard to other confessions) have this ideological need, since they all recognise the intellectual freedom of the citizen and defend the value of the human being (the rights of man). And thus, however mutually incompatible they may be, they together defend the basis of what we might call the Christian-humanistic civilisation against totalitarian state ideologies, even if these appear from their midst.

Western civilisation today is highly secularised, but it is not hostile to religion or anti-theistic. The culture that is emancipated from religion does not deny its religious past and does not attempt to erase the residual traces of religion by force. Soviet ideology does do this. It strives consciously for the disappearance of religion from the thoughts of the people and from their civilisation. The elimination of religion has been assimilated into the long-term programme of the party and is realised with the aid of state politics. In view of this political dimension Soviet atheism differs from the atheism of the West, which it accuses of being nothing more than a theoretical negation of the concept of God. In the

Soviet view western atheism does not engage in an active fight against religion by means of constant atheistic propaganda.

*The main characteristics of Soviet atheism*

Political atheism in the Soviet Union has been given a theoretical extension in "scientific atheism" (*nauchny ateizm*), the intellectual sublimation of a political necessity.

An analysis of atheism in the Soviet Union must not therefore commence with the scientific arguments of the ideology, i.e. dialectical materialism. The dialectical-materialistic rejection of the religious idea is a theoretical proposition which does not, as such, have to lead to an offensive policy against religion and its adherents. Marx gave a "criticism of religion" and his philosophical rejection of the concept of God is still far from being "atheistic propaganda" or an "anti-religious struggle", which is how Soviet atheism now uses Marx. Soviet scientific atheism is more than a philosophical negation of God, it is a rejection of all religious values, moral, social and cultural. The present "scientific atheism" in the Soviet Union is a science which lies at the base of this universal rejection of religion. In other words, Soviet atheism is a categorical and radical atheism. This is the second characteristic of Soviet atheism, besides its political motivation. Soviet atheism, therefore, does not recognise religion as a private matter: even the individual's belief in God, even a church which has withdrawn from society in pietism and liturgical cult, do not fit in the ideological monoculture of Soviet society.

The categorical character of Soviet ideological atheism is also accentuated by its view of itself as the one true atheism, the true unbelief. For in fact it dismisses other forms of atheism as inconsistent and unscientific. They are inconsistent because they reject religion only in theory and do not combat it with practical politics; they are unscientific because they are not based on the dialectical-materialistic ontology.

§ The third characteristic of Soviet atheism can be indicated as its confessional aspect. Communists must be confessing atheists, as opposed to non-communist unbelievers for whom atheism is only a philosophical assertion or a personal conviction. Ideological atheism is not a private opinion, the result of scepticism or existential doubts, but organised unbelief. It has its own creed and books on doctrine, its own rites and symbols, and it is publicised by propaganda and apologies. In many respects ideological atheism has the same organisational form as a religious confession. Since ideological atheism has a confessional character, it has to defend itself, like a religious confession, against external attacks, and against erosion from within, i.e. against indifference. The latter is not a choice in favour of religion but only a negative attitude towards the confessional pressure of organised atheism. Such an attitude can best be described as "a-atheism", and this is now a

fairly common phenomenon in Soviet society. "A-atheism" is a greater threat to the position of Soviet ideology than what is known as the religious renaissance in the Soviet Union, which is limited in extent and can easily be fought with traditional anti-religious government measures.

The seriousness of the atheistic indifferentism can be seen in the repeated warnings of the Soviet authorities against lack of interest in atheistic instruction on the part of young people and teachers. It is so serious because "a-atheism" is a part of a general indifference to or lack of interest in the ideology. Even if indifference does not mean a hostile stance against the official ideology, it still undermines the foundations of that ideological state which is the Soviet Union. It is a form of secularisation within the ideological monoculture, of removal of ideology from the personal sphere. This is already undermining the system because the ideological monoculture does not officially permit people to be neutral in matters of religion and *Weltanschauung*.

#### *Soviet atheism compared with other forms of atheism*

The three characteristics of ideological atheism — political motivation, categorical expression and confessional pattern — were decisively determined by Lenin. The role of Lenin in the development of ideological atheism is generally underestimated. Leninist atheism is usually seen as a direct continuation of Marx's criticism of religion and is dealt with exclusively in that context. The subordination of Lenin to Marx is justified as far as the philosophical aspect of the criticism of religion is concerned. Lenin did not actually say anything original about this: he adopted the atheistic premise of materialistic ontology from Marx and never developed supplementary theories on religion, in contrast to followers of Marx such as Plekhanov and Kautsky. Although even the political approach to religion is contained in Marx's interpretation of history and Lenin builds on this foundation, nonetheless his divergence from Marx starts here. Lenin has in any case given a much clearer political dimension to Marxism by seeing the doctrine as an instrument to achieve power, by making the doctrine into party ideology. That Marx's criticism of religion was therefore also polarised is obvious.

The categorical character, however, of Lenin's rejection of religion is unprecedented. To Marx religion was theoretically out-of-date and practically a condemned institution about which he really did not have to concern himself unduly.<sup>2</sup> Marx did not feel compelled to haul Joseph Dietzgen over the coals when he compared socialism to a new religion and a new gospel. Even Engels had no scruples about drawing a parallel between communism and primitive Christianity. This contrasts with Lenin who "drew swords" with the religious-socialist terminology of the "god-builders" Lunacharsky and Gor'ky. The striking aspect of Lenin's

approach to religion is the sheer emotionalism of his writing on this theme. His vocabulary is anything but objective. The adjectives he uses, often in superlative forms, are: loathsome, infamous, repugnant, odious, despicable, cursed, horrible, in addition to the far from neutral nouns like swindle, delusion, poison, contagion, self-spitting, intellectual corpse-desecration, obscurantism, hocus pocus, intoxication, mist, darkness, sleep and prejudices. These qualifications are not the result of an unbiased analysis of the phenomenon of religion, but rather of an intense repugnance towards it. Since Lenin did not possess intellectual aloofness with regard to the religious question, his atheism has that consistently strong rejection of all religions, whether real or symbolic, theistic or secular, which meant that he was no longer able to see to what extent he gave a pseudo-religious character to his own anti-religion. In that respect Lenin's atheism goes beyond that first appearance of political atheism in the French Revolution. The Jacobins also proclaimed atheism as a political programme and did so with such rigour that they claimed to have disposed of the Christian era. But they were not against religion as an idea: they set up the Religion of Reason with the supreme being of the deists as God and a cult to his honour. The fact that Lenin did not abolish the Christian era was a result of his feeling for reality. The Soviet "era" has eliminated the Christian reminiscence by replacing BC and AD with "before our era" or "of our era". In his radicalisation of atheism and by transforming it into a political confession, Lenin has a unique place in the ideological atheism which began with Marx, and in the whole atheistic tradition of European intellectual history.

Pre-Marxist atheism in 19th century Russia also belongs to that tradition. This first became clearly discernible with Belinsky and Herzen in the 1840s and then, in more acute form, in the various radical trends of thinking such as the nihilism of Chernyshevsky, Dobrolyubov and Pisarev, the populism of Lavrov and Tkachev and the anarchism of Bakunin. But even under the Decembrists, the first revolutionary movement in Russia in the 1820s, some were pronounced atheists. Lenin was well aware of this atheism on his own soil and the influence of Chernyshevsky and Pisarev in particular on the atheistic development of Lenin was recognised both by himself and by his contemporaries.<sup>3</sup>

Soviet historiography sees a proof, in the existence of this 19th century Russian atheism, of the historical roots and the popular character of present communist atheism, a proof that can be used to show that modern atheism does not make any break with Russian culture and tradition.<sup>4</sup> Nevertheless, the theoretical mistakes of this 19th century Russian atheism are pointed out, but these can be explained since its supporters did not know Marx, or did not correctly understand him since Lenin had not yet appeared on the scene. The main trouble with Russian atheism was that it was too idealistic, not sufficiently worked out in a socio-

political sense or, in the case of Bakunin, was too political. Bakunin takes a strange stand against Lenin concerning the criticism of religion. In spite of the fact that they are each other's opposite in many respects, Lenin and Bakunin have a great deal in common in political radicalism and the consequent rejection of religion. Their atheism is in both cases politically motivated and heavily supported by personal hatred.<sup>5</sup>

With respect to Russian atheism before Bakunin, Lenin's atheism distinguishes itself on the essential question of motivation. The atheism of the Decembrists, of Belinsky, Herzen and the Nihilists was not political atheism. It was a rejection of God on the grounds of rational-ethical considerations, some placing more emphasis on the rational aspect and others on ethical indignation in view of the suffering of mankind. This basic approach was well summarised by the Decembrist poet Alexander Baryatinsky, who wrote the following about God in 1824:

He is powerless in goodness or almighty without goodness.  
Look at history and at nature's laws  
And you will say that for his own praise,  
If the world be doomed to suffer according to his will,  
Even if God were to exist we should have to deny him!<sup>6</sup>

Such a rational ethical argumentation with regard to God is, in fact, the most ancient reasoned form of atheism. It was known as long ago as Epicurus (341-270 BC) and for centuries has been the subject of theodicy, the philosophical reconciliation of the existence of God and the evil in the world.

In view of this basic proposition 19th century Russian atheism stands in a tradition as old as the critical thinking of man. The denial of God as a result of a syllogism or as an expression of ethical impossibility are, however, considerations which are too abstract for Marxist-Leninist atheism and, when they lead to the preaching of general sympathy with mankind, too sentimental. Ideological atheism lacks the ethical motivation, the aspect of general love for mankind, that is so very apparent in Russian atheism. Nikolai Berdyayev, who strongly accentuated the ethical character of Russian atheism, characterised the difference between the latter and communist atheism as atheism from sympathy and atheism from rancour.<sup>7</sup>

Notwithstanding the real difference, there is also a common element in 19th century and Soviet Russian atheism. This concerns the question of whether both the ethical protest of the former and the political resistance of the latter should express themselves in such a definitely atheistic manner. The Russian, if we may make use of such a general abstraction, is apparently not indifferent to the problem of the question of God. He adopts a negative or a positive position in regard to the question, he is believing or unbelieving, but certainly not sceptical or agnostic. How real

the problem of the existence of God is to the Russian mentality may be seen from three literary quotations, which may not be scientific arguments but do serve as a neat illustration. The first concerns a statement by Belinsky which comes down to us in the memoirs of Turgenev. After a long discussion on the theme of God Belinsky reacts to a suggestion for a break: "We haven't solved the problem of whether God exists or not and you already want to break for lunch!" The second well-known quotation is from Dostoevsky's *The Idiot*: "Russians don't become normal atheists, no, atheism is to them simply a new belief. They believe in it without perceiving that they believe in Nothing. So great is our need to believe." The topicality of this attitude is expressed in *The Yawning Heights* where Alexander Zinoviev's party secretary says: "We are often asked whether God exists. We answer this question in the affirmative: yes, God does not exist." To return to the place of Lenin in European atheism we may summarise as follows: although Lenin was no great critic of religion, and, as we have already pointed out he had no original thoughts about religion, he is one of the greatest adversaries of religion in history.

Historically speaking, Lenin is of as much significance for the elimination of religion in his part of the world as Grand Duke Vladimir of Kiev was for the extension of Christianity in Russia from 988. With Lenin an attempt is made, for the first time in history since Constantine the Great, systematically to reverse the Christianisation of a country. The extension of atheism in the Soviet Union is no natural process of secularisation as it is in the West, but a process of systematic atheisation, which is directed by the government as part of the creation of an ideological monoculture.

Lenin's historical role in the extension of atheism is more influential than that of the great philosophical critics of religion such as Voltaire, Feuerbach, Nietzsche, Freud, Sartre and Russell. These thinkers have attacked the concept of God by literary means or by philosophical scientific arguments, but have never had as much visible success as Lenin with his political attack on God. But they did not contradict themselves by filling the empty place in the human mind with a new pseudo-religion, even though some of them were later misused by others (Voltaire by the Jacobins, Feuerbach by the Marxists, Nietzsche by the national-socialists).

Philosophical atheism differs from ideological atheism in all three characteristics mentioned: it is not politically motivated but scientifically argued; it is not a collective confession but an individual concern of the person; and instead of being categorical and intolerant it is open to religious symbolism and aesthetic, and tolerant of another's belief. Marxist atheism is to be understood as ideological atheism, which, in contrast to philosophical atheism, is interested only in religion and

religious consciousness from a political and not a theoretical point of view. It does not recognise the philosophical legitimacy of the God-question as such, the question of the sense or truth of speaking about God. At the basis of Marx's philosophical neglect of the God-question lies scientism. Scientism was the intellectual by-product of the industrial revolution and the scientific optimism of the last century. Now that the progress in science, as it continually extends its boundaries, has paradoxically made us more keenly aware of the limitations of human knowledge, even developing the fatal possibility of turning against itself, modern science has long since dropped the metaphysical pretensions of scientism. Marxism-Leninism has been left standing in this respect compared with modern changes in scientific mentality.

Currently the prevalent attitude in science and philosophy concerning the question of God is that of agnosticism: the opinion that it is impossible to give either a positive or a negative answer to the question. It is often a personal denial of God without the scientific confirmation of that denial. It springs ultimately from a recognition of the bounds of human knowledge. This taking up of a stance against God and transcendence is, however, as incompatible with the dogmatic atheism of Soviet ideology as is theism. The attitude of Soviet atheism towards agnosticism is that of disbelief versus ignorance, and thus Soviet atheism not only sets itself against religion but also outside modern philosophical and scientific thought. The rejection of agnosticism by the Soviet ideology has led to an extensive doctrine relating to the non-existence of God — a reversed theology. That is the science of "scientific atheism", whose orthodoxy is protected by the Institute of Scientific Atheism of the Academy of Social Sciences under the Central Committee of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union. We shall now briefly investigate the epistemological status of this science which is practised only in communist states.

#### *Atheism versus agnosticism*

In general it is recognised that the existence of God or his non-existence cannot be scientifically proved, and that religious belief and dogmatic unbelief are pre-scientific propositions. These propositions can be rationally justified only in retrospect. Soviet ideological atheism as dogmatic unbelief should be compared epistemologically with dogmatic theology. In both forms of scientific argumentation something is proved that was already incontestable to the practitioner of the science concerned. However, dogmatic theology recognises the relative character of its science, while ideological atheism claims to be absolute by virtue of its scientific point of view. Soviet "scientific atheism" therefore, cannot be compared with non-Soviet forms of science of religion. This science investigates the phenomenon of religion from various aspects —

comparative, structural, psychological, philosophical/phenomenological — and suspends the truth question when describing religious beliefs. That is to say that the man who practises the science of religion does not have to be a believer or a committed atheist in order to practise his science. Scientific atheism does study religion, however, in order to indicate the untruth of religious pronouncements and dogmas. The science of scientific atheism cannot be practised, just as dogmatic theology cannot, before the personal attitude to belief has been determined, i.e. without being an atheist oneself. Furthermore, religion must be seen as a social evil. The scientific atheist studies the object of his investigations not only to illustrate its total absurdity but also in order to be able to fight against it better in practice. The ideological study of religion leads directly to the propaganda of atheism, the declaration of disbelief. This urge for propaganda or the missionary consciousness of Soviet scientific atheism is its real “raison d’être”, in contrast to the motivation of the science of religion which is purely satisfaction of scholarly curiosity. Soviet atheism is the negative counterpart of religion, its contrary supplement, and as such it is itself a possible object of the science of religion.

The ideologists of Soviet atheism do not deny their partisanship and do not consider their principled stance against religion as an impediment to objective scholarly study of the phenomenon. The Soviet concept of scholarship as such is entirely based on the *partiinost’* (party spirit), which takes precedence over all scientific criteria and norms of objectivity. In view of this it is not surprising that the methods of scientific atheism are determined by the ideological propaganda function of this discipline. Those elements are therefore missing in Soviet scientific atheism which are to be expected in a normal scholarly approach, such as self-critical aloofness, originality, internal differences of opinion and a serious approach to the arguments of opponents. The most obvious method, that which is common in scholarship, namely discussions with opponents, is never used. The Soviet science of atheism is a monologue, immune to doubt and criticism, monolithic in its argumentation and generally rife with sectarian arrogance. It works with a selective representation of the historical facts, with political accusations and moral disqualifications of those who are the representatives of belief. The latter have no possible means of expressing opinions, let alone publishing them even in a modest form. Atheistic books and publications appear in editions of hundreds of thousands, while no single theological or religious book, including the Bible, is available on the commercial market. Public debates with believers have been forbidden since the twenties.

It may be seen from the above that in spite of the continual stream of atheistic literature appearing in the Soviet Union, ideological atheism has produced no work which has attracted the attention of international scholarship or has become a coveted object in its own country. There is no

book among them that has the discernment and provocation of, for example, the well-known work of Bertrand Russell, *Why I am not a Christian*. Russell's book is well-known in the Soviet Union and gladly quoted as proof of atheism among western intellectuals. But this philosophical atheism, or as the Soviet term has it "bourgeois atheism", is criticised as "inconsistent, superficial, abstract, individualistic, not supported by class-consciousness, tending towards agnosticism and scepticism", and finally as "resulting in a human belief instead of in political struggle against religion", according to a Soviet study by A. Kolesnikov, *The Freethinking of Bertrand Russell*.<sup>8</sup> In this criticism of the atheism of Russell it is apparent that Soviet atheism does not only deny the existence of God but expressly desires to propagate its denial of God as the only correct atheism, the orthodox disbelief. The "bourgeois atheism" of the West then appears as an error within atheism.

In Soviet atheist literature the difference between "bourgeois atheism" and its own "scientific atheism" is continually stressed. Soviet atheism is also called "the highest form of atheism" (*vysshaya stepen' ateizma*), and that is certainly the most correct assessment of Soviet atheism.

<sup>1</sup>M. Heller, "How the Soviet Union is Misunderstood", *Survey* No. 2, 1979, p. 208.

<sup>2</sup>This aspect of Marx's attitude toward religion has been described by many authors. Thus, M. Stromberg speaks of the "beyond-atheism position" of Marx. See M. Stromberg, "Marxism and Religion", *Studies in Soviet Thought*, Vol. 19, 1979, p. 209. W. Post writes in his article on Marx's criticism of religion that Marx shows "ein eklatantes Desinteresse" with regard to religion. See K.-H. Weger (editor), *Religionskritik von der Aufklärung bis zur Gegenwart*, Freiburg-im-Breisgau 1979, p. 220. This attitude of Karl Marx has been summarised very well by N. Lobkowitz in his article "Karl Marx's Attitude toward Religion": "Seldom if ever has Christianity been taken so radically unseriously as in Marx. What could be more humiliating to a Christian than to be told that he is not an enemy worth fighting, since he is done for anyway?". See N. Lobkowitz (ed.), *Marx and the Western World*. London: 1967, p. 334.

<sup>3</sup>B. Bociurkiw, "Lenin and Religion" in L. Schapiro and P. Reddaway (eds.), *Lenin, the Man, the Theorist, the Leader*. London: 1967, pp. 110-11.

<sup>4</sup>A. D. Suchov, *Ateizm peredovykh russkikh myslitelei*. Moscow: 1980, p. 10.

<sup>5</sup>This resemblance between Bakunin and Lenin has already been established by the Mensheviks. N. P. Poletika tells in his memoirs that at the funeral of Lenin the Mensheviks sent a wreath together with the following text: "To V. I. Lenin, the greatest Bakunist under the Marxists". See *Kontinent* 36 (1983), p. 373.

<sup>6</sup>The last lines of the poem are an inversion of the famous aphorism of Voltaire, "Si Dieu n'existait pas, on l'inventerait." The poem of Baryatinsky was originally also written in French. The complete Russian text of the poem is to be found in V. Orlov (compiler), *Dekabristy: antologiya v dvukh tomakh*. Leningrad: 1975, pp. 386-88. It must be stressed that in his *God and State* Bakunin was not the first thus to paraphrase Voltaire's aphorism.

<sup>7</sup>N. Berdiyayev, *Russkaya religioznaya psikhologiya i kommunistichesky ateizm*. Paris: 1931.

<sup>8</sup>A. S. Kolesnikov, *Svobodomyслиye Bertrana Rassela*. Moscow: 1978, pp. 4, 5, 6, 12, 21, 121, 125.