

# Editorial

Scholarly analysis of religion and communism has become a growth industry. Our annual listings show that the number of theses on the subject has multiplied (pp. 275-81), as has the quantity of books, and articles. We hope that Keston College and *RCL* have made some contribution to this development. Yet the question remains, how much do we really know about religion in the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe, let alone in other Marxist dominated states?

Certainly some areas have been treated adequately in the literature of the last two decades, and this despite the limitations placed upon those seeking access to primary sources. The history and contemporary life of the Polish Catholic and Russian Orthodox churches are cases that spring to mind. A number of studies are devoted to the varying degrees of abuse of religious rights in the Soviet bloc countries. Indeed, for better or worse, the primary impulse for many of those entering the field has been concern for the rights of believers. Other studies concentrate on church-state relations, examining the strategies devised by political authorities to control (or repress) religious groups, and the responses of those groups to pressure from above. Yet most of these works focus on specific groups or denominations, and surprisingly few monographs analyse the religious question as a whole in individual countries.

A more substantial need seems to be the development of an adequate sociology of religion. We now know something about religious policy 'at the top' — if not about how that policy is formed — but very little of the ordinary believers, the nature of their beliefs, and the social role of religion. Much of what is written is based upon contact, between one set of intellectuals (in the West) and their counterparts in the East. It is these sources who speak of 'religious revival' amongst young people. Yet, as our Hungarian contributors caution (pp. 209-29), these impressionistic concepts often correspond very loosely to the real situation. One cannot deny the resurgence of interest in religious subjects in the USSR, for example, but little empirical work has been carried out into its extent and nature. It is a complex task in the freest of societies to unravel the web of motivations bringing people into religious institutions, but it must be attempted if we are to understand the role of religion in socialist states.

In most of these countries the possibility of a truly adequate sociology of religion has been lacking for many years. Christel Lane and William Fletcher made valiant attempts using the work of Soviet

scholars, but even the best of these was limited by the various political constraints placed upon sociologists in the USSR (and indeed, in many of the East European countries). Many of the surveys were carried out under the auspices of ideological institutions committed (at least on paper) to the eventual elimination of religion, and the fear of negative consequences, made explicit in Archbishop Kirill's article (pp. 269-74), led many survey respondents to hide their beliefs. Although this reticence has virtually disappeared in Hungary and subsided in a number of Soviet bloc states, its legacy seems likely to persist for some years.

Another issue for further exploration is the relationship between secularisation and modernisation. Mass church closures in socialist countries have been the direct result of state intervention and largely carried out against the will of believers, yet it should not be forgotten that in most of the industrialised world churches have been closing down over the last 50 years or so. If modernisation has had a similar effect in the eastern bloc, demands for the restoration of the number of churches which existed before the communist takeovers would be unrealistic. Or it may be the case, as suggested in Pomian-Srzednicki's study of Poland, that enforced anti-religion has actually slowed down or even reversed secularisation processes.

Finally, there is a need for students of religious policy to integrate their studies more thoroughly into the wider analysis of socialist states. Much of the writing on religion appears to ignore recent scholarly discussions about the utility of the concept of 'totalitarianism' or the place of 'ideology' in the formation of policy. All too often it is assumed that utopian and 'totalist' aspirations are the driving force behind anti-religious policies, but surely the value of such assumptions should be questioned in the light of strategies which appear unlikely to bring about the 'withering away' of religion in centuries, let alone decades. This is not to argue for an uncritical acceptance of 'revisionist' analysis but rather to plead for a rather more critical approach to the study of religion.

It is deliberate that this editorial raises more questions than it answers. Many of the questions probably cannot be answered. Nonetheless, the time has come to set a new intellectual agenda, using the changes currently sweeping much of central and eastern Europe — and who knows how shortlived they will be — to deepen our knowledge and understanding of religion and its place in the life of communist states.