State Atheism in the Early Soviet Union

Whatever the status of secularization theory, few societies or regimes have ever been officially a-religious or anti-religious and none has ever successfully and permanently eradicated religion from its culture. Probably the first attempt to purge a society of religion, or at least of clericalism and the influence of religious institutions, was revolutionary France in the 1790s; priests were defrocked or killed, Christian time itself in the form of the Gregorian calendar was eliminated, and churches were vandalized and put to new non-religious uses in what historian J. M. Thompson called a “de-christianizing campaign” (1962: 111). This helps explain the contemporary French practice of laïcité, but despite the revolutionaries’ best efforts religion survived and even crept back into the Republic in the form of Robespierre’s Cult of the Supreme Being and Nature.

If the hero of secularization theory is Karl Marx, with his trenchant analysis of religion as false consciousness and an opiate of the people and “sigh of the oppressed,” then the first society in the twentieth century to attempt to realize secularization theory’s predictions—or promises—was the Soviet Union, which put Marx’s dictums into practice in 1917 after the Communist Party seized control of Russia. With Lenin’s Bolsheviks in power, religion came under relentless attack as part of a much broader initiative to redesign society. The Bolshevik revolution was never a mere political movement but a plan to create a new society and a new humanity, and “From the moment they seized power the Bolsheviks felt they could not project Russia’s development along Marxist-Leninist lines without introducing drastic changes in family, church, and education,” wrote Basil Dmytryshyn (1971: 126). So, a stream of orders flowed from the new regime changing or abolishing many of Russia’s traditional institutions, which were deemed backward, repressive, or counterrevolutionary. All private property was eliminated and claimed by the government in the name of the people. Banks were confiscated,
inheritance outlawed, and all legal institutions (courts, local governments, etc.) liquidated. Ranks, hierarchies, and honors—even in education and the military—were abolished.

Outside of political-economic institutions, the two main realms of reform were kinship and gender relations and religion. Marriage and family law were drastically changed: the sexes were made legally equal, women were granted the right to divorce, children were given legal status equal to adults (whether those children were “legitimate” or not), and formerly criminal actions like abortion, adultery, bigamy, and even incest were decriminalized. Church marriage was made optional, with only civil marriage having legal standing. But this was just the beginning of the whittling away of religious authority over everyday life. In fact, as Dmytryshyn opined, “Next to the family, the Bolsheviks considered organized religion as the significant obstacle in their attempt to project Russia’s development along Marxist-Leninist lines” (127).

The Party nationalized church property when it nationalized all property. It further separated the church from the state (for instance, detaching marriage from religion, as noted above). State financial support for religion ended, and education was also stripped from the church and placed under secular control. The government took possession of birth and death records formerly held by the church. Priests who supported the enemies of the Party were executed. Even the highest officials were vulnerable: the Orthodox Patriarch was arrested in 1925 and exiled to Siberia, and his successor was arrested in 1926. As a consequence of religious resistance, the persecution intensified: in 1927 seventeen churches, thirty-four monasteries, fourteen synagogues, and nine mosques were shut down, and in 1928 another 359 churches and forty-eight monasteries were closed (129). Even more, “the Church had to compete with Communist party-approved antireligious propaganda spread through schools, press, and all other media of communication and education” (129). A League of Militant Atheists was formed in 1925 to
advance antireligious attitudes, and a newspaper called “The Atheist” kept up on onslaught against
religion. As Stalin rose to power, conditions only worsened: all Catholic priests in Moscow were arrested
and put on trial, with Archbishop Cieplak sentenced to ten years in solitary confinement and Monsignor
Constantine Budkiewicz put to death. In 1929 a law forbade any religious activities or instruction beyond
basic religious services in sanctioned church buildings, and May 1931 saw the “anti-religion five-year
plan” which stipulated that by 1937 “not a single house of prayer will be needed any longer in any
territory of the Soviet Union, and the very notion of God will be expunged as a survival of the Middle
Ages and an instrument for holding down the working masses” (quoted in Carroll 1995: 233).

So goes the official history of the early Soviet Union. However, an anthropological perspective reveals
that things were not so one-dimensional. Catherine Wanner, who combines expertise in anthropology,
history, and religious studies, asserts that in spite of all its heavy-handed tactics, “successive efforts to
purge the Soviet public sphere of religious content were compromised by competing efforts on the part
of certain groups to create alternatives to a Soviet worldview that involved evocations of the sacred and
the supernatural” (2012: 2). So a focus merely on official Communist policies does not reflect what
actually transpired on the ground in the U.S.S.R., and even if the Party succeeded in reducing the profile
of Christianity in society, “it would be a mistake to equate diminished formal religious practice with an
absence of belief and disregard for religious institutions because these two are not mutually
determinative” (6). Consequently, she recommends that the Soviet case is an opportunity to rethink
secularization, to “move beyond the view of secularism that the European historical experience offers”
and “jettison the binaries that pit ‘the secular’ against ‘religion’”:

It is perhaps more insightful to think of Soviet secularism as a historically shifting category with
its own genealogy that contributed, above all, to religious change, and indeed change that has
moved in multiple directions. Secularization, therefore, should be seen as an ongoing process
that is manifested in relaxations and intensifications of religious sentiment and expression that
in the long run yield change, rather than negation (8).
As an illustration of this argument, in the first essay in Wanner’s edited volume historian Gregory Freeze reconsiders Communist actions in the 1920s not to discover “what the center wanted to see (and wanted others to believe) but to determine how Bolshevik policies affected religious life and believers” (27). He concludes that the anti-religion efforts did not lead “to de-Christianization but to religious revival, with ubiquitous and alarming signs of religious fervor and observance” (27). The crucial error of the Communist Party—and of scholars since—was to assume that Christianity equaled church institutions; from the regime’s perspective, undermining the Orthodox Church and its authorities amounted to undermining religion. However, what Freeze finds is that, by weakening the institutional Church, the Soviets actually decentralized and popularized religion, in the literal sense of leaving it in the hands of the ordinary people. He claims that the government “inadvertently empowered…the zealous activists who, for decades under the ancient regime, had been demanding more authority for the parish community” (31). No longer contained by the priesthood, Christianity became vernacularized in a new and sometimes frightening way: “displays of piety spilled over into the public arena—most dramatically, in an epidemic of ‘miracles’ and ‘icon renewals’ that occurred outside parish churches and triggered spontaneous mass pilgrimages” (40). Ironically, in the end Soviet actions “weakened the Church but strengthened the church” (34)—that is, weakened institutions but strengthened the religiosity of ordinary people.

Also in the same volume, anthropologist Sonja Luehrmann performs the anthropological task of inspecting one specific site inside the sprawling Soviet Union, namely the Mari Autonomous Soviet Socialist Republic, along the Volga River east of Moscow. In this local context, Luehrmann contends that “the struggle against religion (imagined as a single phenomenon with a predictable set of causes and socially harmful effects) inevitably concerned religions in the plural” (272). In this multi-confessional setting, the Communists “set out to transform the centuries-old co-existence of indigenous, land-based
religions, Islam, and Christianity” where “being a Christian, Muslim, or pagan on the Middle Volga meant participating in a set of distinct, but mutually intelligible practices that were tied to community membership as much as to particular beliefs” (273).

In the period from the 1950s to the 1970s, which is the time-frame of Luehrmann’s study, the regime “restricted religious worship to registered cult buildings and prohibited religious groups from social outreach of any kind” (274), including attempts to prevent non-approved pilgrimages. But of course these policies highlight the failure of Marx’s and the Bolsheviks’ predictions of the disappearance of religion; the state had moved from eradication to regulation and restriction.

[A] mosque, church, synagogue, or temple had to refrain from carrying out educational and charitable activities, and it had to keep detailed records of rituals conducted and of its income and expenses. Although still committed to the eventual annihilation of religion through atheist propaganda, the Soviet Union began to behave more like other modern states, whose bureaucratic interfaces with religious institutions distinguished between acceptable forms of religiosity and those deemed deviant (279).

Further, different religions and religious communities seemed to require different secularizing tactics. In some cases, this meant co-opting ethnic traditions and integrating them into secular festivals and celebrations; in other cases, it meant actively ignoring local practices and replacing them with invented secular events.

Political decisions about promoting or condemning certain folk customs thus grew out of a diagnosis of the steps a group of rural dwellers needed to take in order to become full participants in Soviet modernity. Among Muslims and Christians, reviving memories of a premonotheistic past could be a way to stimulate the kind of optimistic commitment to the material world that clerical religion supposedly suppressed. Among groups where faith in spirits and deities was still a part of everyday life, the path to secularity involved attempts to disenchant the material world. In this effort, even monotheism could be treated as a helpful intermediate stage (288).

After all of this spent energy, Luehrmann concludes that efforts to destroy religion—and to separate it from ethnic identity—failed “because the meanings and functions of religion in local life eluded attempts to conceptualize them adequately, let alone eliminate them” (295). In fact, Soviet-era policies
to positively delineate and then dissolve religious and ethnic identities had the consequence of establishing “discrete religious communities with claims to dogmatic unity and distinct practices” (295)—which may be one of the paradoxical effects of secularization.

References


