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Pospielovsky's "A History of Marxist--Leninist Atheism and Soviet Antireligious Policies" - Book Review

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In *OPREE*, Vol. VI. No. 5, I reviewed Pospielovsky's *The Russian Orthodox Church Under the Soviet Regime.* The quality of that book made me look forward to reading these books, the first two in a projected three—volume series entitled, *A History of Soviet Atheism in Theory and Practice, and the Believer.* In both volumes Pospielovsky provides a general introduction to each specific volume. The first volume begins with a chapter entitled, "The work of Dr. Edward Manukian. Then follow three chapters in which the author periodizes and describes in roughly chronological order the antireligious policies and atheist propaganda from 1917 to 1987. The appendix contains a translation of excerpts of Soviet legislation and decrees affecting the religious communities, a rather extensive section of endnotes with comments, a bibliography which contains many Soviet sources. There is also a single index which appears to be too meager.

The second volume describes the persecutions and antireligious propaganda according to a chronological periodization, in which the periodization for the propaganda and the persecution do not always overlap. This is a reflection of the author's thesis that the anti-religious propaganda preceded persecutions. The first appendix contains four documents by metropolitan Sergius of Lithuania, Latvia, and Estonia, during World War II. The second appendix contains a lengthy list of names with brief biographical sketches of some of the people who were recently imprisoned for their faith. This is followed by endnotes, a bibliography and index, which are similar to those of the first volume.

First let us look at the strengths of these two volumes, which it might be noted are to be followed by third. One observes at once the author's familiarity and extensive use of Soviet primary sources. These include books by atheist propagandists and Soviet scholars, a very extensive periodical literature, which I find to be most useful, and some newspaper materials, such as editorials in *Pravda.* The author attempts to fortify his conclusions with quantifying data on the amount of published literature on atheism in different time periods. This too I find helpful, but I do not attribute to them the same importance that Pospielovsky seems to attach to them. The book contains much valuable data, some of it very detailed and otherwise hard to find, which, I for one, hope to make use of in my future work. This would refer in the first instance to the laws and
decrees found in the Appendix and to the very detailed accounts of anti-religious propaganda and persecutions which are provided for all historical periods. Thus I appreciate especially the raw data provided by Pospielovsky, more than his interpretative framework, as will be apparent below.

There are weaknesses which troubled this reader. Firstly, it seems to me that much better work has been done on the question of the role of atheism in thought of Marx, Engels, and Lenin. The author seems unaware of the interesting series of articles in the *Journal of Ecumenical Studies*, Vol. 22, No. 3 (Summer 1985) entitled, "Is Atheism Essential to Marxism?" Pospielovsky's discussion seems to rest almost entirely on a doctoral dissertation by David Aikman, "The Role of Atheism in the Marxist Tradition." An allegedly Satanic, rather than Promethean fascination is attributed to Marx. Marx's atheism is linked, perhaps too closely, to his fascination with Feuerbach. Nothing in the behavior of the churches is seen as having the rise of European or Soviet atheism.

There are difficulties in Pospielovsky's own work as well. One is a conscious decision on part of the author to focus almost exclusively on the Russian Orthodox Church, his own religious affiliation. Granted that the Russian Orthodox Church has played and continues to play a major role in the life of the country. One must assume, however, that Uniate, Catholic, Muslim, and "sectarian" (both Protestant and Old Believers) issues were also on the mind of the Soviet government. Since an author is allowed to set limits to the investigation I do not wish to emphasize my disagreement with Pospielovsky on his choice of focus. This work has, however, some less legitimate points which need to be challenged.

Upon reading his book the reader would get the impression that the Russian Orthodox Church need carry no blame at all for the confrontations which occurred in the Soviet Union. The thrust of both volumes is that the diabolical Marxist—Leninist viciously pounced on the innocent and faultless Christian martyrs with various degrees of intensity for no apparent reason. Most of the persecutions, I would agree, were entirely arbitrary and had little to do with the concrete behavior of believers. Especially was this so in the later years when it was difficult to maintain that believers were disloyal. It seems to me to be poor historical methodology to insist only on a single cause of a phenomenon. It is good to point out those cases where the clergy stayed out of overt politics and tried to serve the people under the new government. However, this should not be done by downplaying the opposition, political and ideological, to the Bolsheviks by many clergy and laity.

On the whole there is insufficient theory to explain the fluctuations in some religious policies and why there was disagreement within the Soviet regime or why Soviet authors and
leaders sometimes disagreed on religious policies. There is even less explanation of the differences within the Church. The Renovationists are treated completely unsympathetically. Pospielovsky, the Orthodox Christian may be understood for doing this, but not Pospielovsky, the historian.

I also find rather annoying a trait which Pospielovsky's book has in common with many Western writers on Soviet religious matters. It could be called the "progressive worsening of persecution of believers" syndrome. First Pospielovsky describes a wave of persecution, then points out the ending of that wave for purely tactical Soviet goals, only to say in the midst of the supposed improvements, that things have gotten worse for the believers. Not only is Stalin worse than Lenin (anyone will buy that) but Khrushchev is worse that Stalin, who in turn may be excelled by Brezhnev, and so forth. By that logic one may conclude that the present day situation is far worse than even during the darkest days of Stalin's purges. The author also does not sufficiently stress that in such purges it was not only or mainly religious people who suffered. Perhaps the most puzzling is the failure to discuss Stalin's role, i.e. glossing over the person who is singly most responsible for the policies which almost obliterated all church life by the end of the 1930s and which traumatized the socialist experiment almost beyond recovery. Stalin left a mark upon church policies which is felt to the present time.

Another problem is the confusing and inconsistent structure of the book; a shortcoming which leads to repetition and chronological backtracking, i.e. repeating material previously discussed. And example is the discussion of Lunacharsky's views on pp. 32 and 93. Then there is an attempt to smear someone's views by linking them to a view that seems quite unrelated (e.g. Trotsky's dislike of Orthodoxy because of its empty ceremonialism is linked to Hitler's adviser Alfred Rosenberg). Finally one senses an apparent lack of understanding of Western theology, such as identifying Dietrich Bonhoeffer and Bishop J. Robinson as "Death of God" theologians.

Should one buy these books? By all means, but read them critically because they seem to lack objectivity. I hope that the last volume will provide a wider context for the understanding of the complex issues which gave rise to, and then fuelled Soviet atheism and antireligious policies and persecution.

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