

5-1984

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## Recommended Citation

Peachy, Paul (1984) "Religion in Soviet Marxist Societies: Ideology and Realpolitik," *Occasional Papers on Religion in Eastern Europe*: Vol. 4: Iss. 3, Article 2.

Available at: <http://digitalcommons.georgefox.edu/ree/vol4/iss3/2>

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## RELIGION IN SOVIET MARXIST SOCIETIES: IDEOLOGY AND REALPOLITIK\*

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Uneasiness in the United States over the fate of religion in Eastern Europe persists as a disturbing factor in international relations today. Is the practice of religion free, as spokespersons from these societies frequently assure us, or are we to lend credence rather to the stories of continuing harassments of religionists that recurrently filter westward?

Despite the increasing flow of information and the movement of persons between the United States and Eastern Europe, misinformation and even ignorance in the United States regarding these matters abound. On the one hand, religious practice in Eastern Europe is more open, widespread, and vital than many Americans, even in the churches, imagine. On the other hand, the sober fact remains: within the Soviet Marxist societal "model," "religion" remains intrinsically problematic. Relations between churches and the state are sometimes characterized as "normal," yet given the premises of the societal model, normalcy approximates the state of a cease fire without a peace treaty. Thus a simple incident may trigger renewed hostilities.

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\*This is a lightly revised version of a paper read in a meeting of the Southern Sociological Society in Atlanta, Georgia, March 31, 1971.

Logically enough, the conflict between religion and regime turns in part, or on the surface, on the issues of theism and atheism. Taken alone, however, it is difficult to see how or why this problem should lead to unrelieved hostility of the policy toward religion. In fact, Soviet policy can accommodate "theism" insofar as it entails mere metaphysics, void of social significance. The system posits two possible types of world view, namely materialism and idealism. Religion is one, but not the only, form of idealism. But, according to the theory, religion is also a form of alienation. The supposed object of religion, namely deity, is regarded as a figment of the alienated imagination. Insofar as religion, thus conceived, generates modes of behavior or action rather than those generated by the society as a "materialist" phenomenon it can be viewed according to the model as dysfunctional. In fact, only by distortion or negation can religion be reduced or restricted to "metaphysics."

A second, somewhat less ambiguous source of friction between religion<sup>1</sup> and regime in the Soviet model is their intimate association in pre-revolutionary czarist Russia. For centuries the Orthodox Church in old Russia had been integrated into the structure of czarist autocracy. The Church was feudally organized, provided legitimation for the crown, and served as tool of the Russian despots. In other East European lands Christianity had likewise been established in pre-Marxist times, though the forms of establishment varied as did the churches themselves--Orthodox, Catholic, Protestant, etc. Today, though they are constitutionally disestablished in the Soviet type Marxist societies, it is far from clear that the churches have been able to free themselves from their various "Constantinian" and/or caesaropapist legacies. Both the modalities of state intervention in religious practice and of church accommodation to such intervention are reminiscent of those legacies.

The coming of the October Revolution and the establishment of Soviet regimes in other lands, marked the end of a long era for churches. Particularly in the Russian case, the end of the monarchy and its feudal vestiges meant inevitable dislocation for the churches. Unless or until the churches possessed an identity other than symbiosis with the crown, they could only resist the revolution. Much of Soviet

history since 1917 becomes intelligible when the complexity and pathos of this displacement and transformation is comprehended. However deplorable the policies of the Soviet regime vis-a-vis religious communities, given the historic legacy on the one hand, and the premises of the regime on the other, these policies are not devoid of logic.

In a word, both religion and regime had been subverted by the symbiosis of the old order. A judgment on the caesaropapist millenium sub specie aeternitatis, it goes without saying, is not in the human province. But we can and must test the adequacy of the models which history offers as options for our own actions and policies. A variety of criteria, whether drawn from the intrinsic qualities of religion, or the empirical domain of policy, can be invoked, depending on the purpose at hand. But these cannot be further pursued here.

These two arguments, namely the past imprisonment of the churches in the feudal order and the atheistic conception of the new order, may account for much of the early hostility of the Marxist regimes toward the churches. But meanwhile the churches have been disestablished, and have trothed their loyalty to the new regimes. Christians in the society have increasingly identified with, and provide support for, the new socialist ideals. Indeed, it is possible to document from time to time the wholesome role that Christians play in alleviating difficult human situations, say, in factory or community, in the new regimes. In particular instances, improved relations between religion and regime have developed. Administrators have learned lessons, and bureaucratic routines have improved. Government departments charged with the supervision of religious affairs at times do rectify injustices perpetuated by local officials on practitioners of religion.

On the other hand, outside observers may be forgiven some doubts. Organized religion is always tempted sooner or later to accommodate to power. Is that what is now taking place? Is the integrity of churches compromised in the mode of state control treated as "normal" in the Soviet system? In any case, there is still no reason to believe that a qualitative change regarding the problem which religion poses to the Soviet Marxist regime has taken place. Indeed, we shall argue the problem lies deeper than church complicity in czarism or than Marxist

atheism. Underlying Soviet Marxist difficulties with religion is the monistic conception of social reality which the system postulates and which (see below) Russian history prefigures. Society, according to this conception, is a single determinate system, while the individual in the society is simply the "ensemble" of all his social relations. The basic energies flow from the whole to the parts, from the center to the periphery, from the top to the bottom. Lower level units receive their meaning from higher levels, without a clear telos or end of their own. To such a view of reality, if a crude metaphor is permitted, religion intrudes as does a mistress in a married man's home.

Before we develop this hypothesis more fully, we need some notion of the scope and scale of religious practise in these societies. Christianity, as already noted, is practised in several forms more extensively and openly in the Soviet Marxist societies than most people in the West imagine. Indeed, the faith may well be a more vital force in the daily life of some of these peoples than in some western countries where religion supposedly is free. In the United States some 60-65% of the population supposedly belong to a church or a synagogue. There is of course no hard count of church membership and even less so in Eastern Europe.

TABLE I

RELIGIOUS AFFILIATION OF POPULATIONS IN SOVIET MARXIST SOCIETIES\*  
In percentages, by country ranked from high to low

Country	Total Population in Millions	Orthodox	Roman Catholic	Protestant	Other	No Religion/Atheist
Rumanian Socialist Republic	20.5	85.0%	6.0%	6.5%		2.5%
Polish People's Republic	32.9		91.0	2.5		6.5
People's Republic of Hungary	10.4		65.0	25.0	4.5%	5.5
Socialist Federative Republic of Yugoslavia	20.5	40.0	32.0	0.8	12.2	15.0
Czechoslovak Socialist Republic	14.4		59.6	10.8	0.3	29.3
German Democratic Republic	17.0		8.1	59.4	1.0	31.5
People's Republic of Bulgaria	8.5	26.7	0.4	0.2	8.1	64.5
Union of Soviet Socialist Republic	24.7	13.0	1.2	0.6	14.4	70.0
People's Republic of Albania	2.1	20.7	10.3		69.0	?

Total population 368,000,000. Total Christian, all confessions ca. 135,000,000.

\*Compiled from data assembled by Giovanni Barberini in "IDOC Europe Dossier Three," Church Within Socialism, edited by Erich Weinberger (Rome: IDOC International, 1976).

It is instructive to note that according to Table I the rate of membership in the Soviet Marxist societies is as high as, or higher than, in the United States in all but three instances. Admittedly, these figures are not strictly comparable, quite apart from their dubious accuracy. Reinforced as they are by other indicators, however, these figures give some indication of the importance of religion in these societies.

What are other indicators? Statistics can be compiled on parishes, clergy, seminaries, theological students, and the like. In Albania the goal to end organized religion apparently has been realized. In the Soviet Union, though there have been periods of harshness, that goal appears nowhere in sight. In virtually all of the other countries, religions still receive--or since the revolution are receiving for the first time--some form of state subsidies. Theological faculties, paid by the state, are still part of the university system in the German Democratic Republic. Under other auspices, theological faculties are state-salaried in several other countries. In Hungary, when the Marxists assumed control, nearly thirty years ago, separate agreements with the Catholic and Protestant churches provided for a diminishing 20-year annual subsidy to the churches as indemnity for the lands taken over by the state. Today, though expired, the payments continue, and clergy sit in the parliament.

With all this, however, the importance of in- and between-country differences must be underscored. Three countries are predominantly Orthodox (Soviet Union, Rumania, Bulgaria); three Roman Catholic (Poland, Czechoslovakia, Hungary), though with significant Protestant minorities; one is predominately Protestant (German Democratic Republic); one is part Orthodox, part Catholic (Yugoslavia). Political histories have been equally diverse. The Soviet Union embraces many nationalities, and the number of Muslims in the population equals roughly the number of Christians. Virtually all of these countries include minority population groups within their territories which differ ethnically and religiously from the majority. In most cases the three

Christian traditions, Orthodox, Roman Catholic, and Protestant, functioned earlier as state churches or Volkskirchen. Accordingly, especially in Orthodox and Catholic lands, religious dissenters and sectarians were persecuted, sometimes severely. It is important to observe that various free church groups such as Pentecostals at times fare better under the Marxist regimes than under "Christian" monarchies.

What accounts for the great variation in the strength of the churches between the Soviet Union, on the one hand, and Rumania and Poland on the other? The most obvious variable, of course, is the age of the respective regimes, the Soviet Union having been under Marxist control about twice as long as the other two. But it also appears that the case against the church in the Soviet Union was a stronger one than in the other two countries. In all three instances the church was bound up with the national culture. In the Polish and Rumanian cases, however, the church had maintained the spirit of the nation's cultures against hostile outside rule, whereas in the Russian case the church had been tied to the hostile, but native, dynasty. Church membership statistics for these two countries, on the one hand, and geopolitics, on the other hand, speak rather eloquently. Religion in these countries is hardly mere religion!

We can now pick up the main thread of our narrative. Soviet Marxist hostility to religion, we noted above, is rooted in the monistic conception of social reality on which the society is built. This hypothesis we must now explain. The charge that Soviet Marxism is "monistic," indeed totalitarian, is an old one, and our case may thus appear both banal and futile. But pinning a label and understanding a phenomenon, alas, are not the same thing! The justification for the present paper is two-fold: (1) we little comprehend either the sources or the nature of Soviet monism, either positively or negatively; and (2) the problem of religion in Soviet Marxist society has scarcely been considered in relation to the monist problem as distinct from the familiar debates about atheism and the like.

Both "monism," and its opposite, "pluralism,"<sup>2</sup> represent "contrast models" of social theory. A "monist model" refers to a social order in which all power is "public power", while a "pluralist model" refers to



one in which there is "either a balance or a fusion of private and public power", with private power resting "in autonomous social groups."<sup>3</sup> These terms, though modern, are reminiscent of older debates, such as the controversy in medieval philosophy over realism and nominalism as conceptual problems. Employed sociologically, "realism" signifies that "society is the true and primary reality, while the individual is the derivative phenomenon." "Nominalism," on the other hand, means that "the individual is the primary and true reality, while society is something either derivative or a mere sum of individuals."<sup>4</sup>

With terms thus defined, Soviet Marxist societies are clearly "realist" in nature. All power is collected in a single, centrally directed system. Constitutionally, citizens are guaranteed basic rights and securities. But these rights are created by the state, rather than acknowledged as preexisting. The citizen possesses no rights independent of, or eventually in opposition to, the state. Since all human reality is socially constituted, how can one speak of pre-political rights? "From the point of view of Marxism, the essence of any element in the structure of a social organism or the connections between these elements can be disclosed only if the system of social relations is studied as the general which is concretely expressed in these elements and connections, determining their essence," writes a committee of contemporary Soviet theorists. At the same time, they reject as "social atomistics" the view of the "individual" as a social atom . . . characterized by a set of immutable traits supposedly rooted in his biological nature, in the depth of the unconscious, and so on and so forth."<sup>5</sup>

Only when this conception of social and political reality is understood does the force of the case against religion become clear. In this conception religion has no place, no reality. There is no object to which religion is the response. Rather it rests on illusion as the projection of alienated spirit. Religion, which in a pluralistic system might serve as source of independent variation, is here at best parasitic. Following Lenin, Soviet policy at the most protects the right of the believer to continue religious practise, confident that religion will disappear of itself as the revolution matures. Frequently, however,

as we shall see in a moment, policy is not at its best, particularly when religion raises its head anew at points where it should have disappeared. Once the basic theory is granted and believed, religion indeed can be made to appear enigmatic and pathological!

As already implied, however, the arguments on which the Soviet Marxist case rests are arguments which have played a role in the development of Western political theory. Some analysts like to characterize Marxism as a Western heresy rather than as something esoteric or Eastern. But in Soviet Marxism, or rather in the larger phenomenon constituted by Soviet Marxism and the Western tradition to which it is joined in opposition, we confront a reality far more formidable than two conflicting doctrines. It is rather the fusion of the opposing idea systems into constellations of historical power that constitutes the peril.

Hegel, it must be remembered, developed a holistic conception of political reality in reply to the competition and conflict which he regarded as endemic in societies based on the market economy. In substituting materialism for idealism, Marx may have turned Hegel right side up. Yet the decisive fact is that Hegel's realism prevailed. But it was not as antidote to Western nominalism and anarchy that Hegelian holism was to make history, but rather as legitimation for a civilization and culture in Russia which had never known pluralism. Thus the problem in Soviet Society is not too much atheism, but too little. Soviet Marxist society is a highly sacral phenomenon which mistakes avowed atheism for secularity. Aren T. van Leeuwen coined the concept "ontocratic" to describe those political traditions in which the "state is the embodiment of the cosmic totality." The Byzantine tradition, in which the Russian monarchy was rooted, was an example of the ontocratic conception. Indeed, van Leeuwen continues, "the West has only with great difficulty contrived to escape its (ontocracy's) blinding spell."<sup>6</sup>

Max Weber, it will be recalled, advanced the notion of an "elective affinity" of ideas for certain corresponding historical configurations. If the reception of Marxist theory into the flesh and blood of Russian history appears to illustrate Weber's conception, perhaps the same can be said with regard to the reception of the nominalist half of the

debate in European political theory in the flesh and blood of American history. Each in its own way thus appears as half-truth and perhaps as heresy. That, of course, is another topic. It is a possibility suggested here only to underscore the need to see the historical force of the problem of religious liberty in the Soviet Marxist system. Perhaps, particularly in the light of the Helsinki Accord, we can only protest in the West. But we should at least understand and recognize the historical limits within which political incumbents in that system act. So we turn finally to examine a few of their policies.

Constitutional and other legal stipulations concerning religion reflect the same Enlightenment conceptions which one finds in Western constitutions. The Decree of the Soviet People's Commissars of January 23, 1918, states that "the church is separated from the state," and that "every citizen may confess any religion or profess none at all." Article 124 of the constitution of the USSR says: "In order to ensure to citizens freedom of conscience, the church in the U.S.S.R. is separated from the state, and the school from the church. Freedom of religious worship and freedom of anti-religious propaganda are recognized for all citizens."<sup>7</sup>

These provisions, it can rightly be claimed, are enforced in the Soviet Union and in other Soviet Marxist societies. Constitutional language, of course, varies from country to country. Where these basic provisions have not been enforced or have been violated, it is because implementation of other measures result in indirect contradiction. What are those other provisions? The most important category is doubtless the provisions which pertain to religious buildings and artifacts. At the time of the revolution such properties were inventoried and nationalized. Buildings and religious objects were then to be made available without cost to authorized religious groups for use. Only duly registered groups, of course, could receive permission to use such property. But this arrangement inserts a local public official into the heart of local parish activity as a normal procedure.

Another category of provisions pertain to the definition of religious practise. The guarantee of religious liberty applies both to beliefs held privately by the individual citizen, and to worship or the

enactment of the cult. Belief is treated as a private matter. It may not be mentioned, for example, in personal civil documents. But corporate worship is another matter. Even when confined to the regular liturgy of divine service, it becomes in some degree a social act. So a contemporary Marxist scholar asks, "How can religion be maintained as a private matter? . . . When religion ceases to remain a domestic cult and begins to express itself through an organized church, the private matter takes on a special social dimension. A social dimension is an externally social manifestation which no longer is a private matter. It becomes society within society. Its relationships being juridically and legally regulated by the latter."<sup>8</sup> The attempt to draw a line between the private and the social dimensions of religion, in order to permit only the former, ends in ambiguities which cannot be resolved.

In practise, then, the two principles, namely religious liberty, and separation of church and state, collide. This contradiction is dramatized in the dissenting religious groups that have surfaced over the last decade, both in the Orthodox Church and among the Evangelical Baptists. In the latter instance the existing leadership is not only challenged, but a competing organization has been effected. In both instances, however, the criticism pertains to concessions which the existing hierarchies have made to the state for the permission to operate as churches. Significantly, the constitutional point is raised. State authorities, in regulating religious life as indicated above, and hierarchies, in accepting such supervision, are both accused of violating the constitutional separation of religion from the state.<sup>9</sup>

Westerners critical or impatient with this state of affairs can benefit from a glance back on Western history. Here the era of the Protestant Reformation in the sixteenth century is instructive. Luther, it will be recalled, confronting the political turmoil surrounding religious reform, finally distinguished the inner and outer orders of church life, and looked to the magistracy to regulate the latter. The radicals then (Anabaptists), as the Initiativniki in Soviet Union in the 1960s and 1970s, rejected this distinction. Religious faith and life must be independent!

In the long run, however, the view of the radicals was to prevail.

But the triumph of separation of church and state in the Western tradition owes more to secularizing forces than to the churches' own doctrine, even though today that separation does enjoy theological sanction as well. In effect, the notion of christendom, a unified civilization, which prevailed in medieval Europe, appears highly analogous to the Soviet model today, however different the particular formulations. Only the pluralization of Western societies, as an historical reality, appears to have nurtured the insight that human existence is fundamentally or intrinsically pluralistic. The problem is not the achievement of pluralism but its recognition. This is not to defend any particular pluralism--there is much that is problematic in what passes for pluralism in the United States today. Certainly it is equally important, and the more so when pluralist forces flourish, to look after the "core universe" which sustains groups and communities.

It is not readily evident how other societies should respond to the Soviet predicament. It may well be appropriate for Soviet political leaders to be held somehow accountable before world opinion in accord to standards of religious liberty increasingly prevailing in global values. Whether such challenges aid or hinder the cause may not be readily determined. In any event, in the US-USSR confrontation, not only two societal conceptions face each other, but two histories as well. Perhaps until this dual fact is more fully and widely recognized and understood, and until pluralizing transformations temper the Soviet model, the uneasy cease fire now in effect will not yield to a viable peace.

#### FOOTNOTES

<sup>1</sup>The term religion is used in this paper both "generally" and "specifically." In the latter sense reference is always to christian believers or churches. Other religious populations are to be found in the Soviet Union, but these will not be treated in this paper. The contexts should make clear which of the two usages is intended.

<sup>2</sup>William F. Connolly, ed. The Bias of Pluralism. (New York, 1969) provides a critical discussion of pluralism.

<sup>3</sup>George Fischer, The Soviet System and Modern Society (New York, 1968), pp. 14f.

<sup>4</sup>Pitrim A. Sorokin, Social and Cultural Dynamics (London, 1947), Vol. II, pp. 262f.

<sup>5</sup>A. S. Makhov, et al., Society and Economic Relations (Moscow, 1976), p. 8.

<sup>6</sup>Arend T. van Leeuwen, Christianity and World History (London, 1964), p. 285 & passim.

<sup>7</sup>Erich Weingärtner, ed. Church in Socialism (Rome, 1976), p. 73f.

<sup>8</sup>Branko Bosnjak, "Reflections on religion," in B. R. Bociurkiw, et al., eds. Religion and Atheism in the USSR and Eastern Europe (Toronto: U. of Toronto Press, 1975), pp. 28ff.

<sup>9</sup>Religion in Communist Dominated Areas (New York, 1976).