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**BOOK REVIEW**

# Victoria Smolkin (2018). A Sacred Space Is Never Empty. A History of Soviet Atheism. Princeton & Oxford: Princeton University Press[1]

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Since the turn of the century, a reappraisal of secularization thesis in social sciences of religion resulted in a growing body of research on diversity of secularism, or rather secularisms. In recent years, we have seen an expanding interest in atheism, or again rather atheisms. Atheism traditionally understood as either an ideological stance in the Enlightenment or militant repression of religion in the Soviet Union is now studied as a spiritual phenomenon and as historical experience. Victoria Smolkin book – the monumental exposition of the history of Soviet atheism – analyzes it in its complexity and multidimensionality tracing its development from an ideological precept of Marxism-Leninism to the state policy of expunging Russian Orthodoxy from the Soviet public life, to social science methodology in the study of religion, to philosophical inquiry into the nature of spirituality and moral commitment.

Smolkin generally structures the argument around the "three sets of oppositions: the political opposition between the party's commitment to ideological purity and state's pursuit of effective governance; the ideological opposition between religion, superstition, and backwardness and science, reason, and progress; and the spiritual opposition between emptiness and indifference and fullness and conviction" (p. 5). As she supposes, these sets of oppositions could be usefully reformulated into three questions that puzzled the Soviet authorities in their efforts to deal with religion: "What kind of state Soviet Communism should produce" (p. 5); "What kind of society Soviet Communism should produce" (p. 5); and "What kind of person Soviet Communism should produce" (p. 5).

Although the ideological view on religion hardly changed in the course of Soviet history, atheism had to be "reimagined in fundamental ways" (p. 3), which reflected the Soviet government's self-reinvention and reinterpretation of its goals. Thus, these oppositions and questions, in fact, conform to the stages of

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Soviet history. The respective problems the Soviet government faced in achieving these purposes on each of these stages also varied and required different approaches and tools, which Smolkin consequently observes.

She shows that in the early Soviet period, Bolshevik leaders regarded the Russian Orthodox Church as a fundamentally counterrevolutionary force. Therefore, despite the initial promise of secularization and certain support for religious minorities, Bolsheviks launched a devastating attack on the Russian Orthodox Church in order to eliminate its economic and political potential. Apart from confiscations and evictions, militant atheism was unleashed on religious believers and clergy through state sponsored propaganda. After 1929, legislation was enacted, religions were practically forced out of the public space with "prohibition of performing any form of charity or social work, as well as religious education" (p. 239). Since Stalin's sudden change of policy in 1943, all who survived the purges of the 1920–30s were co-opted to serve – willingly or not – to the goals of the Soviet government at home and abroad. Religious organizations were effectively controlled by the state apparatus, although the veneer of separation of the state and church was put in place. Antireligious propaganda was practically hushed.

After the denunciation of Stalin's personality cult, in order to legitimize his leadership, Khrushchev tried to revive revolutionary ideals and with them the hope of a society freed from religion. Thus, Smolkin stresses, religion was "reconstituted as an ideological problem" (p. 239) rather than as a political threat. Khrushchev invested heavily in mass education and propaganda "to inculcate a scientific materialist worldview" (p. 15), which was supposed to eradicate the ideological grasp of religion over presumably still ignorant, backward and politically inconsistent people. The alien and corrupting influence of religious beliefs and practices was construed as one of the causes which hindered further progress of Soviet society on its way to Communism. Scientific atheism was, therefore, to replace militant atheism of the early Soviet period.

Scientific atheism relied on enlightenment of the masses and investigation into the factors that could explain the persistence of religion in Soviet society. At the same time, the state did not hesitate to resume its repression by closing religious spaces, disbanding religious communities and enforcing legal and financial restrictions on religious institutions and clergy. Yet, the campaigns had limited success. As Smolkin rightly indicates, "for Soviet atheists, the lesson of Khrushchev's antireligious campaign was that many Soviet people had little trouble reconciling science and religion, or (un) belief with (religious) practice. Many continued to rely on religion for moral norms, traditions, and rites of passage. Religion, then, continued to shape communities, families, and individuals" (p. 240). Thus, the challenge of intractable religious beliefs and practices along with the developing academic study of religions forced the Soviet ideologues to reconsider their very understanding of the nature of religion and to rethink their strategy of eliminating religion.

In their struggle against religion, imagined as a bunch of false beliefs and superstitions, on which venal clergy feeds and which barely survive in the new world of Socialism, the atheists and antireligious campaigners encountered religion that was lived. And, in Smolkin's words, "the problem with lived religion was precisely that it was a world distinct, if not apart, from religious dogma and institutions. Rather than being

confined to specific spaces and texts (which could be regulated and disciplined by church and state authorities), lived religion was domesticated, dispersed, and therefore often beyond the party's reach" (p. 163). Therefore, the new strategy of the struggle against religion should aim at substituting Soviet rituals and emotional experiences for religious practices. Instead of simply repressing or repudiating religion, the atheists should engage in promoting the "socialist way of life" (p. 198). Smolkin summarizes another stage of atheism's re-invention: "Finding themselves in the unexpected role of spiritual caretakers, Soviet atheists shifted their attention inward, to the interior worlds of ordinary Soviet people" (p. 240).

But, Smolkin continues, the challenge of persisting religions was more dangerous, Marxist laws of historical development postulated the gradual disappearance of religion in a society on its way to Communism. The continued presence of religion could upon reflection lead to the conclusion that the Soviet society was not actually on its way to Communism. Thus, as Smolkin underlines, religion at first regarded as a political threat, and then as an ideological opponent, has now become an existential challenge. Moreover, the advances in the empirical study of religion as it existed in the Soviet Union uncovered a phenomenon which shocked the Soviet authorities and ideologues: "For Soviet atheists, the fact of indifference came to be more unsettling than the fact of the continued existence of religion...Whereas believers could be engaged and converted, those who were indifferent had no interest in the questions at the heart of religion or atheism. They were disengaged from religious or ideological truth claims, and were unconcerned if their actions did not accord with their convictions, since they lacked firm convictions" (p. 240).

According to Smolkin, in late Soviet period the true nature of Soviet atheism was revealed. It did not seek merely the disappearance of religion, it aspired to effect the conversion to the Communist values. Because indifference was primarily widespread among Soviet youth, the future of the Soviet system was endangered. The struggle of the Soviet regime with religion's political, ideological and spiritual authority exposed atheism's inability to offer a positive program of its own for existential problems people had to face. By demolishing the sacred in the public space and failing to fill the cleared space with new values, adequate for a modernizing society, which just discovered the pleasures of individualization and consumerism, atheism contributed to the emergence and growth of indifference, which Soviet social scientists diagnosed in the late Soviet period. In the 1980s, however, Soviet people turned "to alternative spiritual, ideological, and even political commitments" (p. 241), which "again made religion into a political problem" (p. 241). Smolkin concludes: if earlier religion could be described as a survival and – subject to the laws of historical development – destined to disappear, the spiritual revival under Brezhnev, glasnost that opened mass media for religious voices and the official celebration of the Orthodoxy's millennium in 1988 "disrupted the internal logic of the Soviet Communism" (p. 244).

Smolkin's book is a panoramic study, which describes stages of the Soviet atheism's development and its specific features in the context of raise and fall of the Soviet state. Her book is a must-read for those who specialize in the Soviet history, as well as for those who work in Religious Studies.