Christian Religion in the Soviet Union: a Sociological Study
by Christel Lane, George Allen & Unwin, London, 1978, 256 pp., £10.

As the title suggests, the chief purpose of this book is sociological. It attempts to apply to the Soviet Union theoretical models of religious behaviour, developed in studies of Western European and, especially, North American behaviour patterns and attitudes. This in itself is an interesting venture since few people have tried to do it, largely because of the difficulty of obtaining sufficient reliable information for the results to have any meaning. Paradoxically, the field of religion is relatively thoroughly studied by the atheist authorities in Russia, and a great deal of information has been unearthed and published in pursuit of the Soviet government's declared aim of eradicating religion: first know your enemy. It is the wealth of this information which is of most value to the non-specialist. The book is one of the most systematic presentations of Soviet research on Christianity available in English.

Dr Lane's book has two aspects. First, it attempts to compare North American and West European religious behaviour with the Soviet equivalent, and second, it attempts to describe quantitatively the state of the Christian religion in the USSR. In each chapter the author uses, in addition to more familiar western studies, material available in the USSR to answer questions about the strength of individual commitment to a church or sect, the social roots of that commitment, the reasons for its survival in a militantly atheist environment and so on. A number of extremely interesting facts emerge. With respect to Orthodoxy we learn, for instance, that about 50 per cent of children in rural areas are baptized and 50 per cent of the dead have church funerals, while in various places the proportion of couples being married in church appears to be between 1 per cent and 15 per cent. One quarter of the Orthodox hierarchy were ordained outside the USSR. Hardly any Orthodox believers, we are told, know the ten commandments. Only 6.25 per cent of Orthodox, according to one survey, defined "happiness" in religious terms, the corresponding figure for Baptists being 62.2 per cent.

It is with respect to the smaller groups that some of the most interesting information emerges. For instance, Dr Lane records the survival among sectarians of traditional practices, for example pilgrimages to certain holy places such as lakes; 92 per cent of Baptists in one survey said they only communicated with non-believing neighbours out of necessity; the attraction of the evangelical sects includes their orderly way of life in a society where most norms have been shattered by successive violent military and revolutionary unheavals; and the Jehovah's Witnesses have an extraordinarily strong link with the group's Brooklyn headquarters.

Dr Lane's main purpose, however, is to test sociological models and confirm or refute a particular "typology of religious collectivities". Part of the

predisposition for this work is to have a relatively value-free approach and scientific language. This does not altogether work in this case since the author's values come through all the same. Churches "cater for" their adherents, some people require "a minimum of religious need satisfaction", the survival of Orthodox "religiosity" can be explained by considering what "cultural and/or psychological rewards are gained by Orthodox Christians". "All religions, it is generally recognized, provide for a variety of psychological needs and therefore may have therapeutic value". These statements reveal the problem of trying to study in value-free quantitative terms what is an essentially qualitative and value-based aspect of human life. A quantitative approach immediately excludes the pride of any church, its saints and martyrs who are a statistically insignificant aberration. Dissidents are dismissed explicitly as "a small and selective sample". "Social disillusionment" is assumed to underlie many of the phenomena about which Dr Lane writes, without any reference to the question of why (even if one assumes this to be a basic force) disillusionment should be expressed through religion and not through drunkenness, hooliganism or any other channel.

It seems questionable, particularly in the light of the evidence she herself uses, to describe Soviet society as "militantly atheist", or as having an "industrial-developmental, socialist and militantly atheist character". These phrases describe the goals of the Soviet ruling élite, not the characteristic of that society where militant atheists are heavily outnumbered by believers and where both are outnumbered by the indifferent masses.

Perhaps the most important reservation about the value of Dr Lane's findings is that, as she says, the reliability of the data in the book depends on the soundness of the methodology of Soviet scholars. We cannot necessarily assume that the people who fill in questionnaires in the USSR are not frequently artful enough to conceal their true beliefs from the agents of a government devoted to the eradication of religion, especially since much of the important fieldwork seems to have been done by local militant atheists. Even the most "neutral" research of this type often gives a disproportionate number of responses which are sympathetic to the views of the researcher. Given Soviet conditions, this tendency must be magnified.

Despite this, however, Dr Lane's book is a mine of information on Christianity in Russia, even if the exact quantity and nature of that information is highly questionable. There is also an excellent bibliography of Soviet material on Christianity. Incidentally, readers of this journal in particular will be pleased to note the importance of the Keston College library and research facilities to this study.

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