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BOOK REVIEW

Jenny Vorpahl and Dirk Schuster (eds). *Communicating Religion and Atheism in Central and Eastern Europe*. Berlin: De Gruyter, 2020. 312 p. ISBN 978-3-11-054637-8 Hardcover \$114.99.

Reviewed by: Oleg Kyselov, Fulbright Visiting Scholar, Department of Religious Studies, University of Alabama.

This book consists of thirteen contributions, in which the authors describe and analyze the situation of religion and atheism in Central and Eastern Europe (CEE) countries during communist regimes and after their fall. A period of a hundred years – from the 1920s to the 2020s – is covered here. The region includes Germany (GDR), the USSR, Czechoslovakia, Romania, Hungary, Croatia, and Poland. The spectrum of issues is rather diverse: Marxist study of religion, representation of religion in politics, public discourse, and books, secular usage of religious rites and art, religious knowledge, and knowledge about religion. Interestingly, each issue is analyzed in at least two texts. Although the contributions are based on different approaches, they have different structures and interpretations. Nevertheless, the readers can compare different cases. This gives a wider picture of religion and atheism in the CEE region.

The editors of the book, Janny Vorpahl and Dirk Schuster, state that the aim of the book ‘is to investigate the truth claims of worldviews within contexts shaped by the Soviet socialist system’ (p. 1). Sociology of knowledge and discourse analysis are the main authors’ methodological tools. Peter Berger’s and Thomas Luckman’s *The Social Construction of Reality* (1966) is the most cited work in the book under review.

Three contributions are devoted to scientific atheism. Dirk Schuster has dedicated his research to the ‘Marxist sociology of religion’ in the GDR in the 1960s. Here, one can find two already common but still important statements. Scientific atheism (with the sociology of religion as its part) was an ideological discipline, which means that it functioned with applied purposes—to find and then to use better methods to fight religion. There was a conflict not only between religion and science but also between science (including humanities) and ideology. Science, in this case, should be understood as a scientific approach and critical thinking, which was used by communist parties when they proved main Marxist-Leninist statements but excluded when conclusions contradicted the communist doctrine. Johannes Gleixner presents his findings of the sociological survey of religiosity among Muscovite workers conducted in 1929. In his contribution, we find a wider context of the Soviet sociology of religion. Gleixner follows James Thrower’s point of view that Soviet religious studies or the ‘scientific atheism’

appeared only after World War II or even after Stalin's death. Earlier studies Gleixner calls 'antireligious studies' and the scholars of that field he calls '(anti)religious scientists.' In her contribution, Ksenia Kolkunova claims that Soviet style scientific atheism is still alive and is used in contemporary Russian religious policy. "[S]cientific atheism still shapes how people think about religion" (p. 59). "It contributes much to the way Russians speak of religion today" (p. 60), Kolkunova writes. The case presented by the author is the discussion among Jehovah's Witnesses in modern Russia. Kolkunova demonstrates that the arguments used by politicians, journalists, and Church representatives have a background of scientific atheism.

How religion is represented in the books during the communist regime can be found in the contributions of Daniela Schmidt and Johann Ev. Hafner. Schmidt compares religion-related vocabulary from various GDR and FRG dictionaries, among them the unpublished manuscript of the *Dictionary of Political-Operational Work*. There the author notes the influences and borrowings, specific understanding of particular terms, and emphasizes the approaches used. Hafner does something similar, not with dictionaries but with the books given as gifts during the secular rite of *Jugendweihe*. These gifts imitate Christian confirmation. It was surprising for me to learn that this rite is still practiced in Eastern Germany. Hafner writes about its history and traces the differences in the books presented to the young men and women taking part in the rite. The main thesis of the contribution is that during the Soviet times these books shaped the collective conscience. After the fall of the Berlin wall they were directed to an individualistic consciousness. The attitude towards religion in the contemporary gift book *Weltanschauung (Worldview)* is still under the influence of a secular understanding—as religion is represented as a human creation.

The issue of secular rites in the GDR is continued in Vorpahl's contribution. The author demonstrates how they were justified and implemented. If you deal with that topic in other countries of CEE (see e.g. Smolkin 2018) you will find similarities in the morphology and 'theology' (I mean, a theoretical background) of secular rites in the region during the Soviet period. The secular rites were perceived by the communist authorities as an alternative to Church rituals, but, at the same time, their elements were borrowed from religious ones. One can find similar borrowings in the GDR's secular art and I am convinced in the secular art of other CEE countries of that period. As Manuela Möbius-Andre shows in her contribution, Christian themes were used by painters. The logic of argumentation here is similar to when they use religious elements in rites—these are a part of people's heritage and tradition and their usage by the Church should not influence our perception of that.

The public discourse on religion is analyzed in texts by Zdeněk R. Nešpor and Alexandra Coțofană. Nešpor devoted his contribution to Czechoslovakia in the 1940-1960s. He shows that the regime's attitude to religion was not consistent during this period. One can discover anticlericalism, on one hand, and cooperation with religious organizations and believers, on the other. The author writes that in the mid-1960s there were journal articles that questioned "antireligious hostility of previous years and even assessed religion in a more positive light" (p. 109). Coțofană's contribution is devoted to Romanian public discourse after the fall of the communist regime. Interviews with 21 Romanian politicians lay at the core of her research. She shows that religion takes an important place in the views of left-wing politicians, but sometimes religion is rather a pragmatic tool than a systematic worldview that influences their behavior. An indicative situation is presented in Coțofană's text, when one of her interviewees gave her an Orthodox icon, but soon after was imprisoned for corruption.

Two contributions are dedicated to Croatia. In the first one, Ankica Matinović analyzes the content of school textbooks on religion. There she finds the mirror reflection of processes present in socialist times, a positive attitude to religious values and a negative attitude towards atheism. The rejection of atheism causes public discussion and even protests of the Ombudsman for children against the discrimination of atheist children. The second contribution is dedicated to the nonreligious community and its use of science to oppose themselves to the religious one. Nikolina Hazdivac Bajić, grounding on content analysis and semi-structural interviews, shows the place of science in the legitimization of atheistic worldview and discrimination of the religious one. The cases with stickers and calendars can be good examples of the secular use and imitation of religious phenomena.

The contribution of Marta Kołodziejaska also deals with the use of science by atheists, but she grounds on her analyses of the Polish Catholic online forums. She claims that 'self-identification as nonreligious was usually associated with reception of science and religion as opposing domains...' (p. 281). Here one can find a curious image of the Polish non-believers. The author presumes that the majority of them have been baptized and received First Communion, and have received religious education. This means that the Polish non-believers do have some religious experience and that they were involved in religious life.

In the afterword, Jenny Vorpahl properly claims that one of the book's central results is the demonstration that CEE countries still endure the influence of socialistic ideology and policy. Some of the customs, traditions, views, and values formed during the communist times, have become an integral part of contemporary societies. Sometimes we observe the change of its content (from atheistic to religious) but the forms are still the same (as with the exclusivist

religious education). But the case with Jehovah's Witnesses in contemporary Russia gives us an example that even the content remains the same.

There is one further thing that I want to discuss, that is not very important for the majority of the contributions, but, is crucial for the whole book. It is a problem of understanding one of the core terms in the book title--the term *atheism*. I fully agree with the book's editors who claim that atheism is one of "examples of subcategories of nonreligiosity..." (p. 11) and that it "is an active denial of transcendent ideas, such as God" (p. 13). But one of the authors has another point of view: Bajić's understanding of atheism is based on its etymology--"rejecting God." As a result of such limited understanding, she proclaims that a person may share religious ideas, believe in salvation, but do not believe in God. Such a person, in Bajić's opinion, is an atheist. That is why she states that "[a] certain part of the concept of atheism does not fit into the semantics range of nonreligiosity" (p. 258). I can agree that there are people who share some religious, spiritual, or esoteric ideas and, at the same time, identify themselves as atheists. I can even affirm that such people belong not only to the "atheistic religions" (as Bajić writes) or spiritual movements, but even to the traditional confessions of monotheistic religions. The scholars from the former USSR are well acquainted with the self-identification as an *Orthodox Christian atheist* or a *Muslim atheist*. Of course, in the case of the former USSR region, the religious part of such self-identification (Orthodox Christian, Muslim) is rather a cultural affiliation than an indicator of sharing some ideas, but at the same time, such people can be members of a religious community and/or take part in religious rites and festivals. But should our understanding of atheism be based on someone's self-identification? In this case, it would be hard to give a clear definition of any notion. In the case of atheism, we should not ground our understanding on its etymology or primary meaning as a denial of particular god(s) (*adevism* in Max Müller's terminology). Atheism is a notion that has a history of usage. But its contemporary understanding is rejecting everything supernatural, not just particular god(s) or God, or "personal God" as Bajić writes, but souls, spirits and ghosts, angels and demons, elves and dwarfs, jins and devas, and even the Absolute Spirit or Overmind. I do not want to discuss here the differentiation between *weak* and *strong atheism* as the absence of belief in the supernatural and belief of its non-existence. But in my opinion, it is rather convenient that the atheists deny not just the concept of God but the whole religious system--its theology and ritualism, and the term *atheistic religions* are not technical and is rather a synonym to *nontheistic religions* than to *atheism*.

This remark about atheism is referred only in a footnote. To my mind, the editors and the author should have discussed this issue during the preparation of the book, or, at least, they

should have displayed in the introduction this contradiction in the understanding of atheism. At the same time, it allows us to discuss the issue.

I found the book useful as a source of information about the situation with religion and atheism in CEE countries. I am even convinced that this is a “must-read” book for the scholars of religious and secular issues in Soviet and Post-Soviet times.