

Soviet Research on Religion and Atheism Since 1945

BOHDAN BOCIURKIW

The Soviet-German war led not only to the suspension of anti-religious activities in the USSR but also to an end in scholarly research on religion and atheism. Post-war developments in this area of research and academic study have been largely determined by the changing course of the Party's policy towards religion and could be divided into three stages: 1945-1954; 1954-1964; and from 1964 till the present.

During the first period (1945-1954) research facilities were restored and work in this field was resumed only gradually and to a limited degree. The Museum of the History of Religion and Atheism (Leningrad Academy of Sciences) – re-opened in 1946 – and the Institute of History of the Academy in Moscow were the main centres for this work. An important role in reactivating research and publications in this area belonged to V. D. Bonch-Bruевич (1873-1955), who headed, until his death, both the Leningrad Museum with its massive library (over 150,000 titles by 1968), manuscript and archival collections, and sector (subsequently commission) on the history of religion and atheism, established within the Academy's Institute of History in 1947. In 1950 Bonch-Bruевич initiated the publication of the Institute's yearbook series, *Voprosy istorii religii i ateizma*¹ (12 volumes from 1950 to 1964) and of a monograph series "Nauchno-ateisticheskaya biblioteka"² in the Academy's Publishing House.

Once the study of religion and atheism had been resumed in the philosophical and ethnographic institutes of the Academy, Bonch-Bruевич was appointed chairman in 1954 of a co-ordinating commission on scientific-atheist propaganda, established by the Presidium of the Academy of Sciences.

The second stage (1954-1964) opened with the July and November 1954 resolutions of the Party Central Committee, which urged a large-scale reintensification of "scientific-atheist propaganda". However, only in 1959 was a large-scale anti-religious campaign launched by the Party's ideological apparatus. This campaign continued to escalate until Khrushchev's removal in 1964. The re-opening of the "anti-religious front" brought mixed blessings to Soviet students of religion and atheism. On the one hand, their work was now given high priority and generous alloca-

tions in the Academy of Science and other scientific and academic institutions. But on the other hand, much of the work published in these years was adversely affected by the Party's increased emphasis on its immediate propaganda effects. Thus some reputable scholars were recruited to write agitational brochures or obliged to combine their efforts with those of professional propagandists. On the whole, major strides were nevertheless made during this period by Soviet students of religion, especially in their investigations of the contemporary Soviet population's religiosity – an area of special practical interest to the Party's ideological workers.

As in the previous period, most of the serious research was concentrated in the establishments of the USSR Academy of Sciences. The Leningrad Museum in 1957 started publishing the annual series *Ezhegodnik Muzeia istorii religii i ateizma*³ (7 volumes 1957-1963), carrying a valuable current bibliography of Soviet books and articles on religion and atheism. (Since 1961, a more complete bibliography – trimestral mimeographed series *Novaya sovetskaya i inostrannaya literatura po voprosam ateizma i religii*⁴ – has been published by the philosophy sector of the Academy's Fundamental Library of Social Sciences.)

In April 1959, the Presidium of the Academy adopted a resolution "On the intensification of scientific work in the realm of atheism" which led to the establishment of a Learned Council for the co-ordination of the work on atheism, within the Division of Economic, Philosophical and Legal Sciences. A sector of atheism was set up within the Institute of Philosophy (under L. N. Mitrokhin) and, subsequently, groups studying the history of the critique of religion were established in the Institutes of Ethnography and of the Peoples of the East. In the same year chairs for the history and theory of atheism were established at the universities of Kiev (under V. K. Tancher) and Moscow. In subsequent years, similar chairs were formed in the Party's Academy of Social Sciences and at the Universities of Leningrad, Lvov, Tashkent, Tbilisi as well as in other institutions of higher education. Within a few years, sectors on atheism were formed in the Academies of Sciences of the Ukraine, Belorussia and several other union republics.

At the popular propaganda level, the All-Union Society for the Dissemination of Political and Scientific Knowledge (subsequently renamed the *Znanie* Society) rapidly expanded its activities, especially after its 1957 All-Union Conference on the Questions of Scientific-Atheist Propaganda. In 1959, the Society began publishing a monthly, *Nauka i religia*,⁵ and its Ukrainian branch launched a Ukrainian-language monthly, *Voiovnnychi ateist* (since 1965 – *Liudyna i svit*),⁶ in 1961.

Several important works appeared during the 1954-1964 period, most

notably N. A. Smirnov, *Ocherki izucheniia islama v SSSR* (1954);⁷ M. M. Persits, *Otdeleniie tserkvi ot gosudarstva i shkoly ot tserkvi v SSSR*⁸ (1917-1919) (1958); A. I. Klibanov, *Reformatsionnye dvizheniia v Rossii*⁹ (1960); M. I. Shakhnovich, *Lenin i problemy ateizma*¹⁰ (1961); and *Istoria i teoria ateizma*¹¹ (1961).

The latter part of the period 1954-1964 saw a striking development: the scope and methodology of Soviet research on religion moved beyond the earlier philosophical and historical themes and approaches, to empirical sociological study of the extent, nature and changes of religiosity among the population, adaptation of individual religious groups to political and social change, processes of secularization, etc. Such "concrete sociological" studies were pioneered by A. I. Klibanov and his colleagues from the Institute of History of the Academy (see the 1959 expedition to study the state of sectarianism in the Tambov, Lipetsk, Voronezh, and Ryazan regions). Many more studies of this kind were undertaken in the following years both by *bona fide* scholars and by Party-Komsomol ideological workers, producing results of different quality and credibility.

The "enlarged meeting" of the Party's Ideological Commission, held in November 1963, at the peak of the anti-religious campaign, had a lasting effect on the organization and orientation of research in the field of religion and atheism. The Ideological Commission's resolutions ("On measures for strengthening the atheist upbringing of the population"), approved by the Central Committee in January 1964, provided for a sweeping reorganization of research in this field. An Institute of Scientific Atheism was to be formed within the Party's Academy of Social Sciences. Its tasks were: "the leadership and coordination of all scientific work in the field of atheism" including the work being done in Institutes of the Academy of Sciences of the USSR, higher institutions of learning and establishments of the Ministry of Culture of the USSR; graduate training; the organization of inter-disciplinary research; the organization of all-union scientific conferences and seminars. The Institute's learned council was to include representatives from the Academy of Science, the Ministry of Higher and Specialized Secondary Education, from the Ideological Commission and other Party institutions and *Znanie* Society. *Voprosy istorii religii i ateizma*,¹² as well as *Ezhegodnik Muzeya istorii religii i ateizma*¹³ were to be henceforth replaced by a new series, *Voprosy nauchnogo ateizma*¹⁴, to be published twice a year by the Institute. The resolutions also provided for an increase in undergraduate teaching and graduate work on "scientific atheism", and stated that new university chairs in this field should be established.

The founding of the Institute of Scientific Atheism (under A. F.

Okulov) in 1964 was followed by Khrushchev's departure from the political scene. The resulting lull in the Soviet anti-religious campaign of course influenced the implementation of the remaining resolutions of the Ideological Commission. In the last period (1964 to the present) Soviet research on religion and atheism markedly increased in volume and in overall quality. The early fears that the new Institute would submerge scholarship in propaganda activities did not materialize. While stressing contemporary aspects of religion and atheism, obviously relevant to Soviet anti-religious propaganda, the series *Voprosy nauchnogo ateizma* (12 volumes published from 1966 to 1971) has contained a number of valuable historical and sociological studies, and has continued the current bibliography previously carried by *Ezhegodnik*.¹⁵ The new journal has reflected the shift in emphasis from a preoccupation with the philosophical critique of religion and investigation into its origin and history, to the sociological and psychological dimensions of religion, from the critique of the churches and sects, to the examination of religiosity in different categories of the population. This changing orientation was given greater stimulus by a conference on "Methodology and results of the concrete research on religious beliefs" convened by the Institute in November 1964. In 1966, the Institute held a co-ordinating conference for representatives from research and academic institutions and central ideological institutions. A combined plan of research (over 400 topics), to be carried out in the Soviet Union, was devised by the Institute, and eleven problem groups (projects) were set up to deal with such themes as "The Leninist legacy and the present", "The degree and character of religiosity in the USSR", "Peculiarities of the struggle between science and religion under present conditions", "Moral progress and religion", "Religion and the nationality question", "The system of scientific-atheist education in the USSR", "Forms and methods of atheist propaganda", "Atheist education of the new generation", "History of religion and atheism", "New tendencies in religious ideology and activities of religious organizations in capitalist countries", and "Atheism and free-thinking abroad at the present stage". Individual problems were allocated to specific academic institutions, and 40 "bases" were set up by the Institute throughout the USSR to carry out "concrete sociological" field research, to verify and apply its findings and to translate them into "practical" atheist work. A number of important collective volumes appeared during the post Khrushchev period under the auspices of the Institute. They included *Stroitel'stvo kommunizma i preodolenie religioznykh perezhitkov*¹⁶ (1966) (the best available survey of the contemporary state of individual religious groups in the USSR – published jointly with the Academy's Institute of Philosophy); *Osobennosti souve-*

*mennogo religioznogo soznaniya*¹⁷ (1966); and *Konkretnye issledovaniya sovremennykh religioznykh verovaniĭ*¹⁸ (1967) (summing up the methodology, organization and results of Soviet empirical research in this field).

Probably the most valuable studies of this period emerged from the Institute of History of the Academy of Sciences. For example it produced the second and third volumes of A. I. Kliĭbanov's major study of Russian sectarianism, *Istoriya religioznogo sektantstva v Rossii*¹⁹ (1965) and *Religioznoe sektantstvo i sovremennost'*²⁰ (1969). The Museum of the History of Religion and Atheism in Leningrad brought out useful collective volumes, *Voprosy preodoleniya religioznykh perezhitkov v SSSR*²¹ (1966) and *Po etapam razvitiya ateizma v SSSR*²² (1967). Several volumes of papers by the staff and graduate students of the Moscow University chair of the history and theory of atheism (under I. D. Pantshkava) incorporated results of field research on believers conducted from 1962. The most important of these was *Konkretno-sotsiologicheskoe izuchenie sostoyaniya religioznosti i opyta ateisticheskogo vospitania* (1969)²³.

The upsurge of sociological research at Academies of Sciences and universities in several non-Russian republics produced several important studies on the religiosity of the population. The following are worth noting: the Ukrainian Academy's volume *Aktual'ni problemy ateisticheskoho vykhovannia*²⁴ (1967), the Belorussian Academy's *Prichiny sushchestvovaniia i puti preodolenia religioznykh perezhitkov*²⁵ (1965), and in particular V. A. Cherniak's study of atheism among the Alma-Ata workers, *Formirovanie nauchno-materialisticheskogo mirovozzrenia*²⁶ brought out by the Kazakh Academy of Sciences in 1969.

The post-1964 period has witnessed not only a growth in the volume and quality of historical and sociological studies of religion and atheism in the USSR, but also the assimilation by Soviet specialists of the more advanced techniques of empirical research and the "invasion" of this field by sociologists and psychologists. Symptomatic of the broadening disciplinary base of the study of religiosity was the first Soviet conference on the psychology of religion, convened in January 1969 by the Institute of Scientific Atheism. This conference brought to the surface tensions between the protagonists of "traditional" and "modern" approaches to the problem, and opened a number of ideologically-charged questions.

Looking back, one notices that the achievements of Soviet research on religion and atheism – in particular on sectarianism – are impressive but still fragmentary in their coverage, and constrained by their ideological prescriptions. Admittedly, little reputable work has been done on the post-1917 history of the Orthodox and Catholic Churches, Islam and Judaism. Psychology of religion in the USSR is still in its infancy, while the philo-

sophical study of religion remains the most dogmatic part in this field of study. The future progress of Soviet research on religion and atheism will depend on the extent to which the scholars involved, and their respective disciplines, can expand the boundaries of intellectual inquiry in the USSR. Greater contacts and intellectual exchanges of Soviet specialists in the field with their colleagues abroad would undoubtedly contribute to this end.

¹ Questions on the History of Religion and Atheism.

² The Scientific-Atheist Library.

³ Yearbook from the Museum of the History of Religion and Atheism.

⁴ New Soviet and Foreign Literature on Questions of Atheism and Religion.

⁵ Science and Religion.

⁶ Militant Atheist (since 1965, People and the World).

⁷ An Outline of the Study of Islam in the USSR.

⁸ The Separation of the Church from the State and of Schools from the Church in the USSR.

⁹ Movements of Reform in Russia.

¹⁰ Lenin and the Problem of Atheism.

¹¹ The History and Theory of Atheism.

¹² See footnote 1.

¹³ See footnote 3.

¹⁴ Questions of Scientific Atheism.

¹⁵ See footnote 3.

¹⁶ The Construction of Communism and the Overcoming of Religious Survivals.

¹⁷ Peculiarities of Contemporary Religious Consciousness.

¹⁸ Concrete Research into Contemporary Religious Beliefs.

¹⁹ The History of Religious Sectarianism in Russia.

²⁰ Religious Sectarianism and the Present.

²¹ Questions on the Overcoming of Religious Survivals in the USSR.

²² Stages in the Development of Atheism in the USSR.

²³ A Concrete Sociological Study of Religiosity and an Experiment in Atheist Education.

²⁴ Present Problems of Atheist Education.

²⁵ Causes for the Existence of and Ways of Overcoming Religious Survivals.

²⁶ The Formation of a Scientific Materialist Worldview.

THE PRESENT SITUATION
OF THE BAPTIST CHURCH IN ROMANIA

Joseph Ton is a Romanian Baptist teacher who has written an authoritative paper on the Baptist Church in his country. The full text of this paper is available in pamphlet form from CSRC. Single copies 15p; 10 or more @ 10p per copy.