

1 Modernization, Secularization, and Socialization

The struggle against religion is not a campaign, not an isolated phenomenon, not a self-contained entity; it is an inseparable component part of the entire ideological activity of Party organizations, an essential link and necessary element in the complex of communist education.

Pravda, January 12, 1967

The political function of communism is not to overthrow authority but to fill the vacuum of authority.

Samuel P. Huntington,
Political Order in Changing Societies
(1968), p. 335

This is a study of mass persuasion. It is concerned with the effort of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union (CPSU) to refashion the political culture of an entire people. For more than half a century, the Party has sought and effected radical change. It has created new political, economic, and social institutions and has transformed Russia from a relatively backward state into one of the world's great powers. It has brought industrialization, urbanization, and improved standards of living and education to the people. But the Soviet leaders, unlike other modernizing elites, have sought to go beyond institutional change in their quest for modernity. They have attempted to change the people themselves. The Party has invested, and continues to invest, vast resources in an effort to remold the values, attitudes, and expectations of individual citizens.

Although they have always believed that social change would itself alter people's views and behavior, the Soviet authorities have attempted to guide this process toward a particular objective. Institutional change has been channeled toward "social mobilization," as "major clusters of old social, economic, and psychological commitments have been eroded or broken and people have become available for new patterns of socialization and behavior."¹ The Party has tried to break down traditional authority patterns and relationships that it considers inappropriate to the modern world, and to develop in their place a new set of attachments. It has chosen to shape the values of an entire people through a massive program of education and indoctrination—the "communist upbringing (*kommunisticheskoye vospitaniye*) of the populace." It has tried to change the views of adults and to inculcate into younger people, who have fewer and less firmly held preconceptions and attitudes, views that it deems correct. Perhaps no other ruling elite in all of history has attempted so strenuously to implement

Aristotle's dictum: "The citizen should be molded to suit the form of government under which he lives."²

The Party's ultimate objective is to rear a "New Soviet Man," whose noble character and varied talents will be worthy of the ultimate communist society. In the first years after the Revolution, official theorists spoke rhapsodically about the New Man. For example, Trotsky wrote in 1924: Man will become immeasurably stronger, wiser and subtler; his body will become more harmonized, his movements more rhythmic, his voice more musical. The forms of life will become dynamically dramatic. The average human type will rise to the heights of an Aristotle, a Goethe or a Marx. And above this ridge new peaks will rise.³

Inflated rhetoric of this kind became much less fashionable during the Stalin years, when revolutionary élan of any kind was discredited. After the dictator's death, however, Party ideologists once again addressed themselves to the theme of the New Man. The man of communist society, it was said, would be "cultured and well-rounded, possessing a strongly developed sense of collectivism and public duty"; he would be "distinguished by the clarity of his outlook, by the richness of his intellectual life and physical perfection."⁴

Official promises today are no less effusive. As two Soviet ideologists have written: "We have in our hands a truly miraculous method of transformation, our 'philosopher's stone'—the philosophy of Marxism-Leninism." With it, "Soviet society is rearing a man whose spiritual and moral qualities are worth more than any treasures in the world. . . ." ⁵ With the aid of this "philosopher's stone," such negative traits as individualism, "bourgeois nationalism," chauvinism, indolence, and "religious prejudices" will be eradicated. The New Man will be intelligent, creative, and humane, imbued with feelings of collectivism, proletarian internationalism, socialist patriotism, love of labor, and militant atheism.

The task of developing citizens with these characteristics has obviously been a difficult one. When the Bolsheviks assumed power, they were faced with a population that was largely preindustrial in outlook.⁶ They were also confronted with two powerful institutions that protected and transmitted nonsocialist attitudes—the family and the church. The Bolsheviks' program made a clash with these two institutions inevitable.

Early efforts to destroy the family as an institution have been abandoned, or at least put aside for the foreseeable future. The government now pursues a policy of supporting and strengthening the family. This has led some Western scholars to conclude that "the orientations contained within the family are now congruent with the political order," and that the family now

transmits political values “that are appropriate for the Soviet state.”⁷ This interpretation, although plausible, cannot yet be documented, because very little empirical evidence on the subject is available. In fact, whether the family actually facilitates or hinders official socialization efforts today is not altogether clear.⁸ Despite this uncertainty, the Party continues to support the family as an institution.

In contrast, the Party has continued its early efforts to undermine the influence of the church. The Soviet leaders have always viewed secularization as basic to their political program. As Marxists, they expected secularization to follow from scientific progress and socioeconomic change. But as Leninists, they decided to accelerate this process by pursuing an active *policy* of secularization. While they were confident that religion would eventually die out (its disappearance was said to be “demanded by history”), they sought to hasten this inevitable process. Over the half century that they have been in power, they have utilized a wide range of measures—from education and propaganda to legal restrictions, extralegal pressure, and outright terror—in their effort to achieve a secular society.

Lenin and his followers regarded religion as a major barrier to their program of modernization. Their rejection of the church derived both from ideological conviction and from the special character of Orthodox Church power. On the one hand, the Bolsheviks saw religious belief as an “opiate,” used by exploiting groups to deceive the masses and by the masses themselves to escape from intolerable realities.⁹ On the other, Russia in the period before the Bolshevik coup was, to use Donald Smith’s term, an “integrated religiopolitical system,”¹⁰ one that was highly resistant to change. Church and state were linked in a conservative alliance, and both profited from the arrangement.

The Orthodox Church helped to sustain the autocracy, operating in a very real sense as part of the tsar’s control system. It was virtually a subdivision of state power, helping to ensure social stability. The Church encouraged allegiance to the tsar and to the Russian fatherland, and it blessed personal sacrifice for the glory of the state. It urged obedience to authority and acceptance of a rigid and unequal social order, while nourishing dreams of a beautiful afterlife for the poor and docile. The Orthodox Church, in turn, derived benefits from the secular authorities. It had little competition for the souls of the Russian people, and its officials were men of prominence, wealth, and power. Other religious denominations were subjected to various pressures, and this helped to reinforce the authority of the Orthodox faith. During the reactionary reigns of Alexander III (1881–1894) and Nicholas II (1894–1917), these discriminatory measures

became more pervasive, and the primacy of the Orthodox Church was elevated to a major principle of Imperial Rule.¹¹

In 1917, organized religion, especially the Orthodox Church, was a formidable power in temporal affairs, and the overwhelming majority of the population were believers. The Communist Party sought to destroy the political and economic might of the church and, at the same time, to induce people to renounce their religious beliefs. As we shall see, the second task has proved far more difficult than the first.

Modernization and Secularization

The sources of religion, Marx once suggested, “are found not in heaven but on earth.”¹² Religion, that is, is man’s invention: it is “the ‘sigh of an oppressed creature . . . , the opium of the people.’”¹³ But if people invent God or gods in order to rationalize their unhappy lot on earth, improving their lives should lead them to abandon their religious beliefs. As Marx put it, “As man affects and changes Nature, he simultaneously changes his own nature.”¹⁴

While the evidence is far from conclusive, there does seem to be a relationship between economic conditions and religion. Throughout the world, higher living standards, improved education, urbanization, industrialization, and scientific progress are associated with a lower incidence of religious belief.¹⁵ In the USSR, too, sweeping changes in the polity, economy, and society have had a substantial impact on religious beliefs and practices. To quote a leading Soviet philosopher, the erosion of religious belief has been “closely and inseparably linked with the resolution of general economic, social and cultural problems in the building of communism.”¹⁶ “From their own personal experience,” another authority has argued, “people are convinced of the real possibility of creating a ‘paradise’ on earth and disregarding the ‘heavenly Garden of Eden.’”¹⁷

Although the Soviet system has been termed “the best atheist agitator of all,”¹⁸ broad social change only provides the preconditions needed to fulfill history’s mandate. Even Marx, who predicted that religion would inevitably disappear with the consolidation of the socialist order, expected education to play an important role in this development.¹⁹ For more than fifty years, the CPSU, as history’s agent and interpreter, has pursued a policy of secularization. Indeed, according to one Soviet commentator, without the “tremendous educational and organizational work” of professional atheists, “the successes which have been achieved [thus far] in forming a materialist world-view among the people would have been impossible.”²⁰

This linking of an ultimate goal that is allegedly inevitable with

conscious, purposive activity to achieve it is a basic feature of Soviet political life, as it was for the Bolsheviks before they assumed power. Impatience with the slow pace of history is fundamental to the Leninist version of Marxism; it is considered expedient and right to accelerate the pace of history. To be sure, there is a logical contradiction between a determinist philosophy of history and aggressive political action. But, as Robert V. Daniels has pointed out, this contradiction makes a great deal of sense in *psychological* terms. The man who is convinced of the inevitability of his cause “strives all the more vigorously to make sure it succeeds.”²¹ Soviet antireligious efforts should be understood in this context.

Although Marx and Engels were atheists—their uncompromising denial of the existence of a divine being is one of the essential features of their *weltanschauung*—both saw direct attacks on religion as useless and misplaced. Such measures, they argued, were useless, because religion “cannot be abolished as long as the world is not put straight,” and were misplaced, “because the real enemy is the perverted social order of which . . . religion is only the ‘spiritual aroma.’”²² Lenin, on the other hand, was extremely impatient with history and with religious beliefs and practices. He considered it appropriate and even necessary to combat religion actively. Once he and his Party assumed power, Lenin’s approach, especially his call for militant antireligious propaganda, became official policy.²³

More generally, the Party’s program of secularization has involved four basic objectives: (1) the separation of the political system from religious ideologies and ecclesiastical structures, (2) the performance by political authorities of socioeconomic functions formerly carried out by organized religion, (3) the restructuring of the political culture to emphasize temporal goals and rational, pragmatic means to achieve them, and (4) the elimination of any vestige of religious belief or practice and the creation of a completely atheist society.²⁴ While the first two objectives were achieved fairly quickly through the application of terror and highly restrictive laws, the latter two have yet to be achieved. To reach these goals, the Party has developed an elaborate program of political socialization.

Socialization

“Political socialization” is the process by which people acquire their political standards and beliefs.²⁵ It involves a wide range of institutions and individuals, from parents and teachers to the press, the courts, and the military. Through contact with these socializing agents, people modify or discard old values, acquire new ones, or reinforce their preexisting notions.

The end product of the socialization process is “a set of attitudes—cognitions, value standards, and feelings—toward the political system, its various roles and role incumbents.”²⁶

In every society, individuals are exposed to countless socializing experiences. But different socializing agents are apt to transmit different viewpoints. Some lead to support of the official value system, while others stimulate or reinforce alternative sets of values. What distinguishes the Soviet system is the vast and overt character of the official program—the “communist upbringing” of the population. The Party systematically, directly, and repeatedly communicates its political messages. The approach is simple and direct. Its principal theoretical underpinning is expressed in a favorite saying of Nikita Khrushchev, “*povtoreniye mat’ ucheniya* (repetition is the mother of learning).”²⁷ Moreover, Soviet ideologists apparently agree with Herbert Hyman’s contention that, to promote political stability, people “must learn their political behavior early and well and persist in it.”²⁸ Political lessons taught in the USSR as early as the preschool years are reinforced through constant repetition. But whether the symbols and values presented by the regime are in fact internalized by the masses is another matter.

In their effort to restructure the political culture and transform a religious people into atheists, the Soviet leaders have tried to socialize and resocialize the entire population. They have been working at this task since 1917. Their first efforts were clumsy and often vicious, serving only to offend and alienate believers. Most of the tactics used in the early years have since been criticized as excessively provocative and counterproductive. Nonetheless, they seem to have left a lasting imprint on the atheist movement. While atheist propaganda today is somewhat more sophisticated than it was half a century ago, it still is based essentially on the repetition of outdated formulas, still offends believers, and still helps to create a climate that encourages antireligious excesses.

Since Stalin’s death, the Soviet authorities have expanded their indoctrination and socialization programs. In particular, they have renewed their drive to eradicate religious beliefs and practices from the USSR. In the past two decades, antireligious propaganda has been the subject of three Central Committee resolutions, thousands of articles and books and millions of lectures. Indeed, as the Soviet Union, according to the official rhetoric, draws closer to communism, defects in the system become matters of increasing concern and the target of more intense and energetic propaganda.²⁹

The Underlying Rationale

When the Bolshevik regime was established half a century ago, organized religion, especially the Russian Orthodox Church, represented a threat. Its political and economic power were vast, and many leading church officials were active and outspoken in their hostility to the new government. Lenin and his followers viewed the church as a danger to the very existence of the new order, as well as an obstacle to the future reconstruction of society. Given their understanding of politics and their ambitions for Russia, their policies toward the church are understandable.

The wisdom of current policies toward religion, however, is less clear. The church can no longer be scorned as an ally and prop of the ruling class, although, ironically, there is more than a little truth to the charge that it continues to play this role. The church's hold over the citizenry has been severely eroded. Its wealth has been expropriated, its doctrines have been revised to conform more closely to the contemporary world, its political pronouncements are invariably supportive of Soviet domestic and foreign policies, it has been infiltrated by the security police, and it is now a rather docile creature of the political authorities.

Why, then, does the Party continue to combat religion? The logic and expediency of such a policy are far from clear. Indeed, its costs may well outweigh any benefits that have been or could be achieved. As we shall see, continued antireligious efforts have led to the erosion of traditional social control mechanisms, as well as to personal alienation and diminished support for the regime. In fact, official antireligious policies have, to some extent, stimulated and reinforced the very practices and beliefs they were designed to eradicate.

The rationale underlying Soviet policy toward religion involves three factors:

1. The Party objects to religion on power-political grounds: it is determined not to share its power with any other organization. The regime, as Jeremy Azrael has pointed out, is "committed to the destruction of all autonomous social institutions and groups—that is, to the eradication of all focal points for alternative loyalties."³⁰ It cannot accept the notion that other doctrines or institutions have the right to remain independent, with a dignity and a validity of their own.³¹ The political authorities are concerned that religious loyalties might conflict with those they consider more suitable. Ironically, though, the Party is so preoccupied with "enemies," "opponents," and "rivals" that it sometimes exaggerates the threat of religion, adopting policies that sometimes make believers hostile to the political regime.

2. Political concern about establishing the full internal sovereignty of the state is reinforced by the desire to mobilize the citizens' energies for radical social change. Despite considerable evidence that religious believers are as loyal and hardworking as nonbelievers,³² stereotyped views of the influence of religion are still widespread. In fact, these outdated conceptions of religious belief and believers dominate the entire atheist movement. Religion, it is said, "sows illusions . . . and acts as a . . . serious obstacle on the path to social progress."³³ It encourages humility and submissiveness to fate, attitudes that "disarm people spiritually, hinder their creative powers and public activity."³⁴ Religion keeps people weak and downtrodden and tells them that they are impotent. It urges them to resign themselves to fate, requiring that they patiently endure "all ills and misfortunes, persecution and oppression."³⁵ It demands that people become "slaves by conviction . . . , hoping only for the mercy of the Almighty."³⁶

Religion also draws people away from concern with the real world, preventing them from "fully displaying their creative forces in work and social life."³⁷ "By the whole of its ideas, [religion] distracts people from labor . . . and leads believers away from participation in the life of society."³⁸ It "shuts [them] off from the seething life of the people, making them indifferent to the interests of society."³⁹ Its focus is otherworldly; it deludes believers, compelling them to devote time to prayer and to sacrifice their lives on earth in order to prepare for an illusory life after death. According to the official ideology, the earthly life is a matter of secondary importance to believers: "the purpose of this life is to prepare for death," or, more properly, for life after death.⁴⁰

3. It is not simply the general thrust of religious doctrine, i.e., its unscientific character and its focus on otherworldly matters, that is considered inimical to the regime's goals. Certain teachings and practices, characteristic of one or another church, are regarded as especially undesirable.

a. Perhaps most important, the Christian concept of individual salvation is said to impede the development of a spirit of collectivism. Fidelity to church doctrine promotes individualism, a "private-property psychology," and a "petty, egotistical concern about 'saving one's soul.'" ⁴¹ It creates a world "whose center is man's personal 'I' and . . . concern for 'personal salvation' and 'entry into the Kingdom of Heaven.'" ⁴²

b. Religious differences allegedly breed hostility among individuals and groups. The principle of "religious exclusiveness" promotes contempt for, and conflict with, those of other faiths.⁴³

c. In some regions of the USSR, especially Central Asia and the Baltic States, religious differences become intertwined with national differences, thereby nourishing “bourgeois nationalist” tendencies.⁴⁴

d. Religious teachings, especially in the Moslem and Jewish faiths, are said to propagate male chauvinism, relegating women to an inferior position in the conduct of religious rituals and in society as well.⁴⁵

e. Certain religious practices are seen as directly endangering the health of parishioners, e.g., prolonged fasting, frenzied prayer, baptism by immersion, overindulgence at religious celebrations, or contact with stagnant holy water.⁴⁶

f. Members of some of the fundamentalist sects refuse to work on Saturday or Sunday, refuse to serve in the military, refuse to take part in elections or trade union activities, and sometimes prohibit their children from joining the Pioneers, taking part in sports activities, or attending the theater.⁴⁷ The regime feels so strongly about these practices that it has prosecuted both clergymen and ordinary believers and has even banned a number of religious groups.

While there is a good deal of truth in many of these allegations, they are on the whole oversimplified, misleading, and outdated. Most churches in the USSR have revised their attitudes toward social, political, economic, and scientific questions.⁴⁸ Some religious groups, most notably the Baptists, have done away with elaborate rituals and have placed relationships between clergy and laymen on a more democratic basis.⁴⁹ But the authorities are not impressed by these changes. Revisions in religious doctrine, no matter how significantly they depart from traditional teachings, are dismissed as superficial and limited in scope. Modern versions of religious doctrine, Soviet ideologists argue, are “rational in form and in details, but dogmatic in content.”⁵⁰ The changes involve minor issues, whereas the essence of religion—belief in God—remains intact.⁵¹ And, if most believers today are sometimes acknowledged to be “honest workers who conscientiously fulfill their obligations to society and march side by side with atheists,” they are said to do so despite, not because of, their religious convictions.⁵²

Who Is Religious?

Soviet scholars, like their Western counterparts, have found it difficult to define “religiousness.” According to a Soviet handbook, religion is “belief in a nonexistent, supernatural world, supposedly inhabited by gods, spirits,

angels, saints, the souls of the dead or other supernatural beings.”⁵³ This formulation fails to distinguish between religious beliefs and religious practices, and it does not discriminate among religious, quasi-religious, and ethical beliefs. Belief in a Supreme Being, church attendance, the performance of certain rituals, the acceptance of certain ethical norms, identification of oneself as religious—all can signify religiousness. But some who believe in God may not attend church; others who claim not to believe in God may baptize their children; still others who belong to no church may adhere to a moral code usually associated with one of the major religions. Who is religious and who is not often cannot be determined with any degree of precision.

This difficulty is seen most clearly in the area of religious ceremonies and rituals. It is not only religious persons who take part in these rites; many nonbelievers engage in them as well. Some observe church holidays, others baptize their children, while still others arrange church marriages and funerals. According to Soviet specialists, the overwhelming majority of parents who participate in baptismal rites do *not* consider themselves believers and do not take part in the ceremony for religious reasons. (This is somewhat less true in rural than in urban areas.) A study done in the city of Gorky, for example, revealed that only 5.5 percent of parents taking part in baptismal ceremonies were impelled to do so by religious convictions. Most said they were influenced by their belief that baptism is “an old Russian rite, a national custom and a tradition which ought to be preserved,” or else attributed their participation to pressure from grandparents.⁵⁴ (Some grandparents get their way by threatening not to look after an unchristened infant.)⁵⁵ On the other hand, many people who consider themselves to be believers do not engage in religious rituals. A study of Moslems in Kazan, for example, showed that approximately half of the believers did not fast during Ramadan and did not take part in other rites basic to Islam.⁵⁶

Because only some citizens readily identify themselves as believers, Soviet social scientists have had to devise more sophisticated classification schemes to deal with people who are reticent and with situations that are ambiguous. Some researchers count as religious only those who are members of, or who actively participate in the life of, an organized church group. Others see as religious anyone who believes in God or other supernatural forces. Still others consider self-designation the only valid criterion of religiousness. Although leading academic specialists have increasingly come to appreciate the rich and varied nature of religion, the problem of definition remains troublesome.

In the years since Stalin's death, Soviet scholars have attempted to discover precisely who is, and who is not, a believer. Research teams of sociologists, anthropologists, ethnographers, and historians have conducted numerous surveys of religious communities and individuals. The results of these investigations indicate quite clearly that, regardless of the criterion or criteria used, religious people are apt to be elderly, female, rural dwellers, and people with little formal education. (Not all are, of course. Some young, well-educated urbanites, even Party members and Komsomols, believe in God.)⁵⁷ Studies have shown that two-thirds of believers live in rural areas.⁵⁸ Perhaps 75 to 80 percent of those who are religious are women, and the overwhelming majority are over fifty years of age.⁵⁹ The following tables (Tables 1.1, 1.2, 1.3, and 1.4) provide survey data on the religious populations of several areas of the USSR.

The findings cited in Tables 1.1, 1.2, 1.3, and 1.4 allow us to construct an image of the typical religious believer: an elderly woman with little education who is very likely a collective farmer or pensioner residing in a remote provincial village. The model is not a very attractive one; it is unlikely to stimulate efforts at emulation. Indeed, the image is itself

Table 1.1 Attitudes Toward Religions in Voronezh Province, 1966 (in percentages)

Group	Among Men	Among Women	Of Total
Atheists	60.7	47.4	53.4
Nonreligious	25.5	18.2	21.5
Waverers	8.3	15.9	12.5
Convinced believers	5.5	18.5	12.6

Source: M. K. Tepliakov, "Pobeda ateizma v razlichnykh sotsialnykh sloyakh sovetskogo obshchestva," in A. F. Okulov et al. (eds.), *Voprosy nauchnogo ateizma*, Vol. 4 (Moscow, 1967), p. 137.

Table 1.2 Nonreligious Belief among Citizens of Voronezh Province, 1966 (in percentages)

Age Group	Of Men and Women	Of Men	Of Women
18-25	94.5	95.9	93.3
26-30	86.6	92.1	81.0
31-40	83.9	90.6	76.5
41-50	77.1	89.6	67.6
51-60	56.2	76.4	43.4
61-65	44.3	60.5	36.2
66 and over	34.6	52.4	23.5
All age groups	74.9	86.2	65.6

Source: M. K. Tepliakov, "Pobeda ateizma v razlichnykh sotsialnykh sloyakh sovetskogo obshchestva," in A. F. Okulov et al. (eds.), *Voprosy nauchnogo ateizma*, Vol. 4 (Moscow, 1967), p. 138.

antireligious propaganda: it helps to derogate religion by painting an unattractive, even ridiculous, picture of the typical believer.

The Soviet population can be subdivided into categories according to the intensity of their religious convictions. The most widely accepted classification scheme involves five subgroups: (1) atheists; (2) the nonreligious (who, while not believers, are indifferent toward both atheism and religion); (3) waverers (who express doubts about the existence of God and other supernatural forces and who perhaps observe certain religious rites); (4) convinced believers; and (5) fanatics (who are distinguished by "blind, reckless belief in God," and who actively disseminate religious views).⁶⁰ Each of these people feels and acts as he does for a variety of reasons,

Table 1.3 Sect Membership in the Byelorussian SSR, 1961–1963 (in percentages)

Group	Brest Province	Eastern Provinces of the BSSR		
		Mogilev	Gomel	Vitebsk
Men	33.6	13.0	25.0	23.0
Women	66.4	87.0	75.0	77.0
Nonworking	10.3	47.0	53.0	60.0
20–40 years	26.4	12.0	15.3	7.2
40–50 years	13.5	—	—	—
40–60 years		45.0	40.7	34.5
50 years and older	60.1	—	—	—
60 years and older		43.0	44.0	58.3
Illiterate and semiliterate	71.4	65.0	55.0	35.3

Source: A. I. Klibanov, *Religioznoye sektanstvo i sovremennost* (Moscow, 1969), p. 82.

Table 1.4 Parishioners at Sakona Church, Gorky Region, 1965 (in percentages)

Occupation	Percentage of		
	All Parishioners	Men	Women
Skilled workers in industry, transport	2.6	53.8	46.2
Unskilled workers in industry, transport	7.8	30.8	69.2
Agricultural specialists	0.2	100.0	0.0
Teachers, doctors, workers in children's institutions	1.2	16.7	83.3
Workers in cultural-enlightenment institutions	1.4	57.1	42.9
Skilled collective farm workers	7.0	22.9	77.1
Other collective farm workers	18.8	21.3	78.7
Pensioners	35.6	21.9	78.1
Housewives	20.2	0.0	100.0
Others	5.2	25.0	75.0

Source: V. G. Pivovarov and A. S. Seregin, "Opyt primeneniya kolichestvennykh metodov k issledovaniyu religioznykh yavlenii," in A. F. Okulov et al. (eds.), *Voprosy nauchnogo ateizma*, Vol. 5 (Moscow, 1968), p. 78.

depending on his experience, needs, and perceptions. As a Soviet philosopher has written,

Belief in God has different meanings and values for different believers. For many . . . religion is not the decisive element in their life. . . . Quite often it is merely a traditional custom learned in the family, where the dying faith still clings. For others, religious beliefs represent a world of special experiences and feelings that . . . is to some extent separate from the milieu in which this person lives and works. And sometimes this world is opposed to the social relations, requirements, criteria, procedures and principles of our society. In the latter case, we are dealing with fanatics, with clerics of the most reactionary stripe.⁶¹

Those of different age groups seek and find in religion the answers to different kinds of questions. Elderly people are particularly concerned about death and "life beyond the grave." Middle-aged people are more interested in problems of morality, while young people appear to be attracted primarily by the beauty of religious rituals. Education also makes a difference: people of little education, particularly in rural areas, are more apt to believe in miracles, make offerings and sacrifices, and even pray for rain or a good harvest.⁶² Finally, the character and intensity of religious belief vary from denomination to denomination. Religious views tend to be far less intense and relevant to members of the Russian Orthodox Church than to members of the various Protestant denominations.⁶³

Religion in a Socialist Society

Marxists view religion as the product of a society beset with antagonisms and contradictions. Why, then, should a country whose means of production were nationalized in 1917, which "built socialism" in 1936, and which claims to be virtually free of internal contradictions have more than a handful of religious citizens?

The Soviets acknowledge that the "social and economic roots" of religion were long ago destroyed. Industrialization, the collectivization of agriculture, the nationalization of land, and the elimination of "exploiting classes" are said to have severely undermined belief in God.⁶⁴ But the early expectation that religion would disappear quickly without the proper economic base to sustain it has not been fulfilled. Investigators now understand that, in addition to economic factors, emotional, social, and political phenomena contribute to the maintenance of religious beliefs and practices in the USSR.

According to the official view, Soviet society has inherited religion along with a number of other views, customs, and traditions that were originally

formed in pre-Revolutionary Russia. Religion, thus, is not an expression or a product of Soviet conditions, but rather a carry-over from Tsarist times. The argument, while imaginative, is not very plausible.

In general, Soviet philosophy argues that material being is primary; individual consciousness merely reflects objective reality. But changes that occur in social life are not immediately reflected in human consciousness, and, for an indefinite period of time, people's minds may not accurately reflect the changed environment. Thus, religious beliefs, nourished by the political, economic, and social conditions that prevailed in pre-1917 Russia, linger on in people's minds today, even though conditions are no longer "appropriate" for the development of religion. In the Soviet phrase, religion is a "survival of the past" (*perezhitok proshlogo*), for which there is no longer any social base.⁶⁵

This line of reasoning presents two basic problems. First, it does not come to grips with the existence of religious views among citizens born long after the Revolution, who have had no exposure whatsoever to the old order. To be sure, Marx did argue that the post-Revolutionary period would be "stamped with the birthmarks of the old society from whose womb it emerges."⁶⁶ But Soviet ideologists have extended the notion of "birthmarks of the old society" or "vestiges of the past" to explain the behavior of second- and even third-generation citizens of the USSR.

Second, and probably more important, the explanation that consciousness lags behind reality is a prescription for passivity. As one Soviet ideologist has argued, "This explanation cannot satisfy us today if we wish to have an active influence on social processes."⁶⁷ That is to say, analysis of defects in the social order must point out how such defects are to be eradicated. The notion that religion represents a vestige of the past, while placing the "blame" on non-Soviet causes, in no way helps the authorities to deal with the problem.

What Is to Be Done?

If religion is a survival of the past in people's minds, then the struggle with religion becomes "a struggle to cleanse the minds of a section of the people of wrong notions about reality, i.e., an ideological struggle."⁶⁸ If social consciousness lags behind social reality, the Party must take steps to compensate for this. Although the decline and fall of religion are viewed as inevitable and irreversible, the Party seeks to accelerate the pace of its demise. If man cannot alter the laws of nature or social development, he can act as an agent of the historical process, and thus bring about the results that the laws of history themselves require.

The very fact that religious belief has been partially eroded may make the task of fully eradicating it more difficult. It is sometimes argued, much as Stalin did with respect to other class enemies, that the religious “enemy” becomes more and more resourceful with each victory on the atheist front. “Religion is on the run,” a *Komsomolskaya pravda* editorial argued, “but its adherents try all the harder to maintain their influence on young minds.”⁶⁹

Soviet ideologists have tended to blur the differences among various religions, regarding all as equally undesirable. Lenin himself argued that “Every religious idea, every idea of God, even flirting with the idea of God, is unutterable vileness . . . vileness of the most dangerous kind, ‘contagion’ of the most abominable kind.”⁷⁰ Official practice since the Revolution has been, by and large, faithful to this point of view. The Party has been almost uniformly antireligious in the broadest sense—equally critical of all churches and equally ready to ignore distinctions among them. (See Appendix 1.)

Some groups have been treated differently, however. The Jews, the Catholics, and some of the smaller Protestant sects have been subjected to harsher treatment than other denominations. They have been singled out for special treatment because their doctrines are thought to threaten the security of the Soviet state, because they reside in strategic areas of the country, or because their practices are considered dangerous to people’s health.

The Jews have been subjected to a wide range of discriminatory practices in economic and cultural affairs, and they have suffered more than any other group from Soviet restrictions on emigration.⁷¹ (In the recent past, of course, they have *benefited* more than any other groups from the regime’s liberalized emigration policy.) Anti-Jewish propaganda has also tended to be more aggressive and crude than propaganda directed at other faiths. Trofim Kichko’s *Judaism Without Embellishment* (1963), for example, declared that “Jewish ideology is impregnated . . . with greed, love of money, and the spirit of egoism,” while Jewish religious leaders were alleged to engage in “speculation . . . , thievery, deception and debauchery.”⁷² Another publication refers to the Jewish God as a “blood-sucker” and racist, and says that Judaism preaches “intolerance and the bloody extermination of people of other faiths”⁷³

The Catholic Church, too, has suffered heavily. The Catholics, who have shared most of the tribulations of Russian Orthodoxy, have never been allowed to benefit from the 1943 church-state concordat. Because so many Soviet Catholics live in the Western border areas, the regime has tended to view them as a security risk. Soviet nationalities policy has reinforced this

bias, because almost all Catholics belong to one or another of the national minorities and are thus assumed to be threatened by “bourgeois nationalism.”⁷⁴

Moreover, Jewish, Catholic, Lutheran, and several other religious groups have not been allowed to establish any kind of central administrative apparatus, while the Orthodox, Baptists, and other faiths have been permitted to do so. Jehovah’s Witnesses, Pentecostals, and dissident Baptists and Russian Orthodox (i.e., people who have broken with the officially recognized churches) have been treated especially harshly. They object to many Party and government programs and often refuse to cooperate with the authorities. As a result, they have been subjected to harassment and even persecution.⁷⁵ The Russian Orthodox Church, too, has generally been treated badly. While it has at times “benefited from special tolerance,” it has more often been “singled out for special martyrdom.”⁷⁶

On the other hand, the authorities have dealt with certain denominations in a relatively mild manner. The Old Believers, for example, “who worship God quietly and unobtrusively . . . and (who) do not go out to make new converts,” have been treated leniently.⁷⁷ Similarly, Islam has fared relatively well, especially in the period since Stalin’s death. Soviet foreign policy objectives in the Middle East have overridden concern about the Moslems as a religious and/or nationality problem. The regime apparently views Islam as a bridge to the Middle East, rather than simply as a barrier to domestic socioeconomic change.⁷⁸

In its attempt to eradicate religion, the regime has utilized a variety of weapons:

1. It has sought to provide a social and economic environment that guarantees all citizens equal opportunity to develop—under the Party’s close supervision and control. “Religion will disappear,” Marx once said, “to the extent that socialism develops. It must disappear as a result of social development”⁷⁹ Today, it is said, people’s value systems have been refashioned “by the whole tenor of Soviet life . . . by the revolutionary transformation of society.”⁸⁰ The Party has eliminated the most blatant forms of social and economic inequality. It has changed the role of women in family and society, eliminated illiteracy, and expanded all levels of education. Much effort has gone into building schools and clubs, raising rural standards of living, and providing for the leisure time of the population. The authorities have sought to insulate and mobilize the population, to draw all citizens into officially sponsored social and political activities, and to control the people’s access to foreign media, foreign citizens, and Soviet citizens anxious to win religious converts.

2. The government has harassed, intimidated, threatened, and punished clergymen and ordinary believers. It has erected an elaborate network of legal and quasi-legal barriers to the expression of religious views. Throughout most of Soviet history, the authorities have interpreted these laws very strictly, and at certain times they have ignored the law and resorted instead to naked force or terror.

3. It has initiated a program of scholarly research into the causes and character of religious belief in the USSR. These investigations are designed to achieve an instrumental aim. As one of the leading Soviet authorities has put it, "Religious prejudices can be overcome only if we know the concrete forms in which religion exists today, the [present] state of religious consciousness, and the tendencies toward change in it."⁸¹ An atheist propagandist from Tadzhikistan has made the same point more vividly: "Here, as in war, before advancing, it is essential to study the enemy defenses well. Only then can one count on a positive result."⁸² The argument is clear: knowledge of contemporary religious beliefs and practices will help the Party to subvert them. The establishment of special research institutions, the training of social scientists, and the carrying out of field research all contribute to this goal.

4. The authorities have devised a set of secular holidays and ceremonies, to compete with and supplant religious holy days and rituals. These are designed primarily to satisfy the citizen's desire to mark significant events in his or her life, but without resort to religious rites.

5. Finally, these programs have been supplemented by a vast propaganda effort aimed at refashioning human consciousness, "improving" the belief systems of Soviet citizens, raising their ideological level to such a degree that religion will not merely become superfluous but will actually disappear.

At the outset of Soviet rule, the Bolsheviks apparently expected their radical socioeconomic changes to produce immediate and radical changes in the human personality. As Robert C. Tucker has pointed out, they sought "not to remold man by a long process of training into a new kind of being, but simply to liberate him to become for the first time himself" ⁸³ Even now, the Soviet authorities regard social and economic development as the foundation on which changes in "human nature" can be erected. But "building socialism" or "building communism," eradicating the differences between mental and physical labor or between city and countryside, raising educational and cultural levels or the standard of living will not automatically cause religion to die out. Atheist propaganda is

needed. Religion cannot be abolished; nor will it wither away. It must be systematically attacked to be destroyed.

Unresolved Problems

The Party's approach to religion has undergone frequent and sometimes radical change during the half century of Soviet power. Periods of repression have alternated with periods of relaxation as the Party's priorities have shifted and shifted again. What is more, official pronouncements on religion tend to be ambiguous, and policies that are publicly condemned are sometimes secretly encouraged. As a consequence, neither church officials nor ordinary believers can ever be quite certain of official policy, and they are likely to have reservations about expressing their religious convictions.

From the Party's point of view, this circumstance is of course welcome. But if ambiguously worded pronouncements and constantly changing priorities have perplexed the religious community, they have had the same effect on atheist cadres. Indeed, there is a great deal of confusion among Party officials, including those responsible for ideological matters, on the very nature and purpose of atheist work. There is substantial disagreement on the most basic of questions: (1) Should the Party make an active effort to combat religious views and practices? (2) How much emphasis should be placed on persuasive techniques, and how much on coercion? (3) At which individuals or groups should official efforts be aimed? (4) What should be the content of atheist messages? We will deal with each question in turn.

1. Official policy, affirmed in countless directives and commentaries, demands a vigorous struggle against religion. Nonetheless, the view that religion need not be, or ought not to be, combated is apparently widespread. Some atheists point to the Constitutional guarantee of "freedom of conscience" and argue that any interference with people's personal beliefs is unwarranted and illegal.⁸⁴ Others feel that a policy of "militant atheism" is no longer appropriate, although it was necessary during the early years of the Revolution, "when a cruel and desperate armed struggle with the old was in progress . . . , when the church put at the service of the Counterrevolution the entire power of its organization, the entire influence of its ideology over the untutored masses."⁸⁵ Today, they argue, religion does not represent a social danger, and legal restraints placed on the church are sufficient to prevent the reemergence of a problem. Moreover, they say, continued social and economic progress guarantees that religious beliefs and practices will disappear eventually.⁸⁶

2. While policy toward the church has always involved a mixture of

persuasion, coercion, and the threat of coercion, the period since Stalin's death has been marked by increased reliance on propaganda and education measures. As Nancy Heer has pointed out, "the rejection of terror as the central instrument of control requires a much heavier reliance upon internalized or subjective norms."⁸⁷ At the same time, however, the laws regulating religious practices continue to be harsh, and there have been authoritative demands that they be enforced even more strictly in the future.⁸⁸ Extralegal and illegal measures have been used to close churches and intimidate believers. During the Khrushchev period, for example, the Russian Orthodox, Baptists, Lutherans, and Catholics lost approximately half of their churches. The Jewish faith was treated even more harshly: synagogues were reduced in number from some four hundred to less than one hundred.⁸⁹

Although the massive campaign of closing churches ceased with the fall of Khrushchev, extremist behavior and demands can still be encountered. "Why are there churches in every city?", one atheist has asked. "Close them, all of them!"⁹⁰ While such demands are publicly rejected, churches are still closed forcibly. Instances of official interference with religious ceremonies and pilgrimages as well as the expulsion of believers from universities or from their jobs are also reported in the Soviet press. Still other incidents have been revealed by underground sources.⁹¹

3. Propaganda specialists disagree about how and where to concentrate their efforts. Their disagreements center around three related issues: (a) whether to try to convert believers to atheism, or to reinforce the convictions of atheists, (b) whether to direct antireligious efforts toward youngsters or toward older people, and (c) whether to work with ordinary believers or with clergymen and other church officials.

a. Some argue that atheist efforts ought to be directed exclusively to undermining the religious views of believers, while others contend that nourishing the doubts of agnostics is likelier to bring success. Still others, aware of the substantial difficulties involved in both of these approaches, suggest that atheist work focus on reinforcing the convictions of atheists. They point out that believers and agnostics are highly resistant to atheist propaganda, while people who claim to be atheists are not always worthy of this designation. Indeed, they say, a person who does not have sufficiently strong atheist convictions "can prove to be defenseless in his first serious clash with religion . . . when faced with the craftily woven conclusions of experienced missionaries and 'fishers of souls.'" ⁹²

b. Those who advocate that atheist efforts be directed primarily at

children argue that it is easier to socialize young people than to resocialize adults. Moreover, they say, older people who believe in God are not going to change their views and should therefore be left alone. (See Chapter 2.) According to the opposing view, it is precisely the older believers who keep religion alive: they take their grandchildren to church, insist that they be baptized, and teach them the Gospels.⁹³

c. Propaganda specialists who try to persuade clergymen to give up their religious views do so for two reasons. First, they argue that without constant inspiration and reinforcement from church leaders, the typical congregation will dissolve. Second, they feel that clerical apostasy will be a direct and powerful inducement to other believers to question their religious beliefs. Other propagandists argue that, despite the obvious and continuing threat that clergymen represent, they are hardly likely to succumb to the blandishments of professional atheists. They therefore recommend working with ordinary believers, whom they regard as less sophisticated and more susceptible of conversion.⁹⁴

4. Questions of propaganda content and style are also debated vigorously. Some propagandists choose only to criticize religious views and practices, while others seek to emphasize the alleged virtues of “scientific atheism” or “communist morality.” Similarly, some consider the dissemination of scientific information sufficient to undermine religion, while others think that questions of morality or aesthetics deserve greater attention. Finally, some think that criticism of religion should be phrased in intellectual, if direct, language, while others believe that blunt, even crude, denunciations will prove more effective.

Any method of dealing with any of these questions has certain advantages and disadvantages. But because there have been virtually no serious studies of the strengths and weaknesses of the various approaches, it has been impossible to choose rationally from among them. The result has been to dissipate much official energy in futile or even counterproductive activities.

The presence of problems, even problems as basic and far-reaching as those we have noted, has not deterred the Soviet authorities from attacking religion. Official uncertainty has not meant official timidity.

Concluding Note

Soviet ideologists have traditionally distinguished between propaganda and agitation. In theory, propaganda involves the dissemination of complex ideas to a small audience, while agitation entails the communication of a

small number of relatively simple notions to the masses. In Plekhanov's words: "A propagandist presents many ideas to one or a few persons; an agitator presents only one or a few ideas, but he presents them to a mass of people."⁹⁵ In recent years, however, these terms have lost much of their original distinctiveness, and they often are used interchangeably. Moreover, a new term, "political information (*politinformatsiya*)," has come into use. The political information specialist (*politinformator*) is essentially an agitator who performs his task in a more sophisticated manner, taking into consideration the fact that people are now more educated.⁹⁶

For the purpose of this study, differences among these forms of political communication are not important. All involve efforts to win acceptance for official policies and the official ideology. They use the same instruments—the mass media, lectures, discussions, consultations, etc.—and all are aimed at stimulating the masses to implement the Party's program. The Party, as William Johnson has observed, "utilizes every possible means to create and nurture the political attitudes it deems desirable."⁹⁷ Our interest is in the communication of political messages. Whether this communication is called propaganda, agitation, political information, indoctrination, or education is, for our purposes, of no consequence.