

**ZEV KATZ**

## **Sociology of Religion in the USSR: A Beginning?**

KONKRETNO-SOTSIOLOGICHESKOE IZUCHENIE SOSTOIANIIA RELIGIOZности I OPыTA ATEISTICHESKOGO VOSPITANIIA. Edited by *I. D. Pantshkava*. Moscow: Izdatel'stvo Moskovskogo universiteta, 1969. 282 pp. 1.08 rubles.

CHELOVEK, OBSHCHESTVO, RELIGIIA. Edited by *A. S. Ivanov et al.* Moscow: "Mysl'," 1968. 224 pp. 43 kopeks.

KONKRETNYE ISSLEDOVANIIA SOVREMENNYKH RELIGIOZNYKH VEROVANIIA. Edited by *A. Klibanov*. Moscow: "Nauka," 1967. 244 pp. 78 kopeks.

"What is the meaning of life?" "What is happiness?" "What is morality?" Does Marxism-Leninism have a satisfactory answer to these everlasting questions of man? The official Soviet doctrine certainly has answers to questions such as what religion is and what its cause and function in society are. But then, why does it still exist in Soviet society, more than half a century after the Revolution—when the USSR is supposedly moving from socialism (already accomplished) to communism (to be achieved soon)? Moreover, why does it also exist among young people? And why does it even undergo, from time to time, periods of revival?

It should not be surprising, then, that the Soviets have begun a relatively widespread program of sociological surveys of religion. They have also begun to study Western thought and sociology of religion. The beginning of some kind of sociology of religion of the USSR is, of course, a part of the general development of sociology in the Soviet Union in general. And like sociology at large, it should be viewed with caution. Naturally its methods, concepts, and basic motivation are rather far from scientific objectivity. Nevertheless, for the first time, these studies provide a body of information and an insight into the state of religion which was hitherto totally unavailable. The reasons for this development may be somewhat puzzling. True, there are some signs of a partial revival of religious beliefs and of rather widespread curiosity about religious ceremonies, churches, icons, and so forth. But these do not amount to any serious threat to the party's position in power. Perhaps the following discussion will provide some clues.

Since no brief review can provide a full treatment of the work in sociology of religion in the USSR, we shall examine three books, all of them collections of articles, mainly based on field studies. The one edited by *A. Klibanov*,

perhaps the best known among Soviet specialists in the field, is based upon papers of a conference held at the Institute for Scientific Atheism of the Academy of Social Sciences at the CPSU Central Committee. Klibanov himself reported on a series of surveys beginning in 1959 by the Institute of History of the USSR Academy of Sciences, mainly in the heartland of Russia itself. Another book, edited by A. Ivanov, is a collection of papers by graduate students at the Institute of Scientific Atheism. It includes a detailed study of one religious community comprising three villages in the Gorky region, a survey of religiosity in a village in the Brest region (formerly Polish), and even a study of "Islam and National Culture." The third book is a publication of the Moscow University Department of History and Theory of Atheism, edited by I. D. Pantskhava. It gives details about a number of surveys—in 1962 in the Orenburg region, in 1963 in Krasnodar Territory and the Karaganda region in Kazakhstan, in 1965 in the Orël region, and in 1966 in the Lenin district of Moscow. Additional teams worked in Central Asia, the Baltic republics, the Western Ukraine, Western Belorussia, and the Mari ASSR. The three books have a number of features in common and reflect the present stage of research on religion in the USSR.

There is no beating around the bush about the purposes of these studies. As Professor Pantskhava puts it: "One of the main tasks which the Party put before the social scientists . . . is the struggle against hostile ideology. . . . Religious prejudices can be overcome only on condition of knowledge of those concrete forms in which religion exists today, of the [present] state of religious consciousness, and of the tendencies of change in it. Sociological studies which developed lately in our country contribute to the acquisition of such knowledge" (pp. 3–4).

Obviously the surveys were conducted by "militant atheists," party and Komsomol officials who are mostly urban strangers amidst the usually traditional and secluded rural dwellers. Klibanov explains: "The believer knew what our purpose was in coming to him; and if he inquired whether we were believers or nonbelievers, he received a straight answer. . . . We never agreed with the religious prejudices of those we interviewed. . . ." Nevertheless, he continues: "The researcher should remember his social responsibility . . . , he should work in a way not to cause a trauma even to one believer. . . . The researchers' tact and knowledge may successfully be counterposed to *the lack of trust and guarded attitude of the believer*" (pp. 7–8, emphasis added).

When reading these studies, one is struck by the evidence of the impact of the religious believers upon their atheist interviewers. The confrontation between the self-assured, educated, and party-indoctrinated big-city urbanites and the supposedly backward, uneducated, and primitive rural believers has evidently taken a somewhat different course than originally expected. One can

imagine with what attitudes the former prepared to meet the latter at the beginning of their field study. Yet despite self-censorship by the researchers (it is certainly unlikely that a person trained for a career in the field of atheism would admit to having been influenced by believers), and despite censorship by the institutes and publishing houses, the impact is quite clearly discernible in the pages of these publications. Some extremely unusual things occur, which are often incongruous with official doctrine and teaching on these matters. Religion, the church, the clergy, religious ritual and behavior of the believers—usually depicted in the most unflattering way in Soviet atheist propaganda—sometimes appear here in a rather different light, suggesting a kind of nostalgia and an intimation that something of immense value has been lost, perhaps irretrievably.

By the way, the surveys also attempted to gather data about “non-registered religious groups and communities” (forbidden by law in the USSR) and about their membership, the income of believers and their occupations, and the quality of schools and cultural facilities in the area. A special questionnaire distributed among listeners to atheist propaganda lectures tried to gauge the effectiveness of antireligious propaganda. Usually it was given a rather poor rating (Pantskhava, ed., pp. 9–10).

For the first time in many years, the Soviet researchers seem to grapple more seriously with the problem, “Why religion?” Hitherto it was customary to dismiss this phenomenon as a “remnant of capitalism.” In the sixth decade after the Revolution and toward the end of the second decade after Stalin, this no longer seems satisfactory. For example, T. G. Gaidurova argues that “the explanation of the existence of religion by [quoting a Marxist tenet that] the social consciousness lags behind social conditions” is not entirely valid. “The question remains,” she continues, “why does this religious consciousness . . . , this bourgeois influence . . . , remain precisely among a certain part of the population in particular.” Neither can one explain this away by “the shortcomings of atheist education alone . . . , if only because this is in contradiction to the teachings of Marx . . . , who thought that religious beliefs should be found as resulting from the real and given social relationships.” Gaidurova proceeds then to answer her own question by pointing out, “In general, religion appeared as a result of limited relations of people with each other and with nature. Socialism brought an end to it. But religious belief exists even today. It is proper, therefore, to pose the question: do not remnants of the old limitations remain in some form even under socialism?” (Pantskhava, ed., pp. 15–16). There seems to be an obvious contradiction in this passage (“socialism brought an end . . . some remnants remain”), but the question posed is no doubt a serious one.

Having gone out to find "limitations" in the social conditions as the root for the existence of religion, the Soviet sociologists find plenty when characterizing the basic features of the main body of the believers.

It appears from the surveys that a high percentage of believers do not work for the public economy—64 to 70 percent among three sects in the Orenburg province, 35 percent in a sample in Orël province, and so on. The believers are often poor, and they apparently find help mostly among "the brothers" and from the priests. Many are independently employed in farming and crafts. Those of the believers who do work are usually unskilled or semi-skilled. In the village of Gnilets (Orël province) 46 percent of the nonbelievers are skilled but only 4.3 percent of the believers. They usually work in small or medium, and relatively backward, enterprises. Work under such conditions "does not give creative joy." Believers in the Orenburg province were found to be mostly seamstresses, hall porters, cleaners, shoemakers, nurses, and more rarely mechanics and welders. The believers are predominantly women, mostly of the older generation; many are pensioners and dependents. They are overwhelmingly rural, and therefore they suffer from deprivation of cultural facilities. When such facilities are made available, religiosity is supposedly diminishing ("Before we had a radio we prayed before dinner; now—all are busy listening, who has time for prayers"). This kind of evidence about the believers seems to be sufficient for Gaidurova to conclude that in Soviet society "remnants of limited social relations still exist, [and thus] it is possible to understand why the religious preachers have an impact upon precisely this part of the Soviet people." In other words, all that was said above looks very much like the old description of alienation in society. Soviet conditions have not eliminated major groups of entirely alienated people, who are the social basis of religion in the USSR. So, is the phenomenon fully explained?

It is one of the merits of present-day sociological study of religion in the USSR—even when done by party stalwarts—that it goes beyond the usual stereotypes. When investigating the causes and the content of the religious experience, it suddenly discovers a whole new world of considerations which were hitherto usually taboo. As a result, the problem itself and the explanation of it do not seem as simple as might have appeared.

The studies confirm the well-known and documented view that the majority of the believers are rural, older, women, unskilled, poor, and not highly educated. However, many of the surveys offer abundant evidence that there is great interest in religion among the young, the bright, and even the well educated—often also for interesting reasons. A young woman (twenty-eight) explained that while studying at a technical school she wanted to enter the Komsomol, because its rules demanded decent behavior from its members.

Later she was so shocked by the behavior of the girl members that she refrained from entering the Komsomol and turned to religion. In the Krasnodar area, two women believers with higher education (one a former teacher, the other a former wife of a party member) explained that they had found consolation in faith after personal tragedies. A thirty-nine-year-old woman explained, "After a church assembly I felt such joy as words cannot express." And another believer testified, "Each prayer meeting is for me a new joyful experience. I like everything there. And such feelings arise in me that I am unable to describe them" (Klibanov, ed., pp. 101–3).

It turns out that the believers come to religion also for important spiritual, moral, and social reasons: "The prayer meetings are nothing else but visiting each other, having tea together, talking to friends, that is, they are a suitable form of entertainment." The old village people formulated it succinctly: *Dlia molodykh klub—a dlia nas tserkov* ("As the club is for the young—so is the church for us," Pantskhava, ed., p. 20). Defending their belief, some religious people argued paradoxically that "the ideals of communism and religion are close to each other." This kind of argument must have caused some concern among the Communist interviewers. The believers find in religion satisfaction of their aesthetic needs (*V tserkvi krasota . . . khor poet*—"It is beautiful in the church . . . the choir is singing," p. 23) and of their psychological needs—the need for comradeship and for attention ("to get advice, [to have] a feeling of being somebody in society," p. 24). They find in religion and in the church a source of pride, a focus of local patriotism (*Nas po tserkvi uznaiut*—"Our village is renowned because of our church"). Moreover, a closer examination shows that the argument about the lack of cultural facilities is only partly valid; generally the believers choose not to attend cultural activities, even when they are available (only 13 percent of the believers attended the cinema and only 16 percent read newspapers, compared to 72 and 87 percent respectively among the nonbelievers, p. 29).

Many participate in religious ceremonies for family reasons and because of an inner need for beautiful, traditional rituals. Evidence for this is widespread in many of the surveys about religion, as well as in the Soviet press. For example, Liza Semënova was recently expelled from the Komsomol and from a teachers' college because of open participation in religious ceremonials (*Komsomolskaia pravda*, January 6, 1971). Religion also seems to be clearly answering a need of those who search for national roots and identity (Russians, Ukrainians, Muslims, Jews, and so on). This is rather bluntly expressed in the paper on "Islam and National Culture" by S. Zharmukhanbetov. He argues, for example, against "pan-Islamism," which bases itself on "the theory identifying [the concept of] nation with that of religion," and calls for "the unification of all Muslim persons and peoples into a uniform Muslim nation." Rather

frankly he adds that "this idea is still alive among the believers and among part of the nonbelievers." Many "see in everything that relates to Islam a symbol of an independent national character" and regard abandoning Islamic traditions as a sign of "disrupting the national personality" (Ivanov, ed., pp. 94–103).

Above all, religion appears to have a fascination for many, including those who are highly educated and skilled, because it deals with the ultimate question of the human condition—the meaning of life, death, and the universe, the moral principles of man. As Soviet society enters the stage of middle industrial development, when rural society is entirely disrupted and urban society atomized, and as the traditional Russian family disappears and new generations rise in the Soviet Communist conditions, evidence is growing about the alienated, lonely, and confused groups in town and country. The need for some spiritual teaching that would address itself to the ultimate questions of human life seems also to be growing in Soviet society. After the disclosures about Stalinism, in the present petrified ideological-spiritual atmosphere, Soviet Marxism seems unable to provide the answer to this need for large parts of the population. Gaidurova is right: "Studying the dependence of religiosity on the conditions of life of the believers, we begin to understand better that in order to overcome religion, atheist propaganda is not sufficient" (p. 31). This indeed is the case, and the root of the problem. The questions of one of the surveys composed after talks with the believers seem to give telling evidence of that: "What is happiness? Do you believe in life after death? Can a nonbeliever be a moral person? What is the meaning of life?" The answers are always difficult—in the Soviet environment as much as anywhere else.