COMMUNIST PERSPECTIVES ON ATHEISM IN THE TWENTIETH CENTURY

Edited by Eva Guigo-Patzelt

Communist Perspectives on Atheism in the Twentieth Century

This book offers an analysis of the wide range of attitudes that communist movements and regimes adopted towards atheism during the 20th century. Despite the well-known violent fight of the Bolsheviks against believers, for example, and religious persecution in communist regimes at different times, being a communist did not always go hand in hand with being an atheist oneself or with the will to actively spread atheism. The reasons for the changing links between communism and atheism, ranging from militant atheists to communists presenting themselves as defenders of the authentic religion, deserved precise, in-depth investigation. The book's case studies on Greece, Albania, Italy, Czechoslovakia, East Germany, Slovenia, Afghanistan, and Vietnam and its common focus on the causes of atheism will be of interest to scholars of these areas but also of atheism and secularism, religion, and politics.

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Foreword

The Spectre of Atheism

Pierre-Antoine Fabre

Atheism remains a relatively novel idea today – both in Europe and around the world. But why? One might reasonably think it is an old idea. In 17th-century Europe, it took the form of Spinoza's pantheism, which made this philosopher the mortal enemy of many. Beyond Europe, Jesuits in China, who sought to make Catholicism acceptable to the Neo-Confucians of their time, quickly realised they could not frame Neo-Confucianism as atheism, although doing so would have suited their purposes by leaving space for the Christian God. Instead, they had to invent a primitive Chinese religion that had degenerated into superstition, which was neither an opponent of the true faith nor a representation of the absence of a god. This spectre of the absence of a god haunted all the theologians of the Holy Church, so much so that they defined it as a specific sin: the philosophical sin, or the sin against the Holy Spirit, which condemned the "impossible supposition" that God might not exist – a supposition whose mere articulation caused unease, even as it was immediately declared "impossible".

But what of the time since then? Is there still a fear of atheism? Could the spectre of atheism still be a threatening ghost from the past? It has, after all, been said that God is dead – admittedly at an uncertain date. These words are not only those of Nietzsche, but Freud and Marx too. These other two great figures of suspicion broke away from their Jewish heritage. Indeed, Marx may be considered a distant inspiration for societies based on the principle of atheism that established themselves in the 20th century, although one of the chapters in this book also explores how certain Catholic currents sought to "de-atheise" Marx. Nonetheless, did socialist societies not turn atheism into something akin to a state religion?

This book aims to tackle precisely this problem.

Eva Guigo-Patzelt's ambitious and necessary project, hosted by the Centre d'études en sciences sociales du religieux (CéSor), is set at a historical juncture when atheism, as a philosophy – that is, primarily as a programme and a responsibility of conscience – becomes what is referred to as a "civil religion". It unites a community and forms the basis of a collective adherence, particularly to a commandment – thus far removed from the reasoned stance of an individual confronting the world. Where atheism may have remained one attitude among many, it was just that: one option. However, in places where it became the only possible stance,

it ceased to be a choice, transforming instead into a new form of subjugation. There is, undeniably, a tragic grandeur in the dissidence found within the world of real socialism, where militant atheism was sometimes upheld in opposition to all religions. But have we not more often witnessed such dissidents rediscovering ancient rituals and resurrecting old icons?

Through innovative and insightful research, the sweeping panorama presented in this book reveals many facets of atheism's thwarted fate within societies and movements where it could have served as a catalyst for freedom – from Greece to Albania, from the former Czechoslovakia and Yugoslavia to present-day Slovenia, and from Afghanistan to Vietnam. The situations are diverse, and so are the research topics, but one thing is certain: the landscape is entirely new, and readers will learn a great deal.

Therefore, on behalf of CéSor, I would like to thank Eva Guigo-Patzelt for allowing us this journey "into the lands of a fallen utopia", to borrow the title of another travel book by Rose-Marie Lagrave, which are also the lands of a forgotten atheism.

Introduction

Investigating Causes of Atheism and Atheisation in Communist Contexts

Eva Guigo-Patzelt

> In the European workers' parties atheism is more or less self-understood […]. As regards the German Social-Democratic workers, it can be said that atheism has already outlived its usefulness for them […]: *they are simply through with God*.
>
> (Friedrich Engels, *Emigrant Literature*, 1874)

The first atheist campaign in the German Democratic Republic, at the end of the 1940s, was aimed at believers within the Communist Party (Heise 1998). In communist-ruled Romania, Slovakia, Poland, Soviet Central Asia and Kerala, it was not unusual for members of the communist parties to also be Christians, Muslims or Hindus (Hoffmann and Tyrała 2020, 189; Tížik 2020; Morozova 2023; Santhosh and Paleri 2023; Buchenau 2024, 273). French communists forgot their commitment to atheism in 1936 in favour of the "outstretched hand" strategy to fight fascism together with Christians (Minois 1998, 524–526). In 1970s Bulgaria, Todor Zhivkov's daughter, Lyudmila Zhivkova, initiated a very special form of State-sponsored "freethinking" steeped in mysticism and Far Eastern spiritual traditions (Denkov, Vulchev and Gueorguieva 2020, 19–20). Several communist regimes observed conversions to religion despite previous or ongoing efforts to secularise society and promote atheism (Martin 2022; Dragišić 2023). Religious socialism was a widespread phenomenon, and in the course of dialogues from the 1950s onwards, research for "common ground" and "common values" relativised the importance given to atheism or made it inappropriate to put it forward (Ramšak, Mithans and Režek 2022; Tóth 2023). There was even a "reluctance to promote scientific atheism" (Bubík, Václavík and Remmel 2020, 321). In 1989, the communist government of Kerala coined the slogan "God's own country" to attract tourists (Santhosh and Paleri 2023). These are but a few examples of a historical reality that proved to be far more complex than Friedrich Engels' assertion might have suggested.

Obviously, communism as such, and even commitment or exposure to Marxism, cannot in itself be defined as a cause of atheism, neither at the individual nor at the societal level. Those who claimed to be communists did not automatically deconvert from religion or adopt atheism, and communism did not necessarily go hand in hand with the desire to spread a certain kind of atheism. Atheism itself recovered manifold meanings in time and space even among communists.

The question of whether "Marxism [is] necessarily atheistic" (Gustav Wetter, see Lucas and Velizhev in this volume) is not a new one and has given rise to numerous philosophical analyses, drawing on the works of Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels (see, for instance, Bochenski 1975; Senge 1983; Thrower 1983). The reasons for the plurality observed in different historical settings deserved further examination independently of the normative question of what particular experiences lived up to the theory, if any.

When investigating the complex links between communists – rather than communism as an ideology or a philosophical system – and atheism, it is helpful to distinguish between two levels of investigation. First, this volume analyses the actors' diverse understandings of atheism and investigates how communists conceptualised and explained different kinds of non-belief in general and Marxist-Leninist atheism in particular; how they sought to create and spread a "positive" atheist vision and influence the evolution of atheism; or how, and for what reasons, they renounced this idea. However, the value of initiatives appreciated by communists to promote atheism, such as the Soviet League of the Militant Godless, does not always withstand examination (Peris 1998; Gleixner 2022). Conversely, historical actors not attaching much importance to atheism or to certain projects does not mean they were of no importance, as shown by historical analysis (Smolkin in Weir and Smolkin 2023). Thus the authors also address significant outstanding questions about the role of various initiatives in processes of atheisation, including antireligious education, atheist rituals and museums. In so doing, they are making original contributions, based on unique documentation and their profound knowledge of specific historical contexts, to a much broader reflection underway in international and interdisciplinary research on the possible causes of atheism.[1] Applied to the study of communism, and at both levels of reflection, analysis benefits from being open to findings from other settings.

Atheism in Communist Contexts: A Transnational Question

The ambition to gain a fuller picture of communist atheism and its varieties has to take into consideration international and transnational perspectives to allow for comparison, exploring differences and commonalities within the Soviet Bloc but also with communist movements in different parts of the world. In the 20th century, some countries were ruled by communist regimes, some were centres of communist thought and others were less influential. Communism, and even Marxism, was undeniably plural, and atheism as a "culturally constructed phenomenon (Baggett 2011), always depending on time and place" (Remmel, Václavík and Bubík 2020, 5) needs to be analysed regarding its specific cultural underpinnings. Nevertheless, and even though communist atheisms in the plural are part of the "multiple secularities" pointed out by Wohlrab-Sahr and Burchardt (2012) (see Buchenau 2015), its supporters never renounced their claim to unity.[2] Divergent paths to communism did not come without reference to other paths and without implying, or even claiming aloud, what true communism should be. The international dimension is therefore inherent in the very object of study.

Transnational debates on atheism between communists were tangible proof of this. At the time of the Soviet Bloc, they took place in what might be called a limited international scientific community. "Antireligious studies" in the interwar Soviet Union already led to surveys on atheist trajectories (Minois 1998, 523–524; Gleixner 2020, 2024). Discovering seemingly different atheisms was a problem as it challenged the claim to a unique, universally valid form of communist atheism (Gleixner 2024). "Scientific atheism", born during Khrushchev's second atheist campaign (1958–1964) before spreading to a series of Central and Eastern European countries, opened up various spaces for sometimes controversial discussion on definitions of atheism and measures to promote it. Depending on the country, its scholars studied sociological, emotional, psychological or ethnographic aspects of religion and/or atheism; their aim was to gain a better understanding of these phenomena in order to fight religion and promote atheism more effectively.[3] The international dimension of this scholarly discipline, however rich in international exchange, remains largely to be analysed (see Tesař 2019; Guigo-Patzelt 2025).

Differences of opinion notwithstanding, this transnational forum hosted a common discourse on religion and atheism, beginning in the 1960s, with discursive patterns and arguments that can be found, more or less pronounced and with variations, in several communist countries. According to this paradigm, religion was rooted in social and economic conditions and was an obstacle to the revolutionary transformation of these conditions, functioning as the "opium of the people" and "inverted consciousness of the world" (expressions in Marx 1844). Therefore, religion had to be overcome, but it was also seen as naturally doomed to wither away when the objective conditions changed. As East Germany's most prominent scientific atheist Olof Klohr would have it, secularisation in this country wasn't "the result of coercion, but the result of the new social conditions under socialism" (1966, 22), of scientific and technical progress, industrialisation and urbanisation. Certain groups in the population were therefore to become atheists more easily than others. The question was whether to help and accelerate this evolution, seen as natural, and how the "subjective" factors – that is, changes in individual consciousness – could be prompted. It was no coincidence that the research centre in Brno, just to name one, was called the Institute for the Study of Social Awareness and Scientific Atheism (Bubík and Václavík 2020, 75).

This paradigm, which seems to have been common to several countries of the so-called Soviet Bloc, went hand in hand with a well-documented toolbox of measures aiming to turn the population atheist – or to make people become so more quickly – which deserve to be put into comparative perspective. Here, our work can build on extensive scholarship on State-Church relations in communist countries seen from a fresh angle. Stan and Vancea started reflecting on secularism in communist and post-communist Poland, Hungary, Czech and Slovak Lands, Romania, Bulgaria and Albania, putting the main emphasis on State-Church relations and the repression of religion under communist regimes. They did not call into question the supposedly strong link between communism and atheist militancy, nor provided clues to its possible causes. The hypotheses they summarised identified nonreligion as an "ideological void", or ascertained "underground" religious

sentiment and "invisible religion" during the communist period (Stan and Vancea 2013, 93). Yet the perception is slowly gaining ground that "atheism has its own history, which is not simply the negative of the history of religious beliefs" (Minois 1998, 12). "The diversity of nonreligion" (Quack, Schuh and Kind 2020) in its own right has drawn broader interest in human and social sciences in recent years, following Talal Asad's pioneering work.[4] This approach is only just beginning to be applied to Central and Eastern Europe,[5] and very little to communist countries or movements in other parts of the world.

As regards repressive religious policy in communist countries, its importance for secularisation has also been highlighted for the German Democratic Republic (GDR) (Wohlrab-Sahr, Karstein and Schmidt-Lux 2009; Pollack 1994), for Hungary (Balogh and Fejérdy 2020, 125–126) and elsewhere. There is no question of denying the effects of such persecutions, still less their existence. The weakening of social ties within a religious framework and the identification of populations with religions play a part in deconversion (see for instance Zuckerman 2015). However, as Bubík, Václavík and Remmel emphasised, "secular thinking's dependence on politics is obvious in many cases, but it was not the only factor determining its development" (2020, 313). Indeed, the repression of certain religious communities could target only religious institutions and not personal belief. As Gleixner put it when talking about interwar Russia, "facing religious pluralism, the Bolsheviks had to decide whether they were content with eradicating institutionalized religion or whether they wanted to continue the fight against informal everyday religion" (2020, 50). East German scientific atheists, for instance, expressly tried to combat not only "churchliness" but also "religiousness" (Guigo-Patzelt 2025, 58–64).

This battle was not only the business of academic experts in atheism, whom Tesař called the "esoteric thought collective" (2019, 30), but of a – more or less developed – broader "atheist establishment" (Smolkin 2018, 198). This could also include Societies for the Dissemination of Scientific Knowledge, active in different Soviet republics, in Czechoslovakia, Hungary, Bulgaria, Romania and East Germany, as well as communist youth organisations, propaganda, literature, posters, films, comics, museums, nonreligious rituals, the education system and organised nonreligion like the Soviet League of the Militant Godless, the Ukrainian Young Militant Atheists, the Freethinkers' Association in the GDR and several freethought associations in Poland.[6] The Soviet comrades certainly made the most extensive use of these available tools, as van den Bercken has highlighted: "The thoroughness is striking: each and every institution in society – from the Academy of Sciences to maternity clinics – are given a list of atheist missionary tasks, or as the official jargon has it, 'the formation of atheist consciousness among the people'" (1989, 131–132).

Articles on a series of Central and Eastern European countries edited in 2020 by Bubík, Remmel and Václavík provide valuable insights and documentation. Combining social and intellectual history with sociological data up to the present, the authors try to bring to light the particularities of this zone compared with Western Europe and the United States of America (Bubík, Remmel and Václavík 2020, 2).

The Soviet experience, which was supposed to be a common and decisive one, is described as one of these particularities (p. 311). Yet this did not prevent diversity, and there may indeed be "gaps in current data, reliance on 'common knowledge' and overgeneralization of certain examples and sub-periods of Soviet rule" (p. 321). This book is intended as a contribution to the authors' call for further source-based research.

Factors of Atheisation in Communist Contexts: Hypotheses in Current Research

By placing a special focus on possible causes for commitment to atheism among communists and for the effective increase of atheism among populations under communist rule, it is possible to put forward a number of elements that the chapters in this book shed more light on, and which further research will hopefully help to refine. Indeed, the means of atheisation mentioned above – courses, propaganda, literature, youth activities etc. – had to be given content that could attract people to atheism or divert them from religion. Some mechanisms may be common to other examples in the history of atheism, or to cases of atheism in non-communist contexts analysed by other disciplines, making the specific nature of the links between atheism, or nonreligion, and communism even more acute. The case studies therefore give new insight into the history of different communist countries and non-communist countries with communist movements. Furthermore, they make a contribution to the broader reflection on worldview changes and mechanisms for turning people atheist, and how they were supposed to achieve this.

The possible factors pleading for or against atheisation can be roughly classified into four groups. First, the official academic, scientific atheist discourse and its applications in education, propaganda and elsewhere relied on what we may call intellectual apostasy (see Zuckerman 2015). An opposition was staged between religion and various fields of modern life in order to win over the population to a "scientific" approach. This included an opposition between religion and natural science (Schmidt-Lux 2008; Wohlrab-Sahr, Karstein and Schmidt-Lux 2009), and in the Soviet Union, such discourse made large use of space exploration (Smolkin-Rothrock 2014; Smolkin 2018). The assumption that people had to take the destiny of world history into their own hands, excluding all supranatural forces, operated according to the same principles. This emphasis was not specific to communist authors, as Minois suggested in the introduction to his great history of atheism: "The unbelieving attitude […] is an affirmation: the affirmation of Man's solitude in the universe, a source of pride and anguish; alone in the face of his enigma, the atheist denies the existence of a supernatural being intervening in his life, but his behaviour is not based on this denial; he assumes it, as a fundamental fact (theoretical atheism) or unconsciously (practical atheism). This solitude […] gives rise to a morality or an ethic based on the only discernible value in the universe: Man" (1998, 13). Unsurprisingly, the stylised opposition between religious ethics and socialist ethics was a third possible area of opposition. Less frequently it seems, but for instance in Latvia, "one of the main atheist tactics was obviously

appellation at the problem of evil – if God is good, where was He when the innocent suffered?" (Kiope, Runce and Stasulane 2020, 146).

However, as Kiope, Runce and Stasulane put it, "the theoretical cognitive arguments against religion as a distorted reflection of reality, in accordance with Lenin's formula […], seemed to be too sophisticated for ordinary people" (2020, 146; in the same vein, see Gleixner 2020, 48–49). The general population was supposed to be more receptive to another kind of deconversion known from scholarship, i.e. emotional apostasy. An often violent anticlericalism – not a new phenomenon either (as shown by Minois 1998, 447–453) – fits in with this need for an emotional dimension. Bubík, Václavík and Remmel identified anticlericalism as "an important, if not the most fundamental, vehicle of secular thinking in Europe" (2020, 312). The relationship between anticlericalism and an antireligious attitude remains disputed.[7] Be that as it may, the reasons for being anticlerical or for believing other people would engage more easily in anticlericalism than in scientific reasoning remain to be specified. Bubík, Václavík and Remmel cite the geographical, linguistic and cultural proximity to the French and German centres of Enlightenment. A concern for the emancipation of the "simple believers", presumed victims of abuse by clerics, is evident for instance in the GDR (Guigo-Patzelt 2025). For the French example of the 19th century, Minois recalled the authorities' compromission of the Roman Catholic Church; the weight of the former imposed the conquest of freedom of thought in the face of the powerful Catholic Church, moral indignation and professional and social rivalries with members of the clergy (Minois 1998, 448–450). Furthermore, "anticlericalism drove the retreat of faith in the 19th century by crystallising diffuse hostility towards the Church, materialising the obstacle, and attaching a metaphysical malaise onto concrete individuals" (Minois 1998, 450).

A second set of explanatory clues concerns collective identity, international and domestic political conditions and the desire to make societies move towards communism (see also Bubík, Václavík and Remmel 2020, 313–316). Connections between religion and nonreligion, on the one hand, and ethnicity, on the other, have been pointed out in the cases of Yugoslavia (Dragišić 2023), Soviet Central Asia (Morozova 2023) and Ukraine (Basauri Ziuzina and Kyselov 2020). The role of religion in national identity and nationalism has also been addressed for Slovakia, Poland, Romania, Bulgaria and Lithuania (Borowik, Ančić and Tyrała 2013; Stan and Vancea 2013, 94). As Bubík, Václavík and Remmel pointed out, the atheisation of Soviet Bloc countries may have been seen as a prerequisite for new collective identities (2020, 316). The tentative to uncover atheistic traditions and to depict national identity as one of atheism and freethought, or to discredit the dominant religion by valuing older religious traditions, was also reflected along these lines (examples in Basauri Ziuzina and Kyselov 2020; Kiope, Runce and Stasulane 2020, 145; Turcescu 2020). The link between raising awareness of the historical nature of religions and nonreligion has also been emphasised for other, non-communist contexts (Minois 1998, 477–478). The examination of a more recent past, such as the role played by certain religious communities during the Second World War, shows

how appealing to nationalist feelings could also serve to weaken the attraction of religion (Mithans 2024).

Contemporary geopolitical considerations were more specific to the communist settings of atheism. Albania's religious policy changed according to its alliance with the Soviet Union (Hoxha 2022). Afghan communists tried hard not to give the impression of being subject to Moscow in their way of dealing with religion (Akhlaq in this volume). In the interwar period, the influence of foreign comrades led Greek communists to adopt a different position on atheism (Paloukis in this volume); some considered atheism as a means of spreading revolution (Smolkin 2023), and the relations between the International of Proletarian Freethinkers and Moscow remained a highly ambivalent and disputed issue (Pettinaroli 2023). As stated before, most communists did not seem to feel free to take their own independent stand on the issue. In colonial and post-colonial contexts, in Nigeria (Ugbudian 2023) and in India (Santhosh and Paleri 2023), the question of atheisation came up against manifold other challenges.

The concrete domestic political and religious situation was also of concern. Communists did not always think that it was necessary and possible to implement atheism. Would it not be more beneficial, from a political point of view, to find ways of integrating, controlling and instrumentalising religious communities? As Stan and Vancea put it, sometimes Churches "could be transformed into useful tools of indoctrination and mass mobilisation in support of the regime" (2013, 90). Not all communist parties, even at the head of State, were in so strong a position as to appear to be openly and offensively enforcing atheisation. In Czechoslovakia, communists invited all believers to participate in building the new society, except for the Catholic hierarchy and Catholic religious orders. Only once the regime was economically and socially stabilised did it launch an antireligious campaign (Matějka 2018, 169–170). The East German government had to accommodate the allied Christian-Democrats under the vigilant eyes of the global public. In Hungary, 1956 saw the end of aggressive mobilisation, and "indifference became a virtue" (Tóth 2023). The Jesuit Gustav Wetter put himself in the place of the Italian communists to show them that it was in their best interest to abandon atheism in order to create a communist society (Lucas and Velizhev in this volume). Afghan communists also ended up abandoning measures against Islam (Akhlaq in this volume). The perceived power of particular religious institutions certainly played a role, as did their perceived political stance: the Greek Orthodox Church moving from political neutrality to confrontation (Paloukis in this volume); Islam seen by Kerala's communists through the lens of class struggle; and Hinduism as an ally of inequality and the caste system (Santhosh and Paleri 2023). In Vietnam, the very definition and identification of the religious proved to be a problem (Nghiem in this volume). Conversely, for some communists, receiving a discredited "atheist" label may not have seemed worth it, as in interwar Europe (Pettinaroli 2023), or when this label suffered from an association with dangerous, foreign atheism from the Soviet Union (Nash 2023).

These perceptions of religion and atheism correspond, or not, to the influence of religious traditions and identity as suggested by other sources. Protestantism has

often been said to have had more superficial roots, for instance in East Germany (Tiefensee 2002) and the Czech Lands (Stan and Vancea 2013, 95); "Catholic areas have been able to preserve traditional religious practices better than Protestant areas" (Lea Altnurme quoted in Stan and Vancea 2013, 95). More generally however, both Catholicism and Protestantism are often supposed to have paved the way for secularisation by separating the profane from the sacred (Minois 1998, 452), so Christianity itself has been described "as a constant process of atheization" (Trebežnik 2024). Islam also had its more secular variants, notably in communist Yugoslavia (Vukićević and Lakić 2024). As Borowik, Ančić and Tyrała have argued, however, a structure of religious pluralism or mono-confessionality, whether Roman Catholic or Orthodox, seems to have had a greater impact than the actual majority confession; plurality and a more turbulent religious past go hand in hand with greater de-Christianisation (Borowik, Ančić and Tyrała 2013, 631–635; similar emphasis in Minois 1998, 451; Bubík, Václavík and Remmel 2020, 317; Ališauskienė 2020, 158).

Navigating under different conditions, all communist movements and governments, however, called for a national or even global destiny consisting of the march towards communism. Notwithstanding Marxist theory, religion either was or was not really perceived as an obstacle on this path. The first Soviet five-year plan, from 1928 onwards, and later also Albanian engineers, linked religion to laziness and unproductiveness (Eder 2020; Lukas 2020; Rosenstein 2020; Hoxha in this volume). This is where the question not asked by Stan and Vancea becomes clear: why were communists, busy modernising at breakneck speed, at the same time forcing through atheism? Greek and East German communists, on the contrary, would rather have workers disciplined by religion and religious values (Paloukis in this volume; Guigo-Patzelt 2025, 147). In contrast to this, other communists supposed that industrialisation and social change would speed up atheisation, and indeed, several non-communist commentators and historians attest to the success of this theory (Büscher 1982; Ališauskienė 2020, 158; more subtle in Bubík, Václavík and Remmel 2020, 313). Thanks to a 1929–1930 survey among Moscow workers, Soviet antireligious militants "realized early on that the success of atheism was not bound to philosophical arguments […] but to the material success of a socialist way of life" (Gleixner 2023). Finally, not only workers or, in India, members of lower casts were perceived as needing to be freed from conservative religious values: in 1927, a campaign for the emancipation of women spread in the Muslim parts of the Soviet Union in Central Asia (Schubert 2020). In Western Europe, women were drawn to Haeckel's monism and its perspectives for improving the conditions of the female sex (Weir 2024).

The third set of hypotheses leaves political, social and economic dynamics aside in favour of spiritual considerations. For the Soviet case, Smolkin has brought to light the battle for "Soviet spiritual life" (2018). According to her, the spiritual space not being successfully filled with a certain form of atheism meant that the political project was incomplete or threatened (Weir and Smolkin 2023). Likewise, as Matějka, a specialist on the Czech Lands, put it, the persistence of institutionalised religion was "always a reminder of the incompleteness of the 'new socialist

reality'" (2018, 169). Such considerations would have argued strongly in favour of the atheisation of society. However, in several settings militant atheism came up against an unexpected obstacle in the realm of ideas, namely the conviction that the work had already been done, that religion had already succumbed. The Moscow workers questioned in 1929–1930 declared having deconverted from religion mostly around 1910–1914 and saw no point in carrying on atheist education or propaganda (Gleixner 2024). More generally, "according to *Bezbojnik*, this decline in anti-religious enthusiasm was due to the illusion that the work was finished and that religion was already dead or dying" (Minois 1998, 524). Some decades later, in the GDR, most decision-makers were quite indifferent to both religion and atheism (Guigo-Patzelt 2025). Here again, the idea that a defeated enemy is not worth fighting is in no way specific to communist contexts (see, for instance, Minois 1998, 449). More specific, but hitherto little explored, were reflections made by communists who left the predetermined paths and theories on religion and atheism. The Soviet scholar Yuri Levada, for instance, who was removed from his university at the end of the 1960s, was not convinced of the necessity and feasibility of eradicating religion altogether, which he considered to be a social fact (Kovalskaya 2023). East German scientific atheists reflected on pluralism and the Church taking on a function even in a socialist and communist society, at the very end of the regime (Guigo-Patzelt 2025, 198–200). These marginal communist voices showed the alleged need for atheisation in a different light.

The last set of lines of thought is once again not specific to communist contexts, but takes up phenomena that are well known in studies of secularisation and the nonreligious; for instance, what Stolz, Könemann, Schneuwly Purdie, Englberger and Krüggeler called "secular drift" or "secularising drift", each generation being less religious than the one before.[8] This well-documented trend has been confirmed in certain communist contexts (see, for instance, Wohlrab-Sahr, Karstein and Schmidt-Lux 2009). In certain parts of the Soviet Union, the "scientific atheist socialization of young people" played a more active role (Ališauskienė 2020, 165). But the question asked by Zuckerman about "the possibility of whether or not some people are simply predisposed toward irreligion" (2015, 166) is not without echoes in communist contexts also and deserves further exploration. Some former East Germans have said, for instance, that they were simply "religiously unmusical",[9] in a land developing a "culture of being without a denomination" (Gert Pickel quoted in Schmidt-Lux 2008, 15), permeated with a "popular atheism" (Groschopp 2013). The significance of personal crises in conversion to a religion or deconversion from religion in communist contexts has, on the contrary, been little studied and remains very difficult to grasp. East German scientific atheists thought, at the very end of the 1980s, that there might be something at stake there, and tried to set up possibilities of support in individual crises (Guigo-Patzelt 2024). Decidedly, people could become atheists for many different reasons under communism, as illustrated by the very "founding fathers": according to Minois, "Karl Marx finds himself an atheist naturally, without a crisis", whereas his friend Friedrich Engels had to undergo a painful crisis. Their follower Lenin became an atheist after reading Tchernychevski (Minois 1998, 500–501) and in protest against the Church of

his time (Minois 1998, 480–481). Finally, Stalin is quoted as saying: "I am against religion because I am in favour of science" (quoted in Minois 1998, 521). As the short examples have shown, a unique consideration, for instance an economic one, could also play out in opposite ways; a very precise documentation and competent analysis are therefore necessary, along with a few methodological precautions.

How to Identify an Atheist?

The difficulty in detecting nonbelievers in the past has been much discussed concerning earlier periods (see for instance Febvre 1942; Weltecke 2010), but it applies to 20th-century societies and in various ways. For communist-ruled countries, official statistics always have to be called into question as to their assumptions and categories, which often shift over time as shown in several chapters of this volume (see also Gleixner 2020, 48–49; Tížik 2020, 281). Stan and Vancea have even stated that "the increase in religiosity [after 1989] was, therefore, the result of nothing more than poor measurement during Communist times" and quoted hypotheses about "underground" religious sentiment and citizens "tacitly subvert[ing] official antireligious policies" (2013, 91 and 94). As for Buchenau, he identified a "fake secularity" in Eastern European countries that had undergone authoritarian modernisation, making the population live like seculars but without deep permeation (2024). For Asian contexts, the entanglement of social life and religious practice made the task particularly difficult for the communists (Nghiem in this volume) and poses particular challenges for today's scholars.[10] In all these cases, there is no means to access the consciousness of people who have gone before us, and autobiographies and narratives of (de)conversion should be treated with caution (Gleixner 2024; Weir 2024). In short, "we do not know how the atheism as experienced by people living under the Communist regime was understood" (Borowik, Ančić and Tyrała 2013, 635). On top of this, as Zuckerman put it, "subjective reasons are not necessarily objective causes. That is, while the reasons apostates give as the underlying factors in their rejection of religion are personally true and subjectively real causes of apostasy for them […], these same reasons are not necessarily things that would independently, objectively – in and of themselves – cause apostasy to occur for anyone or everyone. […] while subjective reasons for apostasy are easily discernible, objective causes are much more difficult to uncover" (2015, 163 and 166).

Atheism can be more easily understood on the basis of policies pursued, discourses on atheism, and statements and conceptualisations rooted in different contexts. Early communist Russia and Ukraine seem to have been an exception rather than the general rule. There, as Peris stated, "in Bolshevik political culture, manifestations of a change in worldview were not left primarily to the believer (or non-believer), but had to be expressed and administered in bureaucratic forms […] Unorganized sentiment was not acknowledged to exist" (1998, 8). Yet the League of the (Militant) Godless soon transformed into a "paper tiger" and was closed down in 1936 (Peris 1998; Gleixner 2023, 2024). Organised atheism did not generalise (for the East German example, see Guigo-Patzelt 2024). One-off

socialist rituals were criticised by the militant godless themselves and later on not considered to be a reliable indicator of atheism by scientific atheists, either because they were said to be "a further step after secularisation" (quoted in Guigo-Patzelt 2025, 60) or because religious rituals were denied their genuine religious quality on the grounds that they would yield "a deeper meaning" (Basauri Ziuzina and Kyselov 2020, 300).

Nevertheless, atheism is less broad than the umbrella term "nonreligion" used in today's scholarship, and it was supposed to be more specific and less vague and haphazard. Borowik, Ančić and Tyrała saw the difference between "atheists" and "nonbelievers", according to the claims in the Soviet Union and Yugoslavia, in "the level of intensity of a(nti)religious views" (2013, 625). Indeed, communists in several countries displayed serious concern about the growing indifference towards both religion and atheism (Smolkin 2018; Bubík and Václavík 2020; Bubík, Václavík and Remmel 2020, 319; Remmel and Friedenthal 2020, 99; Vukićević and Lakić 2024; Guigo-Patzelt 2025). They had more easily achieved what Lee has called secularity: the irrelevance of religion (2015, 32–33). According to Tóth, the 1986 dialogue meeting between Marxists and Christians in Budapest can be analysed as "a joint effort at demonstrating their respective relevance" in an increasingly unfavourable context (2023). Some communists tried to oppose this "practical atheism" (Minois) with a "conscious" and "positive" one whose content never ceased to be problematic. For the Soviet case, Gleixner has argued that early Soviet atheism focused on individual deconversion from religion that could by itself come to constitute an atheist worldview. Conversion to atheism remained, however, subject to a tension: "The antireligious researchers apparently did not expect people to simply stop believing but instead implied a conscious commitment to atheism. […] The ideal Soviet citoyen paradoxically did not 'believe' in atheism, but consciously stopped believing in religion" (Gleixner 2020, 56–57). To some, ceasing to attend church, becoming a member of the Party and proclaiming oneself to be godless was enough to be so (Gleixner 2024), a facility that some "militant godless" criticised (Gleixner 2022; see also Borowik, Ančić and Tyrała 2013, 624). Later scientific atheism, still according to Gleixner, relied more on ritual building (Gleixner 2024; see also Tóth 2022, 2024a, 2024b). As shown by Smolkin, a not only "positive" but genuinely "spiritual" form of atheism was to be developed (Smolkin 2018). In several countries, theorists of atheism called for humanism (Bubík and Václavík 2020; Groschopp 2024; Guigo-Patzelt 2025), for strengthening the "socialist way of life", for offering answers about the meaning of life (see also Kiope, Runce and Stasulane 2020, 143). Unsurprisingly, this meaning was to be found in earthly life, implying for instance, depending on the country and the author, the conviction of the final victory of science over religion and of communism over capitalism (Stepanova 2020, 246–247; Guigo-Patzelt 2025, 64–66). Sometimes being an atheist was even reduced to being a trouble-free member of society (Gleixner 2020, 56), yielding certain political rather than spiritual or metaphysic convictions (Guigo-Patzelt 2025). Was communist atheism supposed to functionally replace religion or to move beyond religion-likeness or even religion-relatedness, according to

the alternative formulated by Luehrmann (quoted in Stepanova 2020, 242)? At the beginning of the 1930s a five-year plan is said to have been launched for the complete eradication of religion in the USSR, during which "the very notion of God will have to be erased from the popular mind" (quote in Minois 1998, 523); this was not achieved. The opposition between "religion" and "atheism", however, was not inevitable, as shown by Nghiem in this volume.

* * *

The highlighted complexity of the questions under consideration does not preclude valid analysis, as the following chapters show. Based on advanced scholarly research and on extensive documentation, specialists of a wide range of countries have provided a fresh look on various communist regimes and communist movements outside communist-ruled countries. The chronological progression in this book is designed to help track resonances between different simultaneous contexts and follow a more general trend. In the interwar period, as argued by Kostas Paloukis, early Soviet antireligious politics inspired communists abroad and, together with changes on the national scene, encouraged Greek communists to adopt a less tolerant stance towards the powerful Greek Orthodox Church. After the Second World War, communist militancy for atheism experienced a golden age in Albania; Artan Hoxha chose to shift the focus from the official declaration of Albania as the first (and only) atheist country in the world in 1967 to the less noticed but highly influential group of technocrats and their role in the growing atheism. Marie Lucas and Mikhail Velizhev offer unique insight into confidential debates inside the Vatican in the aftermath of the Second Vatican Council, thanks to an archive collection that has been rediscovered only recently. These discussions reveal a great deal about the actors of this period and their perception of both Italian and international communism.

Several European communist countries took on more ambivalent positions on atheism in the 1970s and 1980s, presented in the second section of this volume. Jan Tesař gives the first overview in scholarship on the atheist Museum for the Development of Social Consciousness in Bratislava, much less successful than its better known Soviet forerunners and partner institutions. Stephen Brown takes the reader inside the reasoning of East German Marxist philosophers in the late 1980s, for whom the topical issues of war and peace led to a reconsideration of the relationship with Christian fellow citizens. Finally, Gašper Mithans and Mateja Režek combine a comprehensive overview of the evolution of atheism and religion in communist Slovenia with a focus on atheist education and its limits.

The last section shifts the focus towards examples from other parts of the world, one of them still under communist rule today. Sayed Hassan Akhlaq's chapter makes the complex logic underpinning successive phases and shifts of Afghan communists towards atheism accessible to the non-specialist reader. And for the first time, Thao Nghiem offers a written account of his PhD research findings on Vietnam communism and atheism.

An international conference in Aubervilliers near Paris in November 2023 offered the opportunity to reflect together and discuss several of the contributions. I would like to extend a warm thanks to all the contributors to this volume and to the stimulating discussions we had there and in various other academic events during the past few years as part of a dynamic research underway. Pierre-Antoine Fabre, Nathalie Luca, Stéphane Eloy and the CéSor research centre (*Centre d'études en sciences sociales du religieux*) in Aubervilliers gave the most valuable support to my project; my sincere thanks go to them and to the administrative staff of the École des Hautes Études en Sciences Sociales (EHESS). The project would not have been possible without the multifaceted support given by the Explaining Atheism programme and its team, namely Jonathan Lanman, Lois Lee and Claire Berlyn. I am grateful for the scientific adventure you took me on, for the trust you placed in me and for the generous financial support. I would also like to thank the John Templeton Foundation for the grant that made this project possible. Thanks to Una Dimitrijevic for the competent proofreading of the manuscript. And to Pierre-Emmanuel Guigo for a wide variety of support for both the conference and this publication.

Notes

1 See the Explaining Atheism programme, managed by Queen's University Belfast, 2023–2024, and its capstone conference "Atheism Explained?", Oxford, June 26–28, 2024.
2 I would like to thank Jean-Numa Ducange for making me realise this fact.
3 Among the available literature, see in particular Thrower (1983); Kääriäinen (1989, 1993); Matějka (2011); Nešpor (2011); Smolkin (2018); Tesař (2019); Tížik and Sivák (2019); Bubík, Remmel and Václavík (2020); Guigo-Patzelt (2025).
4 In the context of French scholarship where this book project arose, the study of nonreligion started mainly with a conference of the French association for the social sciences of religion in 2016 and a follow-up publication (Bréchon and Zwilling 2020). Subsequently, a research network *Le non-religieux* was set up by Anne Lancien and Anne-Laure Zwilling, who are currently preparing a "dictionary of non-religion" (in French), co-edited with Philippe Portier.
5 In 2013, Borowik, Ančić and Tyrała still stated that "persecution of religion and promoting of atheism in the past has rich literature, while reviews of reflection on atheism and sociological research on the phenomenon in Central and Eastern Europe are rarely the subject of systemic overview" (2013, 624). Since then, see in particular Bubík, Remmel and Václavík (2020); Pettinaroli (2021); and the International Conference (yet to be published) "Religious Conversions and Atheization in 20th Century Central and Eastern Europe" organised by Gašper Mithans at Koper, April 22–24, 2024.
6 In addition to the literature already quoted, see Schmidt-Lux (2008); Tóth (2022); Kirsch (2016); Guigo-Patzelt (2024). These other actors correspond in Tesař's paradigm to the "exoteric thought collective" (Tesař 2019).
7 For divergent analyses, see also Minois (1998, 447–450) and Tížik (2020, 269).
8 Stolz, Könemann, Schneuwly Purdie, Englberger and Krüggeler (2014). This generational phenomenon has been confirmed in various talks at the Explaining Atheism capstone conference "Atheism Explained?", Oxford, June 26–28, 2024.
9 Interview of the author with Kurt Fleming and Bernd Stoppe, 27 July 2019.
10 I would like to thank Johannes Quack here for information about his current research project and its challenges on religious indifference in India.

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Section I

The Development of Communist Atheism in Interwar and Post-World War II Europe

1 "Sacred Parasites" or "People's Allies"

The Greek Socialist Movement
between Christian-Socialism
and Bolshevik Anti-Clericalism
(1880–1940)

Kostas Paloukis

Introduction

The current historiography of the Greek left, despite its richness, exhibits a noteworthy gap regarding the exploration of communist perspectives on the Church and religion. Acknowledging this, an effort has been made to address this knowledge gap, particularly focusing on the interwar period. This endeavor is reflected in the recent re-release of the book, *The True History of the Church*, which features an introduction to the subject in the preface. Also, from the perspective of the historiography of the Greek Church, the relationship between communists and the Church has been touched on very little (Anastassiadis 2023). This chapter therefore attempts to address a series of issues that concerned the Greek communist movement, which undoubtedly share common ground with international communism. It begins by briefly examining how the Greek Orthodox religious community evolved into a unified national entity and the subsequent establishment of a secular Greek State under the pressure of Greek Enlightenment thinkers. This process explains the emergence of a vision of a Christian utopian society, which impacted the early 20th-century Greek socialist movement by adopting Christian socialist views, and later influenced a modern, Protestant-like, anti-communist Orthodox trend. The Socialist Workers' Party of Greece (SEKE), founded in 1918 and renamed Communist Party of Greece (KKE) in 1924, formulated radical positions on the State-Church relationship but avoided ideological confrontation. From 1927 to 1930, the KKE adopted harsh anti-clerical positions but returned to non-conflict from 1934 onwards. The chapter examines the intensification of anti-clerical rhetoric within the KKE and the main organization of the Left Opposition, focusing on their relationship with Soviet communism and the Church's response to the communist threat. The Church's anti-communist stance reinforced anti-clericalism and criticism of religion, transforming latent popular anti-clericalism into communist anti-clericalism, culminating in communist atheism. Finally, the chapter briefly examines the conclusion of this anti-clerical era in Greek communism.

The Church in the Greek State: Dividing Lines in Religion and Politics

The Greek Enlightenment, through the Greek Revolution of 1821, transformed the Ottoman Orthodox Rum Millet into the Greek nation based on a modern Greek State. The Greek Enlightenment thinkers, liberal intellectuals, and political figures of the Revolution were characterized by fierce political anti-clericalism, but they never rejected religion entirely. Their main goal was to Hellenize the Orthodox dogma and the Church. The purpose was achieved as Orthodoxy became integrated into Greek nationalism, and the Church was subordinated to the Greek State (Apekas 2023). Specifically, when the independent State emerged in 1830, it recognized Orthodoxy as the dominant religion, and in 1833 it founded the Autocephalous Church of Greece in complete independence from the Ecumenical Patriarch, who remained an official of the Ottoman Empire, an enemy State (Anastassiadis 2023, XVII–XXVI). At the same time, the newly established State, shaped by the Ottoman heritage of a multi-religion State structure, recognized rights for religious minorities based on tolerance (Anastassiadis 2023, 19–61). This specific process of secularizing Greek society and the laicization of the State allowed for the emergence of two competing trends concerning religion and the Church. One trend upheld the Orthodox faith, maintaining its absolute dominance in society, and gaining the unconditional recognition of faithful citizens. In fact, conservative resistance to ecclesiastical reforms, based on the anti-Enlightenment tradition of Orthodox Church and the pro-Russian party called the "Russian Party" and intellectuals, often took the form of popular uprisings against the throne. The other trend, however, rooted in the Enlightenment heritage, fostered a form of anti-clericalism that was latent within the popular strata but was often expressed in the public sphere by democratic intellectuals, journalists, and politicians. The Enlightenment's affirmation of religion's significance in Greek identity prevented the embrace of atheism or deism. Ultimately, as Anastassiadis mentions, the Greek model of Church and religion represents a distinct form of modernity, not an inferior or backward one (Anastassiadis 2023, 19–61).

In the 19th century, a new ideological synthesis emerged through the work of the theologian Apostolos Makrakis. His passionate defense of Christian values and his critique of Enlightenment ideals set him apart from his contemporaries and profoundly influenced subsequent generations of Greek thinkers. For example, he championed a distinct Christian-rooted interpretation of equality, brotherhood, and freedom as a contrast to the Western perspective (Brang 1992, 218–219). He linked ancient Hellenism with Orthodoxy and envisioned Christianocracy, a Platonian Christian utopian society (Karakosta 2004, 36–39) where material concerns are subordinated to spiritual values, enabling the realization of communal ownership and equality among its members (Brang 1992, 219). Makrakis's advocacy for a politicized Church and his religious discourse resonated with conservative circles, shaping 20th-century Greek nationalism. His students founded the conservative extra-ecclesiastical organization, *Nea Zoi* (New Life), which combined nationalist Orthodox Christianity, anti-plutocrat rhetoric, and social messages. Operating with

a Protestant-like missionary character, which, in the eyes of traditional Orthodox believers, looked like a secular path, it established periodicals and youth clubs, influencing ecclesiastical life, particularly in the 1928 Church reform and the 1933 missionary directions, and leading the anti-communist religious struggle (Dimano-poulou 2010). Makrakis created a new nationalist-Orthodox political tradition that incorporated many modern trends.

Between Marx and Jesus: Christian Socialism in Greece in the Late 19th and Early 20th Centuries

During the late 19th and early 20th centuries, the early Greek socialists were influenced by a synthesis of liberal Enlightenment thought, Protestant influences, radical ideals emanating from the British Ionian Islands, and the distinctive Orthodox theology of Makrakis. This led some to not only embrace religion but also cultivate a unique strain of Orthodox Christian socialism. They aimed to subordinate the religious message to their socialist ideology, seeking to replicate the successes of secular democratic and patriotic nationalism or nationalist theology. In the late 19th century, during a serious economic crisis faced by grape farmers, social protests in the Peloponnese were expressed through Christian rhetoric drawing inspiration from the work of theologian Makrakis (Kalafatis 1993). Thus, anarcho-Christian ideas and practices spread among the radicalized peasants of Pyrgos and Achaia, the regions in the west and north Peloponnese. Christian socialists developed a religious-utopian anarchism based on a popular understanding of Christianity (Dimitriou 1985, 183). Under this historical context, in April 1894, the socialist newspaper *Alitheia* (Truth) was published, popularizing the teachings of those "who desire the application of the principles of Jesus" (Noutsos 1995, 76). In 1900, the socialist-agrarian Marinos Antypas from Kefalonia published the newspaper *Anastasis* (Resurrection), which featured a prominent Christian underpinning of the socialist ideal (Noutsos 1995, 95). However, the term "Christian socialism" was first introduced in 1893 in an article written by A. Dimitriadis in the magazine *Socialist* published by the famous socialist Stavros Kallergis (Noutsos 1995, 189).

Nevertheless, Plato Drakoulis's pioneering synthesis of Christian values and socialist aspirations made him the most prominent figure within the ranks of Greek Christian socialists. Drakoulis coined the term "σωσιαλισμός" (socialism with the omega -ω-) in the Greek language, combining the Greek word for "savior" (σωτήρας) with the English term "socialism". However, this term did not prevail (*Erevna*, August 14, 1911). By 1887, Drakoulis had immersed himself in British socialist circles, studying at Oxford. He even participated in the founding of the Second International in 1889. In 1901, he published the magazine *Έρευνα/Erevna* (Research) in Oxford, which he transferred to Athens in 1908. In 1910, he founded the Association of the Working Classes of Greece, when he secured an independent seat in the parliament.

The newspaper *Erevna* supported that, according to the Gospel, "the Church must sympathize with the socialist who criticizes the current organization of

industrial society and ally with him in demanding the reorganization of industrial society on the basis of equality, brotherhood, and justice" (January 23, 1911). According to this perspective, Jesus himself is the leader of the labor movement. The rumors that socialism aims to destroy religion were considered slanderous. On the contrary, "capitalism truly destroys religion because instead of the worship of God, it imposes the worship of Mammon, while socialism will eradicate the worship of money". In practice, "socialism is the application of Christianity" (*Erevna*, January 1, 1912). Drakoulis's journal contains several letters from enthusiastic supporters of this idea. Drakoulis's views had a profound influence on the labor movement in its early stages. For instance, during the 1910s, inside the Labor Center of the city of Volos, pictures of Jesus and Plato Drakoulis adorned the walls alongside figures like Karl Marx. Furthermore, the Labor Center's newspaper *Erghatis* (Εργάτης: The Worker) featured numerous articles that aimed to bridge the gap between the ideals of Christianity and socialism. For example, in an article titled "Socialism and Christianity", a newspaper columnist analyzes in detail Drakoulis's views that "socialism is based on Christian principles". The evangelical influences from the British magazine "Interpreter" are mentioned (*Erghatis*, October 23, 1908). The newspaper's motto, displayed prominently at the top of the page, proclaimed "Freedom, Equality, and Brotherhood". Below this appeared the inscription: "God and Our Right". Notably, these texts lack explicit anti-clericalism and criticism of the Church and clergy. This omission can be attributed to the Greek Church's avoidance of political involvement and a lack of any established anti-socialist agenda at that time. These early socialists aspired for cooperation rather than conflict with the clergy.

Drakoulis and the other Christian Socialists established an ideological paradigm that permeated the working classes and the left during the interwar period. This paradigm continued to be influential during the era of the national liberation struggle against the Axis occupation and has endured to the present day. It formed an integral part of the informal "grassroots socialism" or "grassroots communism" embraced by most workers and peasants who joined communist and socialist parties or became members of their political fronts.

The New Marxist Socialism 1918–1924: Non-Political Religious Tolerance and Freedom of Conscience

In the mid-1910s, a new generation of radical socialists in Athens would shape a new kind of socialism that rejected any Christian content, despite Drakoulis's profound influence on their thought. This development enabled socialists from Old Greece to unite with non-Greek and non-Christian socialists from the regions of Macedonia and Thrace, incorporated into Greece in 1913, particularly with Jewish socialists from Thessaloniki. Together, they would shape a purely secular socialist discourse. This new form of socialism would adhere to the principles of the Second Socialist International and would be explicitly Marxist and later Leninist.

In the founding text of the Socialist Labor Party of Greece (Σοσιαλιστικό Εργατικό Κόμμα Ελλάδας), SEKE in 1918, a series of democratic, liberal, and

secular demands regarding the interaction between the Church, the State, and society were articulated for the first time in Greek history by a political party. Specifically, it called for the "freedom of all religions without the need for an official religion". Moreover, it emphasized the necessity for "religion to be recognized as a private matter and the church as a private institution". In a similar vein, the issue of prohibiting the clergy from teaching in schools was raised, along with the proposal for the performance of notarial acts under local administration. Furthermore, it suggested the "repeal of all public laws related to ecclesiastical and religious purposes that impose taxes". Lastly, it articulated the request for the establishment of civil marriage (*The First Congress of SEKE (1918)* (KKE 1982, 140). These founding positions primarily reflected the traditional radical demands for the secularization of society and the laicization of the State. Despite this, they did not engage in direct ideological conflict with religion and the Church. So, although SEKE would affiliate with the Communist International after 1919, adding "Communist" to its name (SEKE(K)), these demands did not reappear in the minutes of the Second Congress (1919) (KKE 1974, 50–75) or the Party's electoral program (1920) (KKE 1974, 124–128).

Indeed, traces of anti-clerical discourse can be detected in the Party newspapers. In a 1918 article published in the official Party newspaper *Erghatikos Aghon* (Εργατικός Αγών: Workers' Struggle) defending the Bolshevik revolution, priests and their wealth were criticized. Notably, the derogatory term "men of the robe" was used for the first time to refer to priests (*Erghatikos Aghon*, November 18, 1918). Three years later, an article titled "Priestocracy" attacked priests' political alignment and called them derogatory names like "Greek Rasputins" and "black leeches", claiming that they "live off the backs of the working people and it is time for them to rid us of their filth" (*Ergatikos Aghon*, May 23, 1921). The October Revolution's influence is evident, but a major break with religion wouldn't happen for the Greek socialists until later. The reason for this neutral stance toward the clergy is the persistence of a democratic interpretation of the role of priests in Greek society. According to a historical article in *Erghatikos Aghon*, the Orthodox clergy, although attached to the aristocracy during the Byzantine period, lost its aristocratic ally after the Ottoman conquest. Unable to reconcile itself with the infidel conqueror, it was confined to its enslaved flock, sharing with them all the humiliations of servitude. As a result, the clergy acquired closer ties with the Greek people, at the same time acquiring a democratic mentality (*Erghatikos Aghon*, March 28, 1921).

The leader of SEKE, Georgios Georgiadis, clarified his stance on religion in a 1920 text, rejecting claims that socialists wanted to destroy it. He saw freedom of religion as personal and emphasized education as key to overcoming superstitions. While respecting all religions, he criticized "reactionary intellectuals" for manipulating religion for political gain. As proof of his respect for religions, he presented the SEKE as a multi-religious party since it consisted of Christians, Jews, and Muslims (*Ergatikos Aghon*, November 15, 1920). The Soviet Union inspired Greek socialists. Specifically, Georgiadis claimed Bolsheviks respected individual religious freedom, even citing communist priests "who teach that communism

comes from Christ". Thus, according to Georgiadis, in the Soviet Union science was emphasized, but religious sentiment was protected. Only charlatan clerics exploiting religion faced State action (*Rizospastis*, September 29, 1921). Exploring the phenomenon of religion, Georgiadis distinguished personal faith from religion. According to him, "the first Christian church […] which brought the higher spirit of Christ had been established on completely communist democratic bases". As such, he initially viewed Christianity as a democratic movement for the poor. According to Georgiadis, Karl Marx appeared to heal misery, but instead of the gospel, he held up political economy. On the one hand, "Christianity is the religion" of those who are going to die, and, on the other hand, "socialism is the religion of those who are forced to live". Therefore, the "two religions can coexist". Socialism may declare religion to be an internal matter for each individual but urges Christianity to embrace the workers' struggle instead of remaining neutral (*Rizospastis*, December 25, 1919). After a two-year period, Georgiadis exhibited a trajectory of increasing skepticism toward religion. He blamed Christianity's division of material and spiritual man as failing to solve the problem of life "because it ignored the real needs of man". Socialism appeared as the only path to the complete liberation of man, precisely because it did not make this distinction. On this path, the Christian religion could not help because it was structurally conservative (*Rizospastis*, December 25, 1921).

In essence, Georgiadis championed religious tolerance and freedom of conscience as fundamental tenets of socialism. Rather than violently combating religion, socialists sought to enlighten the population through the dissemination of scientific knowledge. In this socialist model, religion was expected to remain confined to the realm of personal conviction, strictly apolitical. Notably, socialists denounced the political exploitation of the clergy and Church by bourgeois parties, advocating for a non-political approach to religion. In other words, this strand of socialism stood in stark contrast to Christian socialism, while not entirely rejecting the potential utility of Christianity. Drawing chiefly on the liberal reformist tradition of the Greek Enlightenment and, of course, the Bolsheviks, it exhibited latent anti-religious sentiment that only occasionally surfaced, seemingly deviating from the official line.

From Insult Voices to Atheist Vanguard: The Rise of Communist Anti-Clericalism (1924–1934)

In 1924, the KKE (former SEKE) was bolshevized as part of the Communist International. The transformation toward communism was forged through an alliance of various groups, including militant Jewish tobacco workers in Macedonia, traditionally radicalized professions with a guild history, such as shoe workers and bakery workers, refugee workers from Istanbul, and most notably, the dynamic and massive war veterans' movement. The new leaders under war veteran Pantelis Pouliopoulos declared themselves communists and openly adopted anti-patriotic positions, forcing the previous leadership under Georgios Georgiadis out of the Party. Although the Party's official texts continued to avoid an overt anti-clerical

agenda, there was a consensus within the Party to adopt the Bolshevik perspective on religious matters. For example, there was a strong demand to grant monastic estates to landless war veterans who occupied and claimed them by force, enduring harsh repression from the army. However, no positions were formulated for the Church in the 1924 Congress, which was to make the most anti-nationalist decisions.

In 1925, prompted by the Turkish State's expulsion of Patriarch Constantine VI, the KKE grappled with the Church's role in society for the first time. Fearing manipulation by the Greek State to incite another war, the KKE condemned the Patriarchate as a tool of the bourgeoisie and its imperialist agenda. Communist columnists in *Rizospastis* differentiated between the genuine religious devotion of the working class and the politically motivated stance of the bourgeoisie, prioritizing the people's interests over religious concerns (*Rizospastis,* February 1, 1925). At the end of 1926, Lenin's article, titled "Socialism and Religion: Separation of Church and State", was published in the Party's newspaper *Rizospastis*, expressing the demand for the separation of Church and State. Notably, it declared "anti-religious propaganda" as a Party duty, marking a shift from previous vagueness. While embracing atheism within its ideology, the communist party acknowledged individual religious freedom, opting for "translation and wide dissemination of 18th-century French educational and atheistic literature" as Engels suggested. This reflected a conscious return to Enlightenment ideals. Yet, Lenin cautioned that "no book, no teaching" could liberate the proletariat, emphasizing the crucial role of their own struggle against capitalism. Imposing atheism was deemed divisive and counterproductive. Instead, the goal was to render "religion a truly private matter vis-à-vis the State" (*Rizospastis*, December 29, 1926). This article can be viewed as a representative example of communist literature and practice concerning issues of the Church and religion. It openly endorsed the struggle against religion, the promotion of atheism, and the separation of the State from the Church.

In 1928, the Communist Party of Greece adopted the Third Period policy of the Communist International, also known as the Class Against Class Line. During this time, the communist parties adopted a more radical and militant approach to revolution, believing that the world was on the verge of a final struggle between capitalism and communism. The Greek Party became more focused on class conflict and opposition to all other political forces, including social democrats and Trotskyists. The Party also adopted more aggressive tactics, such as strikes, demonstrations, and even insurrections (Paloukis 2020). In this most radical context, while the KKE continued to avoid addressing the Church in its conference resolutions, anti-clericalism began to intensify in articles that appeared in the Party's newspaper. It published anti-clerical short stories by the 19th-century writer Andreas Laskaratos (September 13–14, 1927) and the novel *Pope Joan* by Emmanuel Rhoidis (January 19, 1928). Gradually, commentaries on the sexual abuse of children by priests were accompanied by titles such as "The Orgies of Men of the Cloth" (April 3, 1928). The "wonderful cooperation between the police and the Church" (March 15, 1929) was condemned, and the central role of a priest in the political affairs of a village was stigmatized. The financial exploitation of villagers was denounced

in responses with titles like "The Works (with a negative meaning) of the Representatives of God" (September 2, 1929) or "Priests, Lackeys of the Rich" (April 27, 1930). Until 1930, the basic anti-clerical communist agenda was taking shape, and over the next three years, it escalated significantly. Articles that intensified the critique of priests mainly focused on the immorality of their actions, including negative comments on homosexual acts (June 9, 1931), the perceived "corruption" of young girls (April 1, 1931), and the connections between priests and usurious activities (March 22, 1931). Evidently, there were articles that characterized religion as the "poison of the people" (March 1, 1931). However, during the same period, *Rizospastis* also sought to dispel the myth of "persecution of religion in the Soviet Union" (February 18, 1930).

The Archeio-Marxists were the most important Trotskyist organization in Greece and one of the largest organizations of the International Left Opposition in Europe. The Archeio-Marxist organization was founded in the early 1920s and operated at times internally and externally in the SEKE/KKE, representing mainly strata of male artisan workers and radicalized war disabled (Paloukis 2020). Their journal *Communismos* (Communism) and later *Archeion Marxismou* (Archive of Marxism) did not contain any articles or editorials that were critical of the religion or the Church. The main anti-Church propaganda was probably carried out in the educational courses. When the Archeio-Marxist organization published the newspaper *Pali ton Taxeon* (Πάλη των Τάξεων: Struggle of the Classes) in 1930, it immediately began a series of articles on the topic of "Fatherland, Religion and Family". This is possibly the first Greek theoretical communist anti-religious text.

The article series examines the conflict between religion and science, the Marxist take on Christianity's emergence, and the Church's alleged reactionary role in class struggle. It portrays the bourgeoisie as initially revolutionary against the Church but later aligning with it against the proletariat, leading to State support for the Church. The article argues that Christianity is incompatible with communism; the class struggle is a necessary result of capitalism and cannot be eliminated by religious platitudes. Moreover, the Christian message of love and forgiveness serves the interests of the ruling classes by calling on the oppressed not to revolt. The working class is thus the true bearer of truth and science and will eventually lead to the downfall of religion. The author argues that religion will eventually disappear because science dispels the darkness of ignorance on which religion relies; Marxism provides a scientific explanation of the laws of society that shows that there is no need for supernatural forces; and modern industrial work teaches workers a materialist understanding of the world. In the communist society of the future, people will be masters of nature and society and will have no need for religion (*Pali ton Taxeon*, March 13, 1931). The article lacks militant anti-clericalism and harsh popular expressions. The spirit of the text does not declare an immediate war on the Church but is mainly limited to a theoretical level in a critique of the religious phenomenon. Soon, *Pali ton Taxeon* published Lenin's article "Socialism and Religion" (April 17 and 24, 1931), which would be re-released in *Rizospastis* during 1933.

The moral dimension was consistently used as an anti-clerical motif. A *Rizospastis* correspondent exposed the abuse of a young monk by older monks from a specific monastery, revealing financial scandals that had occurred (July 15, 1932). Another correspondent complained about a sexton who had "corrupted five 6-year-old girls and two 8-year-old boys". In fact, he noted that the sexton "enticed them into the sanctuary with candies" and "transmitted diseases to them" (April 27, 1933). The accusation of anti-communism is combined with irreverent, stereotypical anti-clerical language: "The priests who know how to make speeches against communism are proven to hide intrigue, falsehood and corruption under their cassocks" (November 1, 1932). A similar anti-clerical discourse can also be found in *Pali ton Taxeon.* For example, in a police report news about an abbot arrested for possessing hashish, he is ironically called "God's representative", while the columnist mocks religion by commenting that "hashish is the magic key to opening the heavens" (February 4 and 7, 1933). Another article in *Pali ton Taxeon* serves as an example of popular traditional anti-clericalism intertwined with communist ideology. A priest in Corfu is accused of accumulating wealth through the exploitation of pious donations. Similar accusations extend to monasteries in the Peloponnese, where monks are depicted as enjoying lavish lifestyles built upon the labor of local peasants. The article alleges immoral activities by the clergy, including accusations of lascivious behavior with local women, violence against peasants, and infanticide resulting from illicit relationships (February 26, 1932).

Communist newspapers began to raise awareness about the daily challenges faced by farmers and workers in their interactions with the Church. Until that point, the publication of such reports was unthinkable. In some cases, specific instances of parishioners standing up against abusive priests became public knowledge, whereas they would have previously remained hidden. Additionally, the law requiring compulsory financial support for the churches sparked a reaction among villagers, seemingly spurred by communists. When news of the new law reached a village, "the impoverished community mobilized, appointed a 4-member committee, gathered 100 signatures in opposition to the law, and sent them to the Ministry of Education by telegraph" (*Neos Rizospastis*, October 10, 1932).

Gradually, the grievances against the Church merged with a critical examination of religion itself. In another response to *Rizospastis*, it was argued that when the "village priests lament because the humble do not attend church", their sorrow is not "for the sake of God", but rather "because the parishioners' offerings are diminishing". According to the response, "this example and others help the villagers understand the role that religion plays today" (April 26, 1932). The theological interpretation of injustice was often critiqued, with the assertion that "the cause of human suffering is not the bourgeoisie", but rather "the allegedly sinful young people who do not attend church and establish unions" (July 16, 1932). Other responses criticized the insincere charity of priests and the readiness of public opinion to resort to violent actions against a priest in response to perceived injustices (December 1, 1933).

In summary, Georgios Georgiadis's Marxist paradigm was fading, making way for a new, pure Bolshevik one that was anti-clergy and anti-religious. The prevalent

yet subdued anti-clerical sentiments among the common people became politicized and aligned with the communist perspective on ecclesiastical matters. What is most significant is that this discourse surfaced, becoming a highly visible and political discussion.

Shifts in the Church's Stance: From Religious Institution to Political Actor

The rise of anti-clericalism in communist groups was not solely driven by Bolshevik ideology. During the interwar period, the Greek Church itself underwent a "Reform". Shifting to active societal intervention, it resulted in a radically different and more secular function (Anastassiadis 2023, 157–12, 215–217). The reformers, led by Archbishop of Athens, Chrysostomos Papadopoulos, were influenced by Makrakis, Anglicanism, and the organization Zoe, and relied on the liberal modernizers of the Eleftherios Venizelos Party (Anastassiadis 2023, 249–270). The democratic State of 1923–1936 needed a dynamic nationalist Church to integrate the mosaic of populations it inherited due to wars and to address the social tension of the interwar period. Together, Church and State, in order to achieve political control and national homogenization, sacrificed religious tolerance and their neutrality toward political parties. However, the Church also took on its own distinct agenda of conservative reaction. The reformist hierarchs tried to combat the libertarian tendencies brought about by the modern way of life and the religious disappointment of the faithful, which was expressed by their withdrawal from Church rituals. Alarmed by the petty bourgeoisie imitation of the new bourgeois lifestyle which, in contrast to the "Athenian aristocracy", had escaped religious influence, the Church resorted to moral panic with anti-plutocratic and anti-modern characteristics. The Church now assumed a political role by investing in the field of social action and education, with the creation of catechism schools, propaganda mechanisms, and charitable institutions (Anastassiadis 2023, 157–212, 303–347).

In this context, the development of communism in the slums was not only considered a political opposition but was stigmatized as a symptom of this moral crisis (Anastassiadis 2023, 303–340). More broadly, various agencies and newspapers exerted consistent pressure on the Holy Synod to engage with the youth and address communism. For example, in 1931, following the murder of a police officer by communists, a committee of bourgeois organizations asked the Archbishop of Athens to lead the fight against communism. They requested that the Holy Synod send circulars to all priests to teach in favor of the State, the homeland, and the family, to monitor and denounce any anti-national propaganda, and to give anti-communist lectures to soldiers and sailors (*Akropolis*, September 9, 1931; *Esperini*, August 8, 1931). These calls to the Church were reiterated numerous times. It appeared that the Church responded to this new national role. The denunciations of anti-communist proclamations and anti-communist lessons in churches all over Greece were increasing in communist newspapers (*Neos Rizospastis*, May 5, 1932, July 24, 1932, November 2, 1932, December 22, 1932). For example, in one article, "the village priest" is accused of being "the leader of all reaction. He has

friendships with all the informers and thieves, and through them he goes to exterminate the honest and conscientious villagers" (*Neos Rizospastis*, April 9, 1932). According to *Rizospastis*, the priests' anti-communist actions revealed "the role of religion and the clergy, who openly served capitalism by supporting the war it was preparing against Soviet Russia". Simultaneously, the priests "called for intensified measures to exterminate fighters from the working and poor peasant class" (*Neos Rizospastis*, April 20, 1932). In the 1932 elections, *Rizospastis* lamented that "the dear fathers of the Church also armed themselves with their own weapons, crosses, and gospels and began to fight against us!". Furthermore, the Bishop of Chalcis appeared to be escalating his attack with anathemas: "Let him who votes for the United Front be excommunicated for all eternity. Let him find no peace on earth, nor rest after death" (*Neos Rizospastis*, October 3, 1932). This language is highly inflammatory and serves to underline the deep divisions that existed in Greek society at the time and the new political role of the clergy.

On October 12, 1933, the Holy Synod made a momentous decision that marked the turn of the Greek Church toward militant action against anti-religious and anti-Church propaganda and the communist threat through religious societies for the youth, journals, radio broadcasts, and Sunday sermons. An "internal mission" was established. Lay missionaries were dispersed to the centers of workers' organizations (cafes, wine shops, workers' centers, etc.). Women missionaries were recruited for families, factories, and any place where women worked. Similarly, special missionaries were appointed for hospitals, institutions, and the army, as well as for each naval ship (*Minutes of the Holy Synod*, December 11, 1933). In the same decision, two books were banned from bookstores: *The True History of the Church from 1821–1921* by Marxist theologian Kostas Apekas and *Holy Mountain: The Saints without Masks* by communist writer Themos Kornaros (see below).

Subsequently, on November 9, 1933, along with a letter of protest against the banning of the books, an article by Apekas appeared on the front page of the Trotskyist newspaper *Pali ton Taxeon*, titled "Religion as the People's Opium: The Efforts of the Men of the Cloth to Impose a New Spiritual Middle Age and the Significance of the 'Internal Mission'". A second article, a continuation of the first, was published in the same newspaper on December 2 with the title: "The Spiritual Reaction: The Work of the Clerics' Mafia". Apekas exposed the Church's "internal mission" as a manipulative tool to stifle dissent and maintain the status quo. Targeting youth through schools and universities, the Church's campaign used anti-communist indoctrination, promises of an idyllic afterlife for the poor, and veiled anti-wealth rhetoric to control young minds. According to Apekas, religion came about to serve the powerful, exploiting the faith of the "backward layers" for control. The Church, he argued, was "born to legitimize the power of the exploiters", the clergy's teachings justifying the status quo. Offering an imaginary afterlife to distract from earthly suffering, it ensures a passive acceptance of exploitation. "Whoever suffers here", they preach, "will be rewarded in the other world which is eternal", diverting attention from present injustices. Invoking the transcendent, they cultivate a "deceitful" acceptance of the status quo, stifling any questioning of power structures. This "fatalism", Apekas argued, aims to "deceive the masses"

and maintain the existing order through blind faith (*Pali ton Taxeon*, November 9, and December 2, 1933).

Church reforms sacrificed neutrality and ignited State-backed pressure to fight communism, converting it into a modern nationalist State institution. Communist newspapers retaliated, portraying the Church as a capitalist tool, further deepening societal divisions. The Church responded with an "internal mission" and censorship, escalating the conflict.

The Blasphemous Communism: Marxist Visions of Religion and Church

During the two years of heightened communist anti-clericalism, specifically 1932–1933, the newspaper *Rizospastis* endeavored to develop a theoretical framework for its critique of the Church and religion. It published the Paris Commune's decisions on religion (March 20, 1932), showcasing the socialist approach, and promoted the Soviet model (October 30, 1932). Yaroslavki's book *The Church in the Service of Imperialism* launched this effort, published around Easter 1932 (April 26, 1932).

Nevertheless, Greek communists sought to develop their own theory addressing ecclesiastical and religious matters that were intertwined with Greek issues. The most important Marxist text was Kostas Apekas' book, *The True History of the Church*, published in October 1933. The author challenges the prevailing narrative regarding the Church's role in the history of the Greek nation. He adopts the Marxist framework for the Greek Revolution of 1821, as initially formulated by the pioneering Marxist historian Gianis Kordatos in 1924. He discerns a tradition of popular anti-clericalism, marked by discontent with the oppression and exploitation perpetrated by the clergy. This discontent served as the ideological basis for the liberal ecclesiastical reform during the 1821 Revolution and the Regency of Otto. Despite its concessions, the Regency laid the groundwork for a more modern relationship between Church and State. Initially, the Greek bourgeoisie, in its conflict with feudal elements in revolutionary Greece, sought to subjugate and curtail the clergy. However, after prevailing over the feudal elements, the bourgeoisie sought to ally with the Church to exploit its influence over the people. Apekas interprets this development as a compromise, since the Church transformed into an ideological and political apparatus of the bourgeois class (Apekas 2023). The banned book by Themos Kornaros is a fictionalized account of the author's experiences working as a laborer on Mount Athos, a monastic peninsula in Greece. He alleges that he witnessed drug dealing, prostitution, alcoholism, and violence. He also criticizes the hierarchical structure of the monasteries, which he sees as oppressive and exploitative. It is perhaps the most blasphemous literary text of the time, a shocking testimony to the "debaucheries" between Elders and the subordinate novice monks on "Holy Mount" (Kornaros 1933). In 1930, the Holy Synod had also condemned the communist poet and writer Kostas Varnalis for his excessively bold language, his "free love", and his "lesbianism", but also for his irreverent and anti-clerical speech (Anastassiadis 2023, 303–340).

Additionally, theoretical perspectives with a communist dimension on religion and the Church can be found in a series of articles. In December 1932, *Rizospastis* published articles by Apekas. He argued that religion itself, not just the Church, served as a tool for class oppression, "linked with the theft of the worker's labor". He saw priests as "camouflaged" agents of capitalism, tasked with "lulling the working masses to slumber" through sermons and rituals. He acknowledged existing popular resistance, citing widespread "indignation against the sacred parasites" evident in folklore. But this lacked organization. His aim was to harness this sentiment, transforming it into a structured communist movement with an anti-clerical backbone. His articles represent a critical moment in developing a uniquely Greek, class-focused theory of communist anti-clericalism (December 17 and 20, 1932). After the ban of his book, Apekas wrote two articles in *Pali ton Taxeon* against the internal mission of the Holy Synod. Apekas employed a vocabulary that incorporated contemporary communist political expressions to critique the exploitation, hypocrisy, and deception perpetrated by the clergy. His anti-clerical style was notably irreverent, considering that priests and the Church were institutions and individuals surrounded not only by social prestige but also by religious sanctity. For instance, the clergy was characterized as the "little buzzards of holy vermin" or "medieval ravens". On certain occasions, the language became highly offensive, portraying priests as "dissolute, perpetually intoxicated by the fumes of their debauchery" and "immersed up to their necks in the putridity of sacrificial corruption", among other derogatory descriptions. The Enlightenment tradition strongly influenced Apekas' perception: he viewed the people as often simplistic and backward, making them vulnerable to the idleness and deceit of the religious "gang". He saw religion and the Church as the "last asset" of capitalism, particularly in times of crisis. Consequently, he considered the role of the proletariat and earnest progressive intellectuals to be central to his Enlightenment project, which is inherently tied to revolutionary action. For this reason, he advocated for an enlightening "crusade against the medieval crows" attempting to exploit the destitution of the poor (*Pali ton Taxeon*, November 9, 1933, December 2, 1933).

In Easter 1933, Lenin's "Socialism and Religion" was published in *Rizospastis*. While advocating religious freedom, Lenin saw it as incompatible with the Party's goals. Within the framework of an exploitative society, "religion is also a spiritual pressure that always and everywhere weighs on the masses" (April 16, 1933). Lenin rejected mandatory atheism, asserting that "religion is a private affair". Nonetheless, he simultaneously argued that communists were justified in not considering religion a private matter concerning the Party (April 16, 1933). In December 1933, another anti-clerical text authored by an unidentified writer was featured in *Rizospastis*. The KKE explicitly distanced itself from Christian socialist theories, labeling them as detrimental and perilous. They rejected the notion that "religion, especially the Christian one, is somehow connected to and 'evolves' into 'socialism'" because it "supposedly endorses the same principles as those proclaimed by socialism and communism". The communists were characterized by an atheistic stance: "Communists, as committed materialists, do not believe in the mystical metaphysical powers of deities. Instead, they base their worldview on dialectical

materialism, prioritizing matter over spirit, and they openly and consistently profess their opposition to religion". Members of the KKE were thus urged to establish the groundwork in the country "for a broad anti-religious struggle, especially now that capitalism and its State possess an increasing array of means to underscore religious sentiment" (December 25, 1933). Concurrently, *Pali ton Taxeon* published an article ("Communism and Religion") arguing that Christianity, as capitalism's tool, lulls the oppressed masses (December 31, 1932).

One of the most notable achievements of the interwar period was the emergence of "a new progressive ordinary man", a left-leaning populace (Paloukis 2020). Atheism, particularly in a militant form, was to be included in the cultural archetype of this figure. In other words, communist organizations, for the first time in Greek history, introduced the social and cultural archetype of the atheist within the working, rural, and broader popular strata. Considering that the Greek Enlightenment of the 18th and 19th centuries did not prominently feature atheist currents, but instead primarily rationalized social interpretations of religion, this represented a significant intersection in the evolution of Greek society. From this perspective, communist organizations have been seen by some scholars as making a pivotal contribution to the cultural modernization and enlightenment of the popular classes.

From Anti-Clericalism to Cooperation: The Time of Republican Communism

In 1936, articles and responses related to priests engaging in orgies and attacks on the Church and religion ceased to appear in *Rizospastis*. Anti-clerical discourse was entirely absent. The Sixth Plenary Session of the KKE Central Committee (1934) (KKE 1975, 10–34) projected that the impending revolution would initially assume a bourgeois-democratic character, eventually transitioning into a socialist revolution. This shift was confirmed at the Sixth KKE Congress (1935) (KKE 1975, 279–328), which set the new goal of establishing a People's Democratic government through the formation of a Popular Front and a People's Democratic-Popular Movement. The fundamental transformation occurred during the Resistance period with the establishment of the National Liberation Front (EAM) and the central political slogan of "People's Democracy". Retreating from their "Third Period" anti-parliamentary rhetoric and positioning themselves as defenders of Greek democracy, the communists embraced the republican Greek tradition, transforming themselves into authentic exponents of the 19th-century Greek patriotic Enlightenment. Essentially, the KKE followed the international trend of communist parties adopting the patriotic democratic traditions of each nation. Notably, during the same period, the French communists, retreating from their "third-period" anti-parliamentary rhetoric and declaring themselves defenders of the French Republic, adopted the republican French tradition and thus transformed into new Jacobins (Brower 1968). This transformation necessitated a broader reevaluation of Greek history, encompassing the role of the clergy, religion, and the Church. The communists gradually returned to approaches like those of Georgios Georgiadis. They strictly relegated the religious question to the private sphere, calling for

cooperation with the clergy, and leaving open the possibility of Christian socialist perspectives. In fact, during the national liberation movement of the 1940s, the KKE sought an alliance with ordinary priests. The Party's followers typically embraced these ideas, even though most of the members were atheists. At the same time, communists with an internationalist and hard anti-clerical agenda, like Kostas Apekas, turned to Trotskyist organizations.

Conclusion

In conclusion, until 1940 the Greek socialist movement navigated a complex and evolving relationship with religion and the Church, covering a spectrum of views ranging from Christian socialism to militant atheism and political anti-clericalism. To understand this variety, it is worth noting that Greek society has never been completely homogeneous regarding these issues, despite the dominance of Orthodoxy. From the formation of the liberated nation, the fundamental paradigm shaped by the Greek Enlightenment was the call for a rationalized and democratic reform of the Church, subordinating it under the Greek secular State like the Protestant model. This included the connection of Orthodoxy with Hellenism and national or social interpretations of the religious message. Of course, in opposition to this program, a conservative anti-Enlightenment reaction emerged.

In the late 19th century, the adoption of the social issue by religious intellectuals created the conditions for a new paradigm to develop: Christian socialism. Specifically, early socialists, inspired by British socialism, like Plato Drakoulis, sought to harmonize socialist principles with Christian values, envisioning a society where the Church would support social justice and equality. This paradigm came to a temporary end when SEKE was formed in 1918. As members of the new Party included both Christians and Israelites, and as it aligned more closely with Soviet communism, a new paradigm of no religious socialism emerged that rejected, although not entirely, the utility of Christianity. The separation of Church and State and other liberal demands were promoted, but without much persistence. In fact, the Church and religion as political targets were largely ignored. These socialists probably did not want to provoke the religious sentiments of the people, as the Church had not yet adopted an anti-communist orientation. Moreover, the Soviet leaders had not yet adopted a harsh anti-religious policy.

The Asia Minor Catastrophe, the arrival of one million impoverished refugees, and the dismissal of thousands of soldiers from the defeated front created a new situation in Greece after 1922. The new leadership of SEKE consisted of people who had visited Moscow and sought to communize the Party, but it primarily represented radicalized war veterans who militantly demanded arable land from the Church, and radicalized workers who clashed daily and violently with the State and employers. This social tension created the conditions for an ideological challenge to established values such as homeland, religion, and the Church. Within this framework, the Bolshevized KKE and the Left Opposition were able to adopt even the most radical views of Soviet communism regarding religion and the Church.

They relied on a latent popular anti-clericalism, which led them to adopt a distinctly anti-clerical stance, viewing the Church as an instrument of capitalist oppression and an obstacle to class consciousness. Kostas Apekas, other communist intellectuals, and writers of daily articles brought to the forefront a popular anti-clerical language and developed an original Greek theoretical perspective on religion and the Church. The Church's response to national and governmental calls against communism, particularly through its "internal mission", further intensified this conflict, portraying communism as a moral and societal threat. Thus, for the first time in Greek history, intellectuals and common people from working and agrarian classes challenged Orthodoxy and its Church, leading to a new paradigm of political, theoretical, and ideological anti-clericalism and atheism. Despite this, the socialist movement in Greece also demonstrated a capacity for ideological flexibility and adaptation, eventually leading to a phase where cooperation with religious elements became possible again, particularly during the national liberation struggle of the 1940s. It seems that social interpretations of the religious message continued to attract part of the Party grassroots. This latest shift corresponds to a period of return to an ethnocentric ideology, which also characterizes other communist parties.

Finally, it would be worth comparing these fluctuations of the Greek socialist movement toward religion and the Church with international trends. Such a study would likely reveal that the Greek case largely follows the international norm.

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2 Technocratic Secularism and Religion in Communist Albania

Artan R. Hoxha

Introduction

The scholarly work on atheism in communist countries has largely focused on the role of political agents, whose goal and ideology clashed with those of the organized monotheistic religions (see, for example, Young 1999; Husband 2000; Luehrmann 2011). A closer examination of the archival findings in Albania shows a more complex situation than what had been so far thought. Indeed, the Party cadres and members of youth organizations were not the only actors involved in conceiving and executing the task of social and cultural engineering. Many scholars have argued that the idea and the practices of remaking people have been a fundamental parcel of secular and political religions. These political theologies were embedded in totalizing ideologies that were driven by strong anti-religious fervor while preserving religious concepts in secularized forms (Geertz 1973, 193–233; Bell 2000, 355–447; Gentile 2002, 206–234; Schmitt 2005; Gentile 2009). The scholarly debate on secularization and atheism focuses its lens mainly on the sacralization of politics during the 20th century. Exploring the cultural and religious roots of the political praxis and social engineering of the 20th century's ideological tyrannies, including here the promotion of a godless society, does not help to grasp the whole phenomenon of atheism. Those who controlled the political structure and were committed to disseminating the driving ideologies of their respective regimes were not the only actors who promoted the dichotomous divide that juxtaposed science vs. religion. There were also other actors, who were not necessarily involved in politics but played important political and ideological functions. These were the technocrats, who oversaw the implementation of the Party's instructions for modernizing their societies. In this sense, Todd Weir's differentiation between political secularism and worldview secularism is fruitful for understanding policies that came from the top of the power structure, which tried to replace religion for political ends, and those that came from marginal sectors of society (Weir 2024, 4).

However, Weir's work has focused on Germany in the late 19th century and the first decade of the 20th century. Here, a powerful working class and grassroots leftist movement set the stage for a fully different historical trajectory regarding the spread of atheism. Weir's scheme, though, encounters serious limits if applied in Southeastern Europe, whose countries did not have similar conditions to those

of the industrialized countries of Central and Western Europe. To take Albania as an example, during communism, technocrats were neither marginal nor trying to sow dissent. They comprised engineers, doctors, economists, agronomists, but also writers, aesthetes, and poets. In other words, the members of what in Soviet-type regimes used to be called *intelligentsia*, generally speaking, were not pushing any agenda of resistance, but rather trying to project their power and vision into larger strata of society, within the post-WWII Soviet-type framework. While the communists persecuted many intellectuals, numerous members of highly educated professional groups gave them unrestrained support and even embraced the top-down modernizing policies. Indeed, some engineers urged the communist authorities to undertake a series of large infrastructural projects soon after their takeover, as was the case with the reclamation of the swamp of Maliq in southeastern Albania.[1] This was a phenomenon not limited to Albania alone. The historian Sheila Fitzpatrick has already discussed the privileged position of the intelligentsia in Stalin's Soviet Union (Fitzpatrick 1992, 16–64, 149–182, 216–237). Meanwhile, since the 1950s, intellectuals like the Polish writer Czesław Miłosz and the French sociologist Raymond Aaron brilliantly expounded on the flirting of the educated groups – from engineers to agronomists, doctors, writers, actors, painters, and teachers – with the communist bosses in Eastern Europe and the USSR (Miłosz 1953; Aaron 1962, 291). This contribution will not deal with the entire group of the *intelligentsia*. That would be too ambitious even for a monograph. For this reason, the decision was made to exclusively explore groups that fall within the boundaries of technocracy; in other words, the people who transformed the material world. The thesis of this chapter is that to better understand atheism, we should focus our attention on the material factors and actors who were professionally linked to the subordination of nature and the exploitation of its resources.

Great Ambitions, Incapable Cadres

In the aftermath of WWII, an idea had become hegemonic: technological progress would make Man master of his fate and transform him into a rational subject driven by science and not by any sort of superstition or religious thinking. This was especially true in the countries of the Soviet Bloc. This transformation, which cast alleged rural and backward societies into the new era of high modernity, had its symbols. For the Albanian communist leadership, which inherited one of the less urbanized countries in Europe and with a very small working class, leaving behind the supposed ignorance and superstition of the past, which it identified with religion, and the unholy exploitative alliance between the altar and the throne, meant the full emancipation of people from tradition. With a working class that numbered around 15,000 by the end of World War Two (Durmishi 2001), Albanian communists did not have a large social base with a useful "progressive" and militant tradition. In Albania, the working class was to be largely a product of the communists' policy of forced industrialization (Lelaj 2015; Hoxha 2021). This meant the unfettering of society from the chains of tradition, symbolized,

among other things, by organized religious institutions. Hence, the process of modernization and the building of socialism was strongly related to a full commitment to secularization and atheism. For the communists, pulling their society out of backwardness also meant waging war against history. The present had to be transformed into a tabula rasa and a new script written onto it, which had a material dimension as well.

During the first two decades of its rule, the Albanian communist leadership did its best to diminish the visibility of religion in public life and the social role of the country's Christian and Muslim denominations. The strangulation started with the Land Reform in 1946. From roughly 7,330 hectares of arable land, vineyards, orchards, and pastures that the religious communities possessed before the reform, the regime reduced their estate to 1,014 hectares.[2] Such a move surely increased the financial dependence on State funding, and the communist authorities simultaneously had in their hands a powerful means to diminish and cripple the ability of religious communities to perform their social duties. Besides not allowing religious communities to publish books of theological content (Hoxha 2022, 157), the government and Party structures closed many temples during the first two decades of communist rule. Thus, in the aftermath of WWII, there were 1,800 religious temples across the country,[3] and by 1960 the number of temples had remained the same.[4] The archival sources, however, do not tell the whole story, and there is no accurate data on how many shrines were closed and how many of them were functional. Moreover, by the late 1950s and the first half of the 1960s, the regime hit hard and closed down many churches, mosques, and tekkes (see Hoxha 2022, 154–216). In the meantime, the regime kept filling the territory with monuments, cultural houses, and Party committees. The houses of culture were meant to be hubs for the education of the population. Different centers and circles were gathered here, among which those relating to atheist propaganda and hygienic education were among the most important.[5]

The regime introduced new celebrations and customs to give content to the ideological framework it was trying to impose. The Party of Labor of Albania (PLA) did its best to promote the celebration of weddings in collective farms instead of religious institutions. The authorities also organized periodic celebrations to commemorate the establishment of partisan units, agricultural cooperatives, teachers' day, etc.[6] However, these were not the only shrines that legitimized those in power and radiated their ideology to all corners of the country. Factories and mills were indeed the main temples of what communism, as a developmental alternative, stood for. Tall smokestacks emitting greenhouse gases into the atmosphere, construction yards, drainage canals that organized the plains into perfect rectangular parcels plowed by rattling tractors, hydropower stations, and railways were the most important images of communist iconography (on the Albanian case, see Hoxha 2023). Yet these were not mere symbols that projected the image of construction – the catchword of the Soviet experiment and its cult of work. Industrial plants and construction yards were true nurseries for forging new subjectivities and a new *Weltanschauung*. Here, in these sites, ex-peasants with little or no education

learned to use machines and developed new skills that transformed their identities and relations to the past.

What gave the intelligentsia immense power and placed them at the forefront of social engineering, at least in Albania, was the very low ideological education of the PLA's cadres. Many communists did not distinguish themselves as hard workers – something critical in a regime whose legitimacy was based on the cult of work – and reports from the PLA's archives show clearly that the majority of cadres did not read newspapers, at that time one of the main means of propaganda.[7] As already mentioned, Albania did not have a working class and the bulk of the communists were of peasant stock. Thus, at the end of the 1940s, 70% of PLA members and 73% of the candidates for Party membership were of rural background.[8] As a result, they lacked the revolutionary tradition and the necessary ideological commitment, including their stance toward religion – something that would impact the ability of the leaders in Tirana to shape the country following the Soviet template. This became even more true at a moment when the PLA leadership planned to transform its cadres into missionaries that would go from village to village to "bring light" to the peasants and disseminate the teachings of Marx, Engels, and Lenin in Albania's remote areas.[9] The problem was that there was not much of a gap between the alleged "wrong and false beliefs of the peasants" and the communists, who in fact came from the ranks of the peasantry.

According to a report prepared in 1951, the low education and lack of internalization of the main tenets of Marxism-Leninism were the sources of numerous mistakes that many communists had made.[10] To understand what these mistakes or flaws were, it is enough to quote from a memorandum dating from 1950. According to this document, many Party members were not setting an example to pull the Albanian people out of the "past's darkness" and "religious beliefs".[11] Many of them fasted during Ramadan, while others had baptized their children, married in a church, or even used talismans to heal their children.[12] As reports from localities show, the low ideological level of the cadres, who, from the political perspective were the main activists of atheist propaganda, directly impacted the anti-religious campaigns, especially in the countryside.[13] Here, even the youth continued to fast and observe religion in the second half of the 1950s.[14] In the middle of this decade, the Albanian communist strongman, Enver Hoxha, undertook a series of cleansing measures within the PLA's structures, which aimed to strengthen his position in the country after the events in Hungary and Poland in 1956 (for more on the purges and challenges of 1956, see Mëhilli 2011; Lalaj 2016). These purges deliberately targeted the communists who practiced religion or had not shown the ability to "improve".[15] In fact, as Hoxha pointed out in his memoirs, he identified the Catholic Church as one of the main instigators of the turmoils that engulfed the two Central European communist allies (Hoxha 1980, 265). Thus, by 1956 in Albania, the importance of anti-religious propaganda grew considerably as a response to broader transformations within the Soviet Bloc.

By this time, Hoxha increased his pressure on religious communities, especially by considerably decreasing the financial support the government gave them, and by prohibiting clerical education. Thus, he compensated for the weak propaganda

work with an ignorant and poor clergy. Simultaneously, his regime intensified efforts to grow its footprint in society. Until that point, many social sectors had not been heavily impacted by the engineering policies that aimed at revamping the whole structure of society and the way people thought. This was especially true of rural dwellers, who constituted the majority of the population – around 70–75%. Differences in press distribution across the country were also significant. In the late 1950s, the press run of all the newspapers and magazines for a semester numbered 260,000 copies. Of these, only 69,000 were destined for the rural population. This meant that 25% of all press circulation covered 75% of the population, and 75% of press circulation targeted 25% of the population. The ratio of copy per inhabitant for the newspaper *Bashkimi* (The Unity), the press organ of the Democratic Front, was 1 per 75 people in the cities and 1 per 144 in the villages.[16] Such a slim covering of the countryside showed the lack of smooth communication between the center and periphery. The handicapped connectivity had a profound impact on the dissemination of the "scientific outlook" of life in rural areas. As the political scientist Karl Deutsch argued 60 years ago, communication and control are two sides of the same coin. Without communication, a government cannot have full control of the territory and its population (Deutsch 1963). Hence, the crippled communication between the regime and the rural areas constituted a serious obstacle to the control of the Albanians' souls by the communist leadership.

PLA Leadership and Technocrats: Convergences and Divergences

By the early 1960s, the leadership succeeded in imposing its will and vision among the bulk of the membership. By this time, many Party cadres started aligning closer with the model that Enver Hoxha and his closest associates expected from them. Fashioning themselves as "new men", the majority of them openly rejected religion, conducted propaganda against it in their own families, worked on the day of Eid or on Fridays, and married without the blessing of the clergy.[17] Yet, the cadres were not always the so-called vanguard they were supposed to be, and the atheist propaganda they conducted was a failure because, as a report noted, of their weak preparation for this task.[18] Or rather, the cadres who came from rural or workers' stock encountered huge problems in both adapting themselves to the PLA's discipline and internalizing its ideology. Under such circumstances, the intelligentsia became the most important group that the communist regime deployed in its antireligious propaganda, especially in the countryside. This was especially true if we consider that by the 1950s, the ratio between workers and peasants, on one hand, and the intelligentsia, on the other, started weighing more on the side of the latter.[19] A symbiosis between power and knowledge started taking place in Albania. For the PLA's leadership, agronomists, doctors, and teachers became ambassadors who spread its message of scientific atheism and a Marxist-Leninist outlook in rural areas. They conducted periodical campaigns in the villages, such as those for improving hygiene and bodily care, or the use of fertilizers and modern techniques in agriculture.[20] In March 1953, in a PLA Plenum, Hysni Kapo, who at that time was the Minister of Agriculture and the number three of the regime, stated loud

and clear that the mechanization of agriculture would play an important role in the education of the peasantry.[21] Advanced technology coupled with the work of those possessing modern scientific knowledge would "enlighten" the peasants and bring them out of the darkness.

Following the dichotomies that dominated the political thought of the Cold War era and of the 20th century writ large, the Albanian communist leadership identified religion with ignorance, and the fight against it implied the spreading of what was considered true knowledge and culture, i.e. Marxism-Leninism and hard sciences. Accordingly, the leadership considered "culture" – understood in ideological terms as the triumph of rational thinking associated with unquestioned political loyalty to the political line of the PLA's top echelon – as critical for the building of socialism. Ironically, the most openly pro-Stalinist regime in Europe contradicted its professed materialism by giving instead priority to the sphere of ideas and values, which it considered as the precondition for the country's progress toward the meta of socialism. As a result, Hoxha and his associates labeled religion and all the other "backward" customs inherited from the past as stumbling blocks on the path to modernity. For the Albanian strongman, the youth would be the one group to organize and fully embrace the scientific rational values of Marxism-Leninism. The PLA's top hierarchy was convinced that raising the youth's ideological and cultural level would push it away from the influence of the Church and the Mosque – its short-hand terms for these religious institutions.[22] This same vision that juxtaposed faith and science in an antagonistic relationship defined the attitude of the communist elite toward religiosity among the rural population and workers. In a letter sent to one of the largest yards in the country, and displaying a meaningful expression of such an understanding of the role of culture in shaping a new rational society, the local Party Committee stated: "Our people need a new revolutionary culture to overcome fanaticism, backwardness, and old customs, to transition from the old bourgeois and reactionary education, to a new condition, forging a new and civilized people where will prevail understanding and mutual help among them".[23] This profoundly mechanistic understanding, which was tightly tied to the Marxist philosophical tenets that considered Man as a malleable material shaped by historical and technological forces, put highly educated specialists at the forefront of atheist State-driven policies.[24]

In addition, these professionals would compensate for the communication flaws between the top of the power pyramid and the base of the social structure – or, to use Karl Deutsch's theory of communication, technocrats served as the nerves of government and communist social engineering (Deutsch 1963). Although technocratic groups might seem to be apolitical representatives of a universal science, in the Cold War era they were profoundly political in their ends, especially when working and living within ideological and juridical frameworks that tried to erase any non-political sphere of human activity and relentlessly politicize everything. The best expression of such an overarching phenomenon was the politicization of time by the communist regime, with the five-year plan as its best showcase. The leadership set the goals of the plan and the technocrats had to implement them. But how could these deadlines be met in a country like Albania, which did not have a

real working class when the communists took over in late 1944? The regime mobilized society as much as it could to fill construction sites with the necessary labor force. However, their efficiency was low. The same was true for the newly built factories. The ex-peasants-turned-workers did not show discipline. Their bodies were not easily malleable to the new condition. Neither were their minds. They did not know how to use the machinery imported from their brethren socialist countries (Hoxha 2021, 133–194). They lacked the knowledge and education. Moreover, they did not agree to work according to the frenetic rhythms that the communist leadership expected in its desire to transform Albania into an industrialized and socialist country as soon as possible.

The technocrats, some of them educated in the West during the interwar era and others educated in Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union starting from the second half of the 1940s, concluded that religious beliefs were not only an attribute of the rural areas. The same situation that described the peasantry was also visible in urban centers, where workers professed neither much desire to expand their ideological horizon nor much hostility to religion. The local branches of the PLA continuously pointed out the low level of ideological education of the workers.[25] Most of them did not work hard because many of them fasted. According to the engineers who directed the implementation of the large industrial or infrastructural projects on the ground, there were too many religious celebrations. Regularly, workers left their work sites to go to their villages for the day of their namesake or that of their parents, for the patron Saint's day of their families and villages, or, opposing the instructions of the communist cadres, many workers fasted for the month of Ramadan.[26] The situation was similarly dramatic in agriculture. Sugar, tobacco, and cotton factories encountered huge supply problems because private farmers spent far too many days celebrating religious holidays. According to estimations done in the early 1950s, there were areas in the country with up to 40 religious holidays celebrated per year.[27] In addition, there was resistance against the mechanization of agricultural processes, hampering the supply of raw materials to the light industry.[28] Collectivization, which was also meant to ensure higher rates of production and greater efficiency, initially suffered from the same problems. Engineers and agronomists fell into despair.[29] On the one hand, there was their new credo of progress, the fervent religious-like belief in science and work as a means of transforming nature and people and bringing well-being and paradise to earth. On the other hand, there were the peasants, who were more interested in the paradise of the afterlife, making them apathetic toward an earthly active life. At least this was how the technocrats saw their situation, which they understood and gave meaning in terms of a war between the modern scientific culture and a backwardness that belonged to the past and had left the country in stagnation and ruled by ignorance. In addition, they answered to the regime's leadership regarding meeting the deadlines. Their reports kept stressing the difficulties they encountered with a "backward" and undisciplined workforce that suffered under the weight of ignorance stemming from the rural life from which the bulk of these people came.[30]

The creation of the workers' State did not only mean industrializing Albania and giving birth to a working class. That was the form. To use the analogy

deployed by Thomas Friedman, it was also necessary to give content to the institutional hardware by setting the right software (Friedman 2000, 151–154). This relates to the extent to which cadres, citizens, bureaucrats, and officials understood and embraced the main ideological tenets of the regime and made the power machine work as needed so as not to be hollow and devoid of substance. The making of workers also meant forming the necessary workers' culture and imbuing them with the regime's values. Otherwise, the workers would be the ones to undermine the regime and inhibit it from achieving its goals. The high rates of crime among peasants and workers sent a clear message in this regard. Soon, amid all these challenges, the technocrats and the PLA's structures started conceiving technologies and mechanisms to forge a new working class that was disciplined, secularized, efficient, and committed to the building of socialism. They were not alone – this was a transnational enterprise. In the late 1940s and throughout the 1950s, thousands of Albanians went to study in the Soviet Union and other East European countries, while hundreds of specialists from the socialist Bloc flocked to Albania to build socialism in the southeastern corner of the Adriatic. With these exchanges, new technologies appeared that to many Albanians resembled a magic bullet with which to overcome their backwardness and move in the fast lane toward socialist modernity (Hoxha 2023, 151–158). The Albanian technocrats were very enthusiastic, especially about the techniques for work control and management that were to increase the discipline and productivity of the workforce.

The factories and construction sites became real schools of professionalization and political and ideological education that imbued the newly made workers with a new *Weltanschauung*. Here, especially with the help and supervision of the Soviet experts, the management of the factories and construction sites opened new courses that gave workers a scientific education on how to use the machinery and perform their work more efficiently. The driving archetypal model became Stakhanov, the famous record-breaking Soviet miner. Gradually, time got a new meaning and its measurement in seconds, minutes, and hours materialized with quintals or tons of crops, with pieces produced, linear meters woven, or square meters of wall and plaster. Increasing efficiency meant calculating body movements and position. In Foucauldian fashion, bodies became malleable to the point that by the early 1950s, Albanian workers were performing miracles that seemed impossible only a few years earlier. Soviet techniques like Kulikov – which was used for building apartments at a break-neck speed – and others became revered methods for building socialism and a new Man. Albanian "Stakhanovs" began popping up across the country. Starting from the early 1950s, the regime organized competitions between workers and construction sites on who was able to build more and faster. Flags, stars, and decorations kept filling the chests of the newly emerged workers who, through building socialism, forged a new identity for themselves. They had joined the heroic striving for a new utopia. They put their muscles and bodies in motion and unleashed their energies for socialist progress; they jumped in and embraced a new vision. Their work became scientific and organized scientifically, thus embracing a new outlook (Mëhilli 2017, 119–125; Hoxha 2021, 216–228).

Many might ask: what about the workers' resistance to techniques used by the management to discipline them? What about the superficiality of the scientific training to penetrate the deepest strata of their conscience? What about the workers' resistance and even their limited ability to embrace the new worldview and abandon the old? What about the hybridities? What about the use of religion as an instrument of resistance against communism – as was the case in Poland, for example (Lebow 2013, 152–177)? Even in neighboring Yugoslavia, Christian Orthodoxy and Catholicism both resisted the integralist Yugoslavism and supranational constructions by juxtaposing them with an extraordinary commitment to national identity (Falina 2023). The debunking of the theory of modernization, which claimed that under the pressure of expanding scientific knowledge and industrialization religions' presence in public life would shrink even outside socialist countries, legitimates these questions. However, Ana Krylova is also right when she criticizes the running after the liberal subject and the use of liberal ontology to explain cultural, social, and psychological phenomena in a non-liberal context (Krylova 2000). After all, it is a matter of focus. Religion in Romania, Bulgaria, Hungary, and Czechoslovakia had not been a vehicle of resistance within the framework of the Nation-State (Ramet 1987, 55–79; 1989, 264–285; 1998; Lázló 1989, 286–298 Kalkandjieva 2010; Leustean 2010, 90–120, 181–201, 275–307). This was also the case in Albania. In short, as the sociologist Raymond Boudon suggests, scholarly analysis should always keep an eye on the context and the situationality of the social agents involved in historical dynamics and power interactions (Boudon 2013).

Furthermore, at least at the beginning of their establishment, the socialist regimes pursued full-fledged radical secularism. In countries like Albania – but also Romania and Bulgaria – the communist regime subordinated and co-opted religious institutions. As explained above, through the Agrarian Reform of 1946, the State ensured that religious communities could not survive alone, without the government's financial support. Soon, the government did its best to reduce the public visibility and social activity of religious communities. After forcing out the old high clerical hierarchies, Enver Hoxha made sure to assign people loyal to him at the top of the denominations, who would obey and silently accept the anti-religious policies of his regime. Tirana's authorities eroded the clergy, gradually transforming it into a gerontocratic old body, which could not answer to the radical transformations Albania was going through. Indeed, one of the main goals of the PLA and State organs was to asphyxiate the clerical body and not allow it to be supplied with new blood (for further information and sources, see Hoxha 2022).

It should also be kept in mind that the new workers' identities, which were constructed on the worksites and yards, their hard work, and record-breaking efficiency – at least by Albanian standards – also involved the regime giving something back in exchange. Embedded in folk material culture and practical thinking, the workers were not happy with merely lining up medals on their lapels. The examples provided above and countless other cases prove that ideology did not function without tangible results that affected daily life. Tractor drivers and farmers in agricultural cooperatives did not increase their yields only for the sake of

an abstract idea like socialism. Many of them did not gradually detach from the past or jump on the bandwagon of the regime's onslaught on tradition by miraculously falling victim to indoctrination. Such a commitment was also a result of the advantages that came with becoming members of a society that was fighting to build socialism. As Sheila Fitzpatrick argued many decades ago, under the blanket of egalitarianism, the Soviet regime built an entire system of privileges by giving material incentives to those who contributed more to the building of a new society (Fitzpatrick 1992).

Albania was not too different from Stalin's USSR. During communism, there were a series of spatial and professional differentiations in access to resources. Both in the official discourse and in the categories it used, the regime proclaimed that the most important classes of the country were the workers and their allies, the peasants, and only below them stood the intelligentsia.[31] In reality, as far as revenues and access to power and resources were concerned, technocrats and cadres were on top, below them were the workers, followed by farmers in State farms, and after them farmers in collective farms in the plains. At the very bottom of the ladder were those in collective farms in the uplands, which historically stood outside of the commercial routes (Hoxha 2023, 113–150). The immediate outcome was a high degree of inequality between the city and the countryside, as well as between the villages in the plains and those in the uplands. Thus, in the late 1950s, the average revenue in the urban areas was 35,500 Albanian Lek (ALL) per year compared to 19,700 (ALL) per year in the countryside.[32] Within the countryside, the revenues of rural families depended largely on the economic performance of the collective farms, which were defined by their yields. Nature here challenged socialism. The harvests in the uplands were between 2.5 and 3 quintals of grain per hectare, while in the lowlands the average was between 5.5 and 6 quintals per hectare.[33] Land fertility determined economic inequalities of a topographic nature, expressed in the incomparably higher degree of inclusion in the socialist market of the lowlands and its rural population. In contrast, the uplands' population was far less included in this market. The population in the uplands underwent a much lower degree of social and cultural transformation of everyday life, something visible in the considerably higher purchasing power for amenities and consumer goods of the population in the plains.[34] Coupled with the constant degrading of institutionally organized religion, the urbanites and rural populations in the plains gradually detached themselves from centuries-old traditions. It was here that the regime's atheist policies had a greater success. By contrast, in the uplands, which remained poorer and less affected by the modernization policies of the communist regime, religion remained a factor of social life even after 1967, when the communist regime banned religious life and proclaimed Albania the only atheist country in the world.

In fact, in the uplands, which were less touched by infrastructural investments, the regime had the hardest time disseminating its values and secularism because it could not build the infrastructure to sustain its new vision. When it came to the lowlands and urban centers, where industry was concentrated, the regime's success was incommensurately greater compared to the uplands. After 1967 and all the way to the 1980s, countless reports, prepared either by the PLA's Central Committee or

local committees, wrestled with the continuation of religious beliefs in Albania's uplands. These were the poorest areas in the country and here the regime's footprint was much smaller compared to the lowlands and urban centers.

In the early years of communist rule, the technocrats' functionalist approach to religion, determined by its economic utility and the support to the agenda of modernization, was a restricted one. As the cases quoted up to this point show, in the view of many technocrats and members of the intelligentsia, religion was an anti-economic and anti-efficiency force; instead of the cult of work, it preached laziness, thus hampering Albania's development. Such an understanding differed from that of the PLA's leadership. While the latter was obsessed with the idea of industrialization and building a new society, it also had a very ideological understanding of religion. Although practical considerations were always important, the approach of the PLA's leaders was also very much determined by Marxism-Leninism. But there were also points of convergence between many technocrats and the communist elite. The best example is the function of education. For Enver Hoxha and his peers at the top of the pyramid of power, one of the main goals of education was to pull people out of darkness and imbue them with a wide culture that stimulated their love for work.[35] The PLA's leaders associated darkness, as a surrogate for religion, with apathy, the lack of desire to conduct an active life, and a missing work ethic. This is what many technocrats sought from education as well. There were too many celebrations, a lot of fasting, and too many days spent drinking and eating; in other words, too much energy spent on nothing and gone to waste. Also, the religious celebrations were too expensive. They crippled the purchasing power of the population for new consumer and industrial goods, something necessary to keep the industry going.[36] The dichotomy that became evident was rationality vs. irrationality and utility vs. non-utility.

All four denominations in the country – Muslims, Catholics, Orthodox Christians, and Bektashi – did all they could to adapt their theological tenets to the regime's alleged scientific policies. In the end, the top echelons of all four religious communities embraced the communist formulas of progress and social emancipation propagated by those who controlled political power and the country. During the 1950s, after, as explained above, Hoxha had already consolidated his grip on the country and succeeded in subjugating the religious communities, the latter had no choice but to conform to the project of building a "new society" and "new Man". To prove their loyalty to the PLA's leadership and commitment to development, the clergy of all denominations released continuous calls on peasants to work as hard and as efficiently as possible to meet the quote of the five-year plans, to join collective farms, and to fight backward customs such as the use of talismans and fortune-telling.[37] Yet, regardless of these efforts, by the 1950s the religious communities were no longer a force with any political weight. As such, it was easier for Hoxha to reach the decision to abolish them altogether. Playing the card of support for the regime and voicing its policies did not save them.

Nevertheless, there were also points of divergence between the technocrats' approach toward religions and that of the top power structures of the communist regime. Enver Hoxha, who imposed his will and vision over the whole top layer

of the power structure, saw the religious communities as political adversaries that were driven by messianic monotheistic understandings of the world and history. Among the technocrats, however, the situation was more complex. While a good part of them despised religion, they generally did not nurture any deep anti-religious feelings. On the contrary, there were cases when their representatives had a nuanced understanding of the role of religion in society. In this regard, it is interesting to note that in a report submitted in 1959 to the PLA's Central Committee, a group of physicists working on the dissemination of a scientific worldview tied religion to hygiene. According to this report, people in Muslim villages took better care of their personal hygiene than those in Christian ones, because they washed their hands before eating, while especially in Catholic areas, corporeal hygiene was extremely poor. In certain villages in the northern districts of Kruja, Tropoja, and Peshkopi, especially in Catholic ones, people did not change their clothes until they were reduced to rugs. Quite often, because they were never washed, clothes changed color and turned from white to black. Here, people did not wash themselves because they feared they would lose the grace of God they had received through baptism, while, according to the report, the clergy was generally indifferent to this problem.[38] The stance and judgments of the intelligentsia toward religion depended on the way their teaching conformed to the professional parameters of the observing technocrats.

Yet, their approach to religion was neither apolitical nor non-ideological. Their professional language notably had great potential to be used politically. Indeed, Enver Hoxha himself borrowed the semantics of technocrats to promote his ideologically driven anti-religious policies. An illustrative example is an anti-religious speech he held in February 1967, when Tirana's communist boss argued that there was no need to spend money on the maintenance of the religious temples when the State had to invest its resources in so many other useful works (Hoxha 1982, 182). The technocratic utilitarian approach and semantics had made their way to the top of the communist Albanian power pyramid. The measuring rod for evaluating social and cultural phenomena was not just their congruence toward Marxism, but also their usefulness for the modernizing projects of the PLA's leadership. But this does not mean that Hoxha's decision in 1967 to abolish religious life sprang from the technocratic insistence on rationality and efficiency. Hoxha, a master in exploiting everything for his own goals, partially used the parameters of the technocrats' discourse to legitimate his decision. Despite the Albanian strongman's ability to manipulate and turn to his advantage factors and actors that did not necessarily share his goals, the very fact that he borrowed the vocabulary of highly-educated specialists shows the importance of these actors in communist top-down radical secularization.

Conclusion

How did technocrats, even unintentionally, help the political power structure to promote its atheist agenda? The answer lies in a system that combined material rewards, social climbing, and a secularist and scientific outlook of the world, which

took a hostile approach to religion. The combination of two structures of power, the alliance of scientific and utilitarian-industrial knowledge with an ideology that considered itself scientific, proved to be extremely successful – although success had a spatial distribution and topography. As explained above, the urban areas and lowlands were more affected by secularization. In the uplands, where the infra-structural investments were at a much lower magnitude compared to the lowlands, the social and cultural transformations that the communists triggered were not backed up by material transformations. As a result, religion in many upland vil-lages survived even without clergy. Of course, the reasons for this are multiple – monocausal explanations do not shed light on reality but rather narrow our under-standing of it. Yet, it is important to note that where the communist regime invested more resources and considerably increased the standard of living, secularization was more successful. It is hard to stay indifferent to such a correlation. In indus-trialized areas or where progress was made with agricultural mechanization, the technocrats showcased a path toward success to large sections of society. Indeed, the entire underlying system of values of this social group had an unprecedented impact on radical secularization in the first decades of the regime. The technocrats hollowed out much of the content of the religious doctrine and its rituals; they made them seem anachronistic, outdated, and worthless. Thus, they helped create a void that the regime was ready to fill with its power of sacralization, symbolic repertoire, and respective rituals. As such, when discussing radical secularization and anti-religious policies in communist States, it is important to look not only at the Party cadres and ideologues; the field is much broader, both discursively and from the perspective of practices.

We should understand that the re-emergence of religion as a powerful political, social, and cultural actor after the fall of communism, at least in specific areas of the Balkans, Albania included, is strongly tied to the economic crisis that the coun-tries of the region underwent in the last decade of communist rule. The Soviet-type regimes fell victim to the discourse of progress they had disseminated and rooted in society. Once it did not deliver, the regimes were discredited. In Albania, the transition from communism to market economy and liberal democracy has been rocky. The country was the least prepared State in Europe to jump straight on the bandwagon of globalization. This is exactly what happened after the demise of communism in 1991. With many factories closed and unemployment skyrocketing, the cult of work stopped being attractive and the appealing force of its archetypes of success evaporated. At this point, the flavor and prestige of technocrats had already been reduced and the societies that jumped into neo-globalism looked for new models. After the fall of communism, religious institutions, reborn from the ashes of State atheism, reinvented themselves and re-emerged as new mediums to fill the huge void left by collapsed economies and failed States. Certain religious institutions, such as the Catholic Church, the Bektashi community, and even the Muslim community took up the banner of nationalism. However, they were not alone and did not have a full monopoly of spiritual life because into this equation entered transnational and global religious actors, whose interests often conflicted with those of the Nation-State.

In the early 1990s, the fall of the communist regime and restructuring reforms saw the closing of many industrial establishments, causing huge social distress in the country. Many religious communities funded by outside actors exploited the moment to provide a newfound security to large sections of society, which up to that point were used to living under the patronizing umbrella of a State that owned almost everything. In her now-famous autobiography *Free*, the London-based Albanian philosopher Lea Ypi gives a vivid picture of the global religious actors who flooded Albania and readily tried to fill the vacuum left by the State, giving support to many people who were in search of security and a brighter future (Ypi 2021, 221–222, 228–229, 274–277). In Albania, many sects and forms of belief that now represent large global or regional forces took root: Jehova's Witnesses, Mormons, various North American Protestant sects, radical Islamism from the Gulf countries, and beliefs promoted by neo-Ottomanists Turkey (Elbasani and Roy 2015, 463–464; Bria et al. 2023, 57–72), just to mention a few. In addition, there is abundant support from Greece to the Christian Orthodox Church (Blumi 2019, 197–222; Hoxha 2022, 220–226). As was the case with atheism, the re-appearance of religion is again part of a larger process whereby local social, economic, and cultural contexts interplay with broader global forces and new technologies to create and establish a specific architecture and structure where individuals and groups try to navigate and find a place under the sun. Material incentives again interplayed with spiritual ones.

Notes

1 Arkivi Qendror Shtetëror i Shqipërisë (Albanian Central State Archive – from now on AQSh), F. 494, Collection: Ministry of Economy, year 1945, file 910, sheets 1–7.
2 AQSH, F. 498, Collection: The Ministry of Agriculture, year 1947, file 33, sheets 44–101. Reports on the results of the Land Reform.
3 AQSH, F. 498, Collection: The Ministry of Agriculture, year 1948, file 31, sheet 11.
4 Arkivi Vendor Shtetëror, Korçë (Local State Archive of Korçë – AShV Korçë), F. 3/2, Collection: PLA's Committee of the District of Korçë, year 1960, list 16, file 63, sheet 14.
5 AShV Korçë, F. 3/1, Collection: PLA's Committee of the District of Korçë, year 1957, list 8, files 27–28, sheet 26.
6 AShV Korçë, F. 3/2, Collection: PLA's Committee of Korçë, year 1961, list 17, file 7, sheets 25–26.
7 AShV Korçë, F. 3/1, Collection: PLA's Committee of the District of Korçë, year 1943, list 4, file 78, sheet 4.
8 AQSh, F. 14/APOU, Collection: Leading Organs of the PLA, year 1948, file 445, sheets 1 and 7.
9 AQSh, F. 14/APSTR, Collection: Party of Labor of Albania (Structures), year 1947, file 143, sheet 15.
10 AShV Korçë, F. 3/2, Collection: PLA's Committee of the District of Korçë, year 1951, list 7, file 4, sheet 4.
11 AQSh, F. 14/APSTR, Collection: Party of Labor of Albania (Structures), year 1950, file 51, sheet 34.
12 On fasting for Ramadan and marrying to church, AQSh, F. 14/APSTR, Collection: Party of Labor of Albania (Structures), year 1950, file 51, sheets 21 and 24. On using mascots to heal their children, AShV Korçë, F. 3/2, Collection: PLA's Committee of the District of Korçë, year 1951, list 7, file 4, sheet 4.

13 AShV Korçë, F. 3/1, Collection: PLA's Committee of the District of Korçë, year 1957, list 8, file 130, sheet 22.

14 AShV Korçë, F. 3/4, Collection: PLA's Committee of the District of Maliq, year 1956, list 9, file 4, sheets 12–13, 16, 31.

15 AShV Korçë, F. 3/1, Collection: PLA's Committee of the District of Korçë, year 1956, list 7, file 9, sheet 35.

16 AShV Korçë, F. 3/2, Collection: PLA's Committee of the District of Korçë, year 1959, list 15, file 153, sheet 39.

17 AShV Korçë, F. 3/1, Collection: PLA's Committee of the District of Korçë, year 1956, list 5, file 375, sheet 133.

18 AShV Korçë, F. 3/1, Collection: PLA's Committee of the District of Korçë, year 1957, list 8, file 25, sheets 28–29.

19 AShV Korçë, F. 3/4, Collection: PLA's Committee of the District of Maliq, year 1957, list 10, file 51, sheets 4–5.

20 On hygiene AShV Korçë, F. 3/1, Collection: PLA's Committee of the District of Korçë, year 1957, list 8, file 130, sheet 20; AShV Korçë, F. 3/1 Collection: PLA's Committee of the District of Korçë, year 1957, list 8, file 134, sheets 9 and 17. On the use of fertilizers and modern techniques in agriculture AShV Korçë, F. 3/4, Collection: PLA's Committee of the District of Maliq, year 1956, list 9, file 33, sheets 24–25.

21 AQSh, F. 14/APOU, Collection: PLA's Leading Organs, year 1953, file 2, sheet 44.

22 AShV Korçë, F. 3/4, Collection: PLA's Committee of the District of Maliq, year 1956, list 9, file 4, sheets 12–13.

23 AShV Korçë, F. 3/901, Collection: PLA's Committee of the Construction Site of Maliq, year 1946, file 8, sheet 7.

24 AQSh, F. 14/APSTR, Collection: Party of Labor of Albania (Structures), year 1954, file 99, sheet 22.

25 AShV Korçë, F. 3/1, Collection: PLA's Committee of the District of Korçë, year 1955, list 6, file 164, sheet 6.

26 AQSh, F. 14/APSTR, Collection: Party of Labor of Albania (Structures), year 1947, file 3, sheet 114. See also Hoxha (2021, 229–234).

27 AQSh, F. 14/APSTR, Collection: Party of Labor of Albania (Structures), year 1953, file 10, sheet 26.

28 AShV Korçë, F. 3/1, Collection: PLA'a Committee of the District of Korçë, year 1947, list 3, file 72, sheet 132.

29 AQSh, F. 498, Collection: Ministry of Agriculture and Forests, year 1948, file 188, sheet 3; AQSh, F. 14/APSTR, Collection: Party of Labor of Albania (Structures), year 1948, file 46, sheet 62; AQSh, F. 14/APOU, Collection: Party of Labor of Albania (Leading Organs), year 1949, file 2, sheets 1 and 11.

30 AQSh, F. 515, Collection: Ministry of Justice, year 1952, file 5, sheet 16.

31 AQSh, F. 495, Collection: State Planning Committee, year 1960, file 167, sheets 1–3.

32 AQSh, F. 495, Collection: State Planning Committee, year 1959, file 134, sheets 116–117.

33 AQSh, F. 490, Collection: Council of Ministers, year 1982, file 530, sheet 19.

34 AShV Korçë, F. 3/2, Collection: PLA's Committee of the District of Korçë, year 1959, list 15, file 65, sheet 18.

35 AQSh, F. 14/APSTR, Collection: Party of Labor of Albania (Structures), year 1946, file 6, sheet 39; AQSh, F. 14/APSTR, Collection: Party of Labor of Albania (Structures), year 1946, file 159, sheet 16.

36 On expenses for celebrations, AShV Korçë, F. 3/4, Collection: PLA's Committee of the District of Maliq, year 1957, list 10, file 1, sheet 26. On the antieconomic effect of the celebrations on the industry, AShV Korçë, F. 3/4, Collection: PLA'a Committee of the District of Maliq, year 1956, list 9, file 4, sheets 12–13; AShV Korçë, F. 3/4, Collection: PLA's Committee of the District of Maliq, year 1957, list10, file 5, sheet 4.

37 AQSh, F. 536, Collection: Christian Orthodox Church of Albania, file 1957, sheets 1-3. AQSh, F. 490, Collection: Council of Ministers, year 1951, file 1897, sheet 4.

AQSh, F. 482, Collection: The Muslim Community, year 1952, file 90; AQSh, F. 482, Collection: The Muslim Community, year 1953, file 83; AQSh, F. 482, Collection: The Muslim Community, year 1959, files 62, 65, 75; AQSh, F. 482, Collection: The Muslim Community, year 1960, file 72; AQSh, F. 482, Collection: The Muslim Community, year 1962, file 56; AQSh, F. 482, Collection: The Muslim Community, year 1964, file 77. AQSh, F. 483, Collection: Bektashi Community, year 1959, file 31. AQSh, F. 131, Collection: Archbishopric of Durrës, year 1959, file 11. AQSh, F. 132/A, Collection: Archbishopric of Shkodra, year 1956, file 47; Ibidem, year 1957, d. 23; AQSh, F. 132/A, Collection: Archbishopric of Shkodra, year 1961, file 21. AQSh, F. 14/APSTR, Collection: Party of Labor of Albania (Structures), year 1957, file 924, sheets 1-2.

38 AShV Korçë, F. 3/2, Collection: PLA's Committee of the District of Korçë, 1959, list 15, file 65, sheet 11.

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3 "Is Marxism Necessarily Atheistic?"

Gustav Wetter, the Holy See and the Condemnation of Communism

Marie Lucas and Mikhail Velizhev[*]

Introduction

"Is Marxism necessarily atheistic?"[1]: This question seems to suggest an exclusively theoretical look at the relationship between communist regimes and atheism. On the contrary, the institutional and political context in which the question was asked makes it anything but philosophical speculation. The question of the necessarily atheistic nature of Marxism was raised on May 21, 1978, by the Austrian Jesuit Gustav Wetter, a world expert on Soviet Marxism and Director of the Centre for Marxist Studies at the Pontifical Gregorian University in Rome, at the request of the Holy See.

More specifically, this request was addressed to Wetter by the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith. This is one of the nine congregations of the Roman Curia, which in 1965 replaced the Holy Office, the former Inquisition, set up in the 16th century to fight against heresies. This congregation is the guarantor of Catholic orthodoxy, but its interventions are always determined by a very specific socio-political context. The documents used in this chapter come from the Wetter's archival collection, held at the *Archivio Storico* of the Pontifical Gregorian University. This large collection was recently discovered and gives access to an initiative that had remained secret until now. It contains drafts of a magisterial text and the opinions of various experts on this text. Wetter is one of these experts. Between February 1977 and June 1978, the Congregation prepared and submitted for discussion three versions of a warning addressed to "Catholics who are subject to Marxist seduction".

The initiative never became official and was abandoned in June 1978. Nevertheless, it is indicative of the political climate at the end of Paul VI's pontificate and of a resurgence of anti-communism that preceded the election of John Paul II. These documents reveal the tension, in the face of Marxist influence, between doctrinal considerations and political strategy. The experts had to choose between different theoretical-political approaches: should they allow

[*] The first half of this paper (pp. 57–62) is written by Marie Lucas, the second half (pp. 63–68) by Mikhail Velizhev.

for the variety of conceptions of religion existing in the communist world, or should they deploy a clear disciplinary line based on a systematic understanding of Marxism? For most of them, the priority seemed to be immediate intervention in Italian politics. Wetter then distinguished himself by a more elaborate strategy based on an original understanding of the relationship between Marxism and atheism.

In what way was Marxism perceived as a threat by the Holy See in the late 1970s? What events justified, or on the contrary ruled out, in the eyes of the experts consulted, the renewal of the condemnation of Marxism already pronounced in 1949?

To fully understand the implications of the initiative would require a longer presentation, as it involved an ecclesiastical, Italian and international context. It would seem that Pope Paul VI himself initiated the Congregation's work on condemning Catholics "seduced" by Marxism. The pontificate of John Paul II is often presented as a radical turning point after the conciliar season and the years of "dialogue" between Catholics and communists (Saresella 2020, 119). In April 1965, Paul VI promoted the creation of a Secretariat for Dialogue with Non-Believers, while the request for a condemnation of communism at the Second Vatican Council was rejected (Turbanti 2000, 695–700; Melloni 2006, 24). But Paul VI's pontificate was also punctuated by warnings: in 1971, he firmly condemned Marxism and, with some nuances, socialism in the apostolic letter *Octogesima adveniens*. In 1976, he went so far as to dismiss from the clergy Father Giovanni Battista Franzoni, former Abbot of Saint Paul's Outside the Walls in Rome, after he had publicly declared his support for the Italian Communist Party (*Partito Comunista Italiano*, PCI) (Kocci 2023 43). In these documents, another philomarxist priest was targeted: the Salesian philosopher Giulio Girardi.

The decision to condemn "communist seduction" was undoubtedly prompted by the Italian political context: since 1973, the leader of the PCI, Enrico Berlinguer, had been implementing the "Historic Compromise" (*compromesso storico*) line of cooperation between the PCI and the Christian Democracy Party (*Democrazia Cristiana*, DC), which was viewed unfavourably by the Holy See (Saresella 2020, 107–117). In the 1975 and 1976 elections, the communists gained ground at the expense of the DC: the PCI lists included a number of Catholics, in defiance of the Vatican Secretariat of State and the Pope himself, who had called for the political unity of Catholics.

Moreover, since the end of the 1960s, the prestige of liberation theology in Europe had been growing. For some young Italian Catholics, Latin America was gradually becoming the symbol of a renewed relationship between faith and politics, inspiring new forms of commitment (De Giuseppe 2017). This was reflected in the "Christians for Socialism" (*Cristiani per il socialismo*, CPS) movement – explicitly referred to in our documents – which was born in Chile and spread to Europe in 1973–1977. In 1977, the division into two blocs intensified: those in favour of containing the Medellín theses[2] and those in favour of accelerating them (De Giuseppe 2017, 177).

This paper will concentrate on the historical-political diagnoses and strategies that emerge from these documents: how did the Congregation and the experts link communism and atheism? And to what end? While they all saw communism as the enemy of religion, they differed on the place of militant atheism in communist society and how the Church should relate to it. What do their disagreements reveal?

The various versions of the text make it possible, firstly, to study the draft condemnation as an immediate political intervention. In light of the opinions of the experts consulted, it is then possible to specify the targets of the initiative. Finally, Wetter's argument suggests that this Jesuit specialist in Marxism had a more long-term strategy, based on a more articulate idea of the relationship between communism and atheism.

Condemning Marxist Atheism: Doctrinal Consensus and Strategic Divergence

The documents are part of the Wetter's collection, from the Archives of the Pontifical Gregorian University in Rome, but give information on all the deliberations of the Sacred Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith concerning the condemnation of communism between 1977 and 1978. At the request of Pope Paul VI, the Congregation met on February 23, 1977 at the latest to establish the criteria for a text condemning Marxism, intended for the bishops.[3] In a very different context, under the pontificate of Pius XII in July 1949, the Congregation of the Holy Office had warned Catholics with a decree that they could not enlist in or show favour to the Communist Party. Catholics who failed to observe these prohibitions were excluded from the sacraments (Carillo 1991, 650–651). This new initiative against communist influence remained in the planning stage. It seems that three versions of the text – only two of which are in the Wetter's collection – were drafted before the process was abandoned.

The first version, the only one missing from our file, was written after the meeting on 23 February 1977 by a Dominican theologian, Paul-Dominique Dognin, who in the same year wrote a French translation of the first book of Marx's *Capital* (Dognin 1977). This first draft is often referred to in the documents as "a critique of Marxism".[4] The original version of this text is most likely in the archives of the Dicastery for the Doctrine of the Faith, which are currently inaccessible for the years beyond the pontificate of Pius XII. The second version is entitled "Note from the S.C.D.F. on Christians under Marxist seduction" and was written in Italian by Father Vincenzo Miano, secretary of the Pontifical Council for Dialogue with Non-Believers, between the end of 1977 and the beginning of 1978.[5] This version will be the focus of this paper. However, a third version was prepared, referred to as a "Declaration" (*Dichiarazione*), entitled "Catholics and Marxist currents", concluded on May 10, 1978 and drafted in French by a Jesuit Father, Roger Heckel.[6] The deliberations reveal that this latest version was drafted in a hurry, following the recommendations of Monsignor Agostino Casaroli.[7] Casaroli, a specialist in Vatican Ostpolitik, was to become Pope John Paul II's

Secretary of State a few months later (Melloni 2006). The urgency of these re-writes and the authority of the figures involved seem to reflect the acceleration of Italian political events in the context of Moro's kidnapping. This hypothesis will be explored further in the next section.

Under close examination, the target of these three texts gradually becomes clearer. The first version formulated a fairly generic condemnation of Marxism, while the second and third focus on Christians attracted to Marxism. Put simply, the three texts sought to demonstrate the intrinsically atheistic character of Marx-ism and thus the impossibility for a Christian to adhere to it. The third version states: "It is above all the radical, systematic atheism of Marxist and communist ideology, its materialistic conception of the world, of Man, of history […] irrec-oncilable with evangelical love, which are at the heart of all the developments".[8]

In addition to these different versions, internal and external experts were con-sulted to give an opinion on the text, with their analyses being preserved. That of Father Heckel (who wrote the third text) on the second version; the opinion of Wetter on the second and third versions; and the opinions of Brother Umberto Betti, Father Dognin, Father Bartolomeo Sorge, Father Vincenzo Miano and Father Barnabus Mary Ahern on the third version. These opinions were not unanimous and offer valuable elements for contextualising the Congregation's document, be-yond the generality of the condemnation.

They span from the most enthusiastic judgement to the harshest. Father Dognin, a fervent supporter of the condemnation, considered that "it would be scandalously indecent to discuss Marxist atheism peacefully" in the face of "the religious persecutions for which this atheism is still responsible".[9] Jesuit Father Sorge, director of the *Civiltà Cattolica,* where he had published several articles on Marxism, also approved the text, but deplored its "clerical mentality".[10] He sug-gested adding a paragraph condemning as an error the idea that Marxism "can re-nounce theoretical and practical atheism".[11] Finally, the opinion of Father Miano, editor of the second version, is worth mentioning: he did not approve of the third draft and considered that it did not bring any clarity to the situation of Christians tempted by Marxism.[12]

To sum up, the consensus among experts on the strict correlation between mili-tant atheism and Marxism should be emphasised. The disagreement mainly con-cerned the document's argumentative strategy rather than its doctrinal foundations. While the Dominican Dognin used the persecutions in the Eastern Bloc as an au-thoritative argument for condemning the influence of Marxism among Christians, the Jesuit Sorge, a defender of Christian Democracy and the spirit of the Second Vatican Council, was more attentive to the hierarchical context of the document, which was too "clerical" in his eyes. The text was in fact addressed to bishops and not to lay people. Miano focused on the lack of clarity in the disciplinary instruc-tions provided in the text.

These experts all shared the idea that communism was a threat to religion and differed only on the means of responding to it. Before moving on to Wetter's origi-nal theoretical and strategic analysis, it is important to clarify the Congregation's likely targets.

The Circumstances of This Proposed Condemnation:
The Seduction of Marxism

The difficulty then is to understand the reasons that led the Congregation to open a new debate on the incompatibility of Marxism and the Catholic faith, after 30 years, since professed communism had already been the subject of excommunication in 1949. The codes for drafting a magisterial text of this type require an inevitable abstractness. References to religious persecution in the Soviet Union are recurrent. But the experts' comments and the timetable for the drafting make it clear that the target was elsewhere.

"Cristiani per il Socialismo" and the Influence of Liberation Theology

First of all, the editor of the third version, Roger Heckel, alluded to the Congregation's primary concerns in his opinion on the second version. The most concrete example was the "Christians for Socialism" movement. A little further on, he mentioned the "efforts of the 'Christians for Socialism' to organise themselves in Italy and France" in 1975–1976 and "the publication of Fr Girardi's book".[13] *CPS* emerged in Chile in the early 1970s and had become a veritable platform for the Christian left in southern Europe. At one of the first CPS meetings in Santiago in November 1971, Christians were declared to be "strategic" allies of the Marxists in the Latin American liberation process, and Marxism was accepted as a method (Kocci 2023, 46–48). In September 1973, the CPS movement made its appearance in Italy with an international symposium in Bologna, attended by over 2000 people (Kocci 2023, 58–59). The Salesian priest Giulio Girardi was the author of the widely read book, *Marxismo e cristianesimo*, published in 1966, and one of the main theoreticians of the CPS, inspired by liberation theology. Heckel referred to *Cristiani per il socialismo, perché? Questione cattolica e questione socialista*, published in 1975, where Girardi intensified his exhortations to deepen dialogue with Marxism, exhortations repeated in his 1977 book, *Fede Cristiana e materialismo storico* (Girardi 1977). These publications led to his removal from the Pontifical Salesian University where he taught in Rome. In 1977, while working in Turin with the FLN (*Federazione lavoratori metalmeccanici*), one of Italy's main trade unions, he was suspended *a divinis* before being dismissed from the clergy (Pancera 1981, 135–147; Santagata 2016).

From its beginnings in Italy, the CPS movement was regularly criticised by the hierarchy, notably through the voice of Bartolomeo Sorge, already mentioned above. This Jesuit, who took part in the drafting of Paul VI's 1971 apostolic letter *Octogesima adveniens*, published a collection of his views against the left-wing movement in 1975. The introduction praised the good intentions of the CPS, but deplored its "inadequate and equivocal" solutions, "in open contradiction with the teaching of the Church" (Sorge 1975, 5). In a 1976 article, Vincenzo Miano, who wrote the second draft of the condemnation text, also attacked Girardi as the theorist of a "new anthropology", that of the CPS, and criticised Girardi for making

too many concessions to Marxism (Miano 1976). The Secretary of the Pontifical Council for Dialogue with Non-Believers, like the Director of the *Civiltà Cattolica*, had already launched a polemic against Girardi and the CPS before the plan to condemn them from the highest level was born. At the national congress held in Rome in January 1977, the CPS leadership reported that the movement was experiencing an identity crisis. However, in a historical-political book published by two other Jesuits in 1978, Giuseppe Pirola and Gian Luigi Brena, contemporaries still saw a promise of renewal in the groups of young people and women who had recently joined the CPS (Pirola and Brena 1978, 109–110).

In May 1978, the Dominican expert Dognin, editor of the first version, quoted another example of a heretical targeted for condemnation, Arturo Paoli, a priest who, after a stay in Argentina, was won over to liberation theology and some aspects of Marxism. He described his spiritual and political journey in a 1977 book, *Camminando s'apre cammino*, which was republished several times (Paoli 1978).[14] Paoli was for Dognin an example of an excessive politicisation of the evangelical message ("Jesus guerrillero"), revealing his Marxist inspiration. This example once again shows that the influence of liberation theology on Italian Catholics was at stake.

These two indications suggest that the Congregation was seeking to call to order Catholics influenced by liberation theology in Western Europe. The references to persecution in the Soviet Union had a strategic function, designed to present Marxism as a universal threat to religious freedom and faith.

The Historic Compromise and Collaboration with the Communists in Italy

Other comments point to another aim of the text: determining whether political collaboration with the PCI was compatible with faith. Several experts felt that the text did not clarify this question sufficiently. Vincenzo Miano said of the third text that it did not state clearly enough whether a Christian could adhere to Berlinguer's Eurocommunism, "and this is where the greatest confusion reigns among Christians".[15] Bartolomeo Sorge was also explicit when he said that the document focused too much on classical Marxism-Leninism and did not take into account the concerns of Western Christians faced with a new critical Marxism. The Jesuit expert wrote:

> Today's Christians must be made to understand why the coherence of faith makes the compromise between enlightened conscience and neo-Marxist militancy incompatible. If we don't succeed in clarifying this point, it would be better not to publish anything on the subject.[16]

The word "compromise" [*compromesso*] is a thinly veiled reference to the democratic alliance known as "Historic Compromise" proposed by Berlinguer. Sorge wrote shortly afterwards that Berlinguer should be quoted in the official text.[17]

This was a reference to the secretary of the PCI who, since October 1973, had been calling for an alliance between the two major mass movements, Communism

and the DC in Italy. The overthrow of the Allende Government in Chile convinced Berlinguer that the Marxist left could not govern in democratic countries without alliances. Claiming the heritage of Gramsci and Togliatti, he defended a "convergence of all popular forces" around an "affirmation of the dignity of the individual, an expansion of the many human freedoms" (Berlinguer 2014, 62–64).

The PCI's desire to win over the Catholic masses was not new. At its tenth Congress in December 1962, the Party had already acknowledged the positive and irreducible nature of religion. However, as *Civiltà Cattolica* pointed out in a 1977 article, Togliatti made a clear distinction between simple adherence to the PCI's political programme and its ideology proper, Marxism-Leninism. Like Gramsci before him, he ruled out any compromise on doctrinal grounds.[18] Berlinguer, for his part, by affirming the "full and rigorous secularity of the party", contradicted, in the eyes of the Jesuit editors, the Leninist foundations of his party, which they considered irreconcilable with the democratic State. In October 1977, in an open letter to Luigi Bettazzi, Bishop of Ivrea, Berlinguer had stated that the PCI did not profess "Marxist ideology as an atheistic materialist philosophy" (Saresella 2020, 112–113).

Several of the Party's intellectuals, such as the Catholic and communist philosopher Franco Rodano, defended this policy of alliance not as "a purely tactical instrument", but as "a far-reaching strategic line", with a view to "completely overcoming the capitalist order" (1977, 8, 114–120).

In 1976, for the national political elections in June, a group of non-communist Catholics accepted the PCI's invitation to appear on its lists as "Left Independents". One of them, Mario Gozzini, in a speech delivered in February 1976, said that Christians and communists shared "the rejection of libertarian individualism that distorted the true social dimension of problems" (Saresella 2020, 112). Denounced by Paul VI as a "betrayal", this choice did not, however, lead to excommunication, as some cardinals had demanded (Scirè 2012, 99–119).

In the June 1976 elections, the PCI achieved unprecedented success. It narrowly edged out the DC at the national level and overtook it at the municipal level in Rome, where it gave the city a communist mayor – the first non-Catholic mayor of Rome for 63 years.

Given the impossibility of the DC forming a centrist government, the question of the collaboration proposed by the PCI arose anew. Its electoral success (34.4%) had made it a key player. Aldo Moro, Secretary of the DC, was keen to consider an alliance with the communists, for both tactical reasons – to push the PCI to revise its ideology and distance itself from the USSR – and substantive reasons – to restore the DC's identity as a popular party by broadening its democratic base (Stasi 2018, 58–60). But events abruptly interrupted this project of national solidarity. On March 16, 1978, Moro was supposed to implement this policy of convergence. The same morning he was kidnapped.

The texts of the Wetter's collection are contemporaneous with enormous upheavals: the preparation of the document began before Moro's kidnapping on March 16, 1978. Shortly after this episode, following instructions from Agostino Casaroli, the third draft was prepared and concluded on May 10. The day before,

on May 9, Moro was found murdered, just as the new Andreotti government had the support of the PCI and was about to obtain a vote of confidence from Parliament. There is nothing in the documents to allow any conclusions to be drawn from this synchronicity, but the plan to condemn the Historic Compromise became obsolete.

The two targets made explicit in the documents reveal the immediate political nature of the condemnation of Marxist atheism. Wetter's analysis considers Marxist atheism from an entirely different perspective.

Wetter's Critique of the Draft Condemnation

Gustav Wetter, an Austrian Jesuit philosopher, was Director of a Centre for Marxist Studies at the Gregorian University in Rome from 1970 (Simon 2009, 631). His book on Soviet materialism, published by the left-wing publisher Einaudi in 1948, made him internationally renowned for his knowledge of Marxism (Wetter 1948). In April 1978, he received a letter from Dominican Father Jean-Jérôme Hamer, Secretary of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith. Hamer addressed him as "perhaps the greatest specialist in the field of dialectical materialism" and asked him his "opinion on the accuracy of the use of the terms 'Marxism', 'communism', 'socialism', 'historical materialism', 'class struggle' and the like".[19] Wetter sent his expert opinion on May 21, unaware that a third version had been finalised ten days earlier. His text was therefore based on an out-of-date version, but was still significant in spite of this. Wetter's report consists of 20 typewritten sheets and is divided into three parts: a premise, "Remarks of a general nature" and "Remarks on specific passages".[20]

The premise offers a key to interpreting the text. In it, Wetter warns that his remarks "will sometimes create the impression of a defence of Marxism". He affirms that he has no sympathy for Marxism, and even expresses a "particular aversion" to "Christian reading of Marxism that often degenerates into a Marxist reading of Christianity". However, he wanted to play "devil's advocate" to make the argument more solid.[21] Wetter's text in fact develops a virulent critique of the Congregation's approach and goes far beyond pure technical expertise:

A historical-political critique: He deplored the failure to take account of geopolitical developments in the communist world over the three preceding decades. In Italy, for example, Berlinguer's PCI then defended the construction of a "secular and democratic State, also non-theistic, non-atheistic and non-anti-theistic" and even went so far as to recognise religion as an "autonomous value".[22] Berlinguer's letter to Monsignor Bettazzi was cited as an essential document for dealing with the subject of communist atheism. Wetter admitted that it was possible to doubt the good faith of the Italian communists, because of their "historicist mentality", but it was not possible to ignore their "serious" denial of a central point of Marxism-Leninism. Yet the international diversification of the communist world was not, for Wetter, confined to Europe: China was also mentioned in this text. Postulating the unity of the communist world was no longer self-evident.

A philosophical critique: Wetter qualified the crude use of Marxist concepts. For example, "historical materialism" could not be confused with atheistic philosophical materialism. Against a crude vision of Marxist philosophy, Wetter emphasised the debates in the Soviet Union that sought to go beyond the reductions of summary materialism (he cited as examples an official Marxist philosophy textbook published in Moscow in 1958 and the Communist Party of Soviet Union (CPSU) programme in 1961). Furthermore, Western communism – the Italian example was once again cited – now recognised that religion could be "a valuable stimulus to social commitment". Wetter also criticised the Congregation's Manichean reading of the principle of "class struggle" and "revolution".[23] These criticisms were repeated in his commentary on the third version of the text.

A theoretical-political nuance: Finally, Wetter asked the fundamental question, "Is Marxism necessarily atheistic?" Unlike the other consultants, Wetter thought not. He acknowledged that Marx's writings and dialectical materialism were imbued with atheism, but he believed that historical materialism, as a method of historical enquiry, did not oblige one to profess atheism.[24] Used as a method of social analysis, Marxism did not necessarily lead to apostasy.

These historical-conceptual considerations demonstrated the weakness of the Congregation's text. If the intention was to condemn "Marxist Christians", other arguments must be put forward:

An anthropological argument: Marxism was based on "an erroneous – over-optimistic – vision of human nature", a far cry from Christian anthropology, which implied original sin and the inclination to evil.[25]

A historical-political argument: If the communists in power were still fighting religion, it was not because of an atheism inherent in Marxism, but because of a specific political ideology that rejected all pluralism. This was the ideology of both the Soviets and Italian communism, inspired by Gramsci's concept of "hegemony".[26]

A disciplinary argument: One of the main obstacles, according to Wetter, to Catholic communism was the Leninist principle of "democratic centralism", which could force Christians, through discipline, to act against their conscience.[27]

In conclusion, however, Wetter expressed his scepticism about the plan to condemn communism again and felt that this would require much more in-depth work "by a whole 'team'".[28]

Wetter's expert opinion reveals a discrepancy between Wetter and other experts. Despite his antipathy for Marxist Catholicism, he did not seem to understand the reasons for condemnation. The Latin American model and liberation theology, which were very present among the other experts, were not mentioned; Berlinguer's Historic Compromise did not seem to him to be a significant threat to the Church. For Wetter, the danger of communism lay more in its fight against pluralism in general than in its atheism.

At first sight, Wetter's opinion may seem to contradict positions adopted in other circumstances. For example, in a 1976 article addressed to a wider audience, he asserted that the religious tolerance of the PCI would disappear if it came to power (Wetter 1976, 24–25), whereas in the document studied above he considered that "the communists of the West cannot be reproached for what the communist regimes of Eastern Europe, Asia and Africa are doing".[29] Of course, the interpretation of this variety of positions depended on the variety of addressees. While publicly, in his lectures and publications, Wetter seemed to maintain the clarity of his anti-communist position, internally, in his exchanges with the Congregation, tactical considerations favoured a more nuanced discourse.

But Wetter's originality lay in his oft-repeated assertion that historical materialism and pluralism were compatible in principle. Militant atheism was therefore not essential to Marxism. He wrote that the illusory nature of religion, from a communist perspective, should even encourage tolerance, since history should take care of making religion disappear.[30]

These elements lead us to clarify Wetter's religio-political approach to Marxism. The communist question seems to have much wider religious implications for Wetter than it did for the Congregation. His vision, out of step with other experts, deserves to be explored in greater depth.

Marxism and Religion according to Wetter: Towards a "Theology of Communism"?

Already in the 1976 article quoted above, Wetter mentioned, as a very personal idea, the possibility of a communism renouncing all forms of militant atheism (Wetter 1976, 21). This idea was more than just wishful thinking, it was at the heart of the religio-political project Wetter had been developing since the 1950s. It consisted of energetically promoting the free development of competition between Marxism and Catholicism, in the name of two postulates: on the one hand, Wetter maintained that a communist government, professing Marxism, could perfectly well, in all fidelity to historical materialism, renounce the anti-religious struggle and militant atheism; on the other hand, according to Wetter, Catholic anti-communism served the ecumenical project. For the Catholic Church, overcoming communism was "neutral ground" on which to work for the reunification of Christianity and the defeat of atheism. In a September 1959 letter to the rector of the Gregoriana, Fr Paulo Munoz Vega, he wrote: "The common defence against this danger [communism] and the attempt to overcome it positively would be an extremely effective means of bringing separated Christians closer together".[31] For Wetter, ecumenical dialogue and the response to communism were inseparable.

The link between these two apparently contradictory convictions was strikingly developed in another text: the Latin document "De habitudine Ecclesiae ad Communismum", which was proposed as a basis for discussion by the Council Fathers during the final sessions of Vatican II in 1965. At the request of more than 300 prelates demanding a position on communism (Turbanti 2000, 695–701), Wetter was asked to draft a text. The discussions leading up to the preparation of this text

spoke cautiously of a "theology of communism" (*theologia communismi*). The text is instructive for its rhetorical strategy, which consisted of adopting the point of view of the communists and their well-understood interests in order to support the non-essential character of militant atheism for the advent of a communist society. Wetter wrote that communism could only claim to be scientific by allowing other conceptions of the world to express themselves: "By suppressing religious force, communism deprives itself of the possibility of obtaining confirmation of the truth of its doctrines through praxis".[32] In a healthy socialist society, religion should wither away spontaneously. If communism considered it necessary to fight religion, it showed that it did not believe in its own doctrine.

This 1965 text thus provides a clear explanation of Wetter's theses. Together with his 1978 expert opinion, his position can be summarised as follows: not only is it impossible to affirm that atheism is essential to Marxist doctrine, but it is also certain that the advent of communist society presupposes pluralism and free competition between doctrines. Thus, from a communist perspective on atheism, Wetter concluded that Marxism needed ideological pluralism in order to prove its scientificity. Finally, returning to his Jesuit garb, he considered that the Church, by embodying the most credible alternative to communism, would be able to reunite a divided Christianity. For Wetter, Marxist atheism, like the Catholic Church, must undergo the test of ideological pluralism in order to demonstrate its truth.

Conclusion

Much remains to be elucidated about the content of these documents and the motives behind this project of condemnation. The death of Pope Paul VI in August 1978, who had commissioned it, was probably one of the reasons why it was abandoned. Another hypothesis is that the death of Aldo Moro and the events that followed, by putting an end to the era of the Historic Compromise, allayed the Holy See's concerns about a possible communist takeover. More generally, after 1977–1978 there was a decline in the Catholic left-wing movements targeted by the condemnation (Kocci 2022, 356–366). Further research in the Wetter archives may reveal more. What is important to stress here is the originality of Wetter's position. Through him, we have a perspective that is both Roman, attentive to the particularities of the Italian context, and at the same time very broad, due to his Soviet specialisation and his contacts with German-speaking intellectual and political circles. There was also an attempt to adopt the Marxist point of view on religion and to convince Marxists that it was in their interest not to fight against religion. Communism presupposed pluralism.

Between the frontal anti-communism of the Congregation and the progressivism of the left-wing Catholics targeted in the text, Wetter illustrates an extremely subtle conception of the relationship between the Catholic faith and communism. This consisted of reducing to a minimum the grounds for condemning Marxism, and making numerous concessions to the communists (for example, that the Church can accept a certain idea of the class struggle, historical materialism, as a method), the better to embody the "centre" of a reunified Christendom.

Wetter thus evokes Antonio Gramsci's definition of "Jesuit" politics, that of a "centre" deploying "a ductile political form, without doctrinal rigidities, a great freedom of manœuvre" (Gramsci 1975, 550).

Notes

1 *Archivio Storico della Pontificia Università Gregoriana (ASPUG)*, Wetter's collection, "Osservazioni del P. Gustav A. Wetter S.I. sulla Nota della SCDF sui Cristiani che subiscono la seduzione marxista", May 21, 1978, §9, p. 8. We would like to thank Martin Morales, Manfred Posani Löwenstein and Irene Pedretti for allowing us to consult these documents. We would also like to thank Alessandro Santagata for his advice.
2 The Medellin Theses refer to the conclusions of the Latin American Episcopal Conference held in Medellin, Colombia, in 1968. They played a major role in the formation of liberation theology.
3 *ASPUG*, Wetter's coll.: "Modi et observations sur le texte du P. Heckel rédigés par le P. Dognin", p. 2.
4 *ASPUG*, Wetter's coll.: "Voto del P. Heckel, S.J.", February 27, 1978.
5 *ASPUG*, Wetter's coll.: Vincenzo Miano, "Nota della S.C.D.F. ai vescovi della Chiesa cattolica ai cristiani che subiscono la seduzione marxista", prot. n. 135/75 (30 pages).
6 *ASPUG*, Wetter's coll.: Roger Heckel, "Les catholiques et les courants marxistes", May 10, 1978 (25 pages).
7 *ASPUG*, Wetter's coll.: "Osservazioni del Consultore Don Miano", Rome, June 9, 1978, p. 1.
8 *ASPUG*, Wetter's coll.: R. Heckel, "Les catholiques et les courants marxistes", May 10, 1978, p. 5.
9 *ASPUG*, Wetter's coll., "Modi et observations sur le texte du P. Heckel rédigés par le P. Dognin", p. 12.
10 *ASPUG*, Wetter's coll., "Giudizio del padre Bartolomeo Sorge S. I. sul documento: I cattolici e le correnti marxiste", June 8, 1978, p. 1.
11 *ASPUG*, Wetter's coll., "Giudizio del padre Bartolomeo Sorge S. I. sul documento: I cattolici e le correnti marxiste", June 8, 1978, p. 4–4 bis.
12 *ASPUG*, Wetter's coll., "Osservazioni del Consultore Don Miano" (2 pages).
13 *ASPUG*, Wetter's coll., "Voto del P. Heckel, S.J.", Febuary 27, 1978, p. 2. See in particular Fessard (1978, 217–246).
14 *ASPUG*, Wetter's coll., "Modi et observations sur le texte du P. Heckel rédigés par le P. Dognin", p. 9.
15 *ASPUG*, Wetter's coll., "Osservazioni del Consultore Don Miano", p. 2.
16 *ASPUG*, Wetter's coll., "Giudizio del padre Bartolomeo Sorge S. I. sul documento: I cattolici e le correnti marxiste", p. 1.
17 *ASPUG*, Wetter's coll., "Giudizio del padre Bartolomeo Sorge S. I. sul documento: I cattolici e le correnti marxiste", p. 5.
18 *La Civiltà Cattolica* 1977.
19 *ASPUG*, Wetter's coll., letter from Jérôme Hamer to Wetter, May 12, 1978, prot. 135/75 (sub secreto).
20 *ASPUG*, Wetter's coll., "Osservazioni del P. Gustav A. Wetter S.I. sulla Nota della SCDF sui Cristiani che subiscono la seduzione marxista", pp. 1,15.
21 *ASPUG*, Wetter's coll., "Osservazioni del P. Gustav A. Wetter S.I. sulla Nota della SCDF sui Cristiani che subiscono la seduzione marxista", p. 1.
22 *ASPUG*, Wetter's coll., "Osservazioni del P. Gustav A. Wetter S.I. sulla Nota della SCDF sui Cristiani che subiscono la seduzione marxista", p. 2.
23 *ASPUG*, Wetter's coll., "Osservazioni del P. Gustav A. Wetter S.I. sulla Nota della SCDF sui Cristiani che subiscono la seduzione marxista", pp. 5–6.

24 *ASPUG*, Wetter's coll., "Osservazioni del P. Gustav A. Wetter S.I. sulla Nota della SCDF sui Cristiani che subiscono la seduzione marxista", p. 8.
25 *ASPUG*, Wetter's coll., "Osservazioni del P. Gustav A. Wetter S.I. sulla Nota della SCDF sui Cristiani che subiscono la seduzione marxista", p. 12.
26 *ASPUG*, Wetter's coll., "Osservazioni del P. Gustav A. Wetter S.I. sulla Nota della SCDF sui Cristiani che subiscono la seduzione marxista", pp. 12–13.
27 *ASPUG*, Wetter's coll., "Osservazioni del P. Gustav A. Wetter S.I. sulla Nota della SCDF sui Cristiani che subiscono la seduzione marxista", p. 13.
28 *ASPUG*, Wetter's coll., "Osservazioni del P. Gustav A. Wetter S.I. sulla Nota della SCDF sui Cristiani che subiscono la seduzione marxista", p. 14.
29 *ASPUG*, Wetter's coll., "Osservazioni del P. Gustav A. Wetter S.I. sulla Nota della SCDF sui Cristiani che subiscono la seduzione marxista", p. 11.
30 *ASPUG*, Wetter's coll., "Osservazioni del P. Gustav A. Wetter S.I. sulla Nota della SCDF sui Cristiani che subiscono la seduzione marxista", pp. 11–12.
31 *ASPUG*, Wetter's coll., letter from Wetter to the Rector, September 17, 1959.
32 *ASPUG*, Wetter's coll., "De Habitudine Ecclesiae ad Communismum (addendum in Schemate 'De Ecclesia in mundo huius temporais' post Adnexa)".

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Section II

Eastern European Ambivalences in the 1970s and 1980s

4 Formation and Dissolution of the Museum for the Development of Social Consciousness in Bratislava

Jan Tesař

Introduction

Marxist, or as the historical actors would themselves call it, scientific atheism, had many metamorphoses during its time, from anti-religious propaganda and the invention of new rituals to serious attempts to study religion. All these approaches had one common denominator: Marxist epistemology, which served as a starting point of analysis and marked the borders of discourse within socialist countries. Somewhere in between propaganda and scholarship stood museums of religion, which were seen as useful tools for scholars as well as atheist enthusiasts.

The situation of Marxist atheism in 1970s Czechoslovakia was largely determined by political circumstances. The turning point in this context was the invasion of the Warsaw Pact forces that began on August 21, 1968. The following political turnover led to a change of approach in the field of Marxist atheism. Before 1968, two phases can be identified.

The first phase is associated with the birth of scientific atheist propaganda, which was organized by the Society for the Dissemination of Political and Scientific Knowledge (*Společnost pro šíření politických a vědeckých znalostí*, hereafter abbreviated as SPŠPVZ). It can be characterized as a direct attack on religion on the basis of science and Marxist philosophy. This was a time when all the alleged backwardness of the Church as well as the unsustainability of religious dogma came to the fore. A case in point is a short text published by Jiří Cvekl, "The Contrast of Scientific and religious worldview" which stated that: "atheism is the scientifically justified denial of religion. To be an atheist means not to believe in religious fantasies and, therefore, to oppose such actions that form a religious cult" (1956, 3). Such an anti-religious approach stood in contrast to the idea of progress and supremacy of scientific truths, which were embodied by historic materialism and the interpretation of selected facts from natural sciences. However, the results of scientific atheist propaganda were questionable, and it did not have the effect desired by the Communist Party of Czechoslovakia (Tesař 2019, 117–120).

The situation changed during the 1960s, as the political establishment loosened its grip on ideology. This resulted in a possibility to change the way that scientific atheism and its underlying paradigm could be approached by progressive thinkers. Broadly speaking, the outcome of this effect was an abandonment of anti-religious

propaganda, which was substituted by an attempt to understand religion on a deeper basis. Nevertheless, this development was broken in the aftermath of August 1968, and the aforementioned second phase abruptly ended.

First of all, the progressive thinkers who embodied the new approach were all silenced and removed from the public sphere. They included Vítězslav Gardavský, with his ideas of "communist humanism" or "dialogical Marxism" (1967, 29); Ivan Sviták and his concept of Scientific atheism as a Marxist philosophy of life (1964, 63); and Erika Kadlecová, with her sociological research, which was heavily inspired by Western approaches (1967).

Furthermore, research on scientific atheism was centralized under the institutes of scientific atheism. Due to the federalization of Czechoslovakia in 1969, two institutes emerged. One was created in 1970 under the Slovakian Academy of Sciences in Bratislava, and the other in 1972 under the Czechoslovakian Academy of Sciences in Brno. Such institutionalization was initiated by the Presidium of the Communist Party and had multiple effects. One of them led to stricter control of the Communist Party over the field. Another changed the perception of Marxist atheism. Its role as a scientific discipline to help the Party understand religious faith as well as atheism was strengthened by this decision. Finally, the institutional structure and funding ensured the development of the discipline. This enabled a study of the sociology of religion (Sekot 1985) and the exploration of the substance of Marxist atheism (Halečka 1985) and provided necessary knowledge for policymakers. In short, the road for scientific atheism to become a Marxist science was open (Tesař 2019, 253–268).

With the ascent of politicians such as Gustáv Husák (General Secretary of the Communist Party of Czechoslovakia) and Milan Štrougal (Prime Minister), who were tightly linked to Leonid Brezhnev and his "real socialism", it became increasingly clear that Marxist atheism in Czechoslovakia was going to be organized according to the Soviet model. Looking at the landscape of atheist institutions in the Soviet Union, the fact that there was no dedicated museum to religion and its history was a gap ready to be filled.

Points of Inquiry

Following this broad overview of Marxist atheism in Czechoslovakia, it is now important to point out that the emergence, existence and demise of the Museum for the Development of Social Consciousness (*Muzeum vývoje společenského vědomí*, hereafter abbreviated as MVSV) in Bratislava has been obscure for modern scholarship. The discovery that such an institution indeed existed opens new lines of inquiry that will contribute to a deeper understanding of Marxist atheism in the so-called "Normalization period".

To begin with, the intended function of the institution should be explored to better understand the place it held in the system of scientific atheist knowledge. Furthermore, the views of the employees should be taken into account to investigate what the historical actors' expectations of the museum were and how they perceived their role. From the perspective of the museum's reach, it is necessary

to study its focus and scope, since it gives an insight into its potential and impact in the Czechoslovakian context. The examination of exhibitions and attendance will provide a grasp of the museum's significance in the context of scientific atheist policies. The last question will deal with the dissolution of the museum at the end of 1989. All these questions are essential in order to examine and evaluate the impact it had and what type of Marxist atheism it promoted and represented.

The Emergence of the Museum for the Development of Social Consciousness in Bratislava

Whereas the Museum of the History of Religion and Atheism in Leningrad (*Muzei istorii religii i ateizma*, henceforth abbreviated as MIRA) was formed in the interwar period (Shakhnovich and Chumakova 2014, 19–46), the MVSV was conceived only at the end of the 1970s. The first ideas to open a museum covering the themes of scientific atheism emerged at the end of 1950s, when Otakar Nahodil together with Antonín Robek, Milan Zubek, Jaroslav Hranička and others prepared an exhibition called "Religion and Atheism in the History of Society" with the support of the SPŠPVZ (Nahodil 1960, 3). The exhibition was inspired by the permanent exhibition of the MIRA in Leningrad, as well as by the popular mobile exhibition called "Science and Religion", prepared by the "Knowledge" society (Soviet version of the SPŠPVZ) in 1958 (Andrianova et al. 1958, 1–20).

The Czechoslovakian temporary exhibition was on display in 1960 and many scientific-atheist activists harbored the idea that the gathered objects could serve as a basis for a museum. However, despite support from a majority of interested scientific atheists, the project did not come into fruition in the early 1960s. The enthusiasm to create such an institution diminished during the thaw of the second half of the 1960s, which brought serious questioning about the theoretical framework of scientific atheism in Czechoslovakia (Tesař 2019, 198–211). The discrepancies related to the orientation of the museum should be understood in this context. According to a later account, the groups involved could not even decide on the name of the prospective museum. Whereas some supported the name "Museum of Religious History" or, inspired by the museum in Leningrad, "Museum of History of Atheism and Religion", others opted for "Museum of Humans and Human Society".[1]

The topic was reopened at the beginning of the 1970s due to the engagement of Slovakian scientific atheists such as Felix Vašečka and Jaroslav Čelko. These two scholars prepared the project of the museum and the Secretariat of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of Slovakia (henceforth abbreviated as CC CPS) agreed to establish the MVSV in the framework of the Ministry of Culture, which gave authorization for the MVSV to the Slovakian National Museum. The concept and purpose of the MVSV were clearly laid out in the initial project presented to the CC CPS by Vašečka and Čelko in 1973: "to confront the development of the scientific worldview of nature, society and thinking in history (with special attention to the Slovakian nation) with religious and other non-scientific ideas and to lead to permanent identification with the

scientific worldview with the help of a specific museum form".[2] Furthermore, it should "represent a reactionary, illusionary, i.e. anti-cognitive specificity of the religious worldview" with the help of exhibitions "profiled from the perspective of the philosophical discipline of scientific atheism".[3] Even though it was the only museum in Czechoslovakia covering the history of religion from the perspective of scientific atheism, it had been thought out from the very beginning as a specifically Slovakian institution, and neither the management of the museum nor the ideological workers had the ambition to create a federal museum. Therefore, the exhibitions made by the employees of the MVSV were predominantly covering the region of Slovakia, and visitors came predominantly from Slovakia as well.

The first specialized worker of the museum, which initially had neither objects to exhibit nor a corresponding building, was admitted in 1975. He was a former member of the Institute of Scientific Atheism (henceforth abbreviated as ISA) in Bratislava, Michal Kolárik, and was given the assignment to create a detailed conception of the museum and make necessary steps for its formation.[4] In order to do that, he made a sort of "call for papers" that resulted in three received scripts for exhibitions on the topic related to the MVSV's proposed project. Although all scripts touched upon the problem of the worldview and its development, none was able to meet the expectations of Kolárik or Vašečka, the latter being a spiritual father to the emerging museum. The main problem was that none of the scripts – "Development of Life on Earth", "The Earth and its Position in the Universe" and "The Development of Humans" – fitted the envisaged concept.

From the report composed by Vašečka and Habovštiak in 1976, it is clear that the exhibitions should have had a more openly scientific atheist focus: "It is not appropriate to start with the exhibition 'The Development of Humans'. (…) The MVSV should represent the following topics: a) activities of churches at the time of the formation of bourgeois opinions, functions of religion during individual phases of social development, b) atheist and anticlerical traditions in Slovakian literature, c) history of science and technology".[5] The members of the scientific committee of the MVSV also expressed that "it is not necessary to be afraid of speaking about religion and getting into confrontation".[6] Since the authors of the scripts made no adjustments or inclusions in order to emphasize the "missing, distinctively ideological [ideový] intention",[7] they were all rejected due to their inability to follow the main lines of the museum's concept, and the floor was open to other proposals with a more pronounced ideological direction that would be able to relate to scientific atheist theories.

As such, even though the initial project of the museum did not automatically disqualify exhibitions about natural science, the critical reaction of the scientific committee in the mid-1970s effectively discouraged potential authors from submitting similar scripts.[8] As a result, the exhibition policy moved from the worldview aspects of natural sciences and focused on the popularization of ideologically sharper but harder to display philosophical disciplines such as scientific atheism.

The MVSV within the Web of Atheist Institutions

In 1977, the MVSV established contacts with other scientific atheist centers in Slovakia such as the ISA and the Department of Scientific Atheism at the Šafárik University in Prešov. It was the beginning of a fruitful collaboration, since one of the faculty members of the department in Prešov, Viera Hudečková, wrote the script for the first exhibition, "Anticlerical and Atheist Traditions in our Workers' Movement", a project which was based on her "candidate" dissertation[9] and fitted perfectly well with the conception of the museum. As a result, the script written by Hudečková was approved by the MVSV and it developed into the first exhibition of the museum in 1980.

In 1979, the ties between the MVSV and the ISA in Bratislava became even tighter as Jan Bielčík, another former ISA researcher, received a position in the museum, and Čelko was assigned the task of managing the MVSV as an external director. Čelko almost immediately departed to Leningrad, where he got acquainted with the MIRA's director, Yakov Kozhurin, specialized workers and the MIRA's exhibitions.[10] It was the beginning of a beneficial relationship that resulted in the lending of certain exhibits from the MIRA to the MVSV during the 1980s. Moreover, the first visit opened the way for further work trips of other MVSV employees, who continually traveled either to the MIRA in Leningrad or to other, geographically closer atheist museums in the Soviet Union, like the museums in Uzhorod, Kiev, Lvov and Vilnius, in order to gather inspiration and enhance their expertise in the field of museology.[11]

Whereas the MIRA could help the MVSV in terms of exhibitions, the other, much smaller regional museums, such as the MIRA in Uzhhorod, were institutions that could serve as an important source of inspiration for another reason. Because the MVSV, in its organization, structure, concept and available resources resembled Soviet regional museums of religion and atheism more than the central institution in Leningrad, the study visits to Lvov and Vilnius at the end of the 1970s and the first half of the 1980s helped hitherto inexperienced MVSV workers to get acquainted with the know-how of already functioning institutions of similar reach and potential.[12]

Problems with Cadres

The museum's cadres grew over the years, although the situation looked bleak at the beginning. Being the only employee, Čelko lamented in 1981 that "the intensification of the museum's activity is conditioned and determined by current spatial and cadre problems, which have not been solved satisfactorily until now".[13] In other words, it was not conceivable to create a fully functioning museum with so little staff. Although there were other possible atheist scholars who had the qualification to be employed in the MVSV, such as Bielčík or Kolárik, their other research obligations within the ISA in Bratislava prevented them from taking on more responsibilities at another institution. That was the case with Čelko as well, who resigned from his position as the MVSV External Director in 1982.

Anna Ištvaničová, who was a former member of the Slovak Matica ("Matica Slovenská") and did not have scientific atheist training, replaced him that same year. Apparently, the fact that she lacked specialized knowledge was not perceived as a flaw when she assumed the function.

The reluctance of the researchers from the ISA in Bratislava to become fully committed to the project of the MVSV indicates a certain lack of trust on their behalf. Other reasons why it was initially difficult to find highly qualified members of staff included that the concept of the institution was unclear from the outset and that it did not promise any serious research. Compared to the ISA, it could also have been seen as lacking prestige. That is not to say that people like Čelko, Bielčík and Kolárik did not want to cooperate with the MVSV. The fact that they remained associates indicates that they were able to maintain a working relationship with it. However, it also means that the heavy lifting, i.e. the everyday tasks, preparation and maintenance of the exhibitions, had to be done by someone else.

The new director successfully resolved the personnel crisis. In 1983, the museum already had six employees, and the number of cadres grew to ten specialized workers by 1988. It should be noted that three employees had professional scientific-atheist training from the university in Prešov, and two had been affiliated with the ISA in the first half of the 1980s.[14] Ištvaničová remained the director until January 1989 when she was replaced by Tatiana Cibulová.[15] Since the MVSV was still under development throughout the 1980s, a firmer organizational structure was created relatively late. The museum had three departments in 1988: (a) history of religion, (b) history of atheism and (c) documentation and archive. The first issue of the MVSV yearbook was published in 1989 and titled "The Development of Social Consciousness in Slovakia".

Religion and Atheism on Display

The MVSV organized a total of seven exhibitions in ten years. The first temporary exhibition, based on the script written by Hudečková, was prepared in 1979 in collaboration with Kolárik. Lacking its own space for display, the museum had to make do with substitute spaces in the building of the Slovak National Museum, located on Vajanského Nábrežie in Bratislava. Nevertheless, the exhibition opened to the public in May 1980 and stayed on display until 1981.[16] It was the first Slovakian attempt to tackle the notorious challenge which, according to contemporaries, consisted in representing highly abstract ideas and a mainly ideational development of atheism with the help of three-dimensional artifacts and other illustrative images (Kolárik 1980, 494).

While various religious themes could have been represented by many tangible objects, it was difficult to portray the development of scientific atheism. This is why the bulk of the artifacts on display was made up of photographs, posters, books and photocopied sources supplemented with abundant text commentary (Doboš 1980, 4). According to the authors, the main purpose of the exhibition was to show the moment when "atheism enters our society as a new

ideological phenomenon which was formed and prepared by the working class inside of the bourgeois regime" (Kolárik 1980, 492). On a more general level, the exhibition had to be a "lesson that the fight against clericalism and religion never was and never will be only a matter of science and scholars but that it has its deep traditions in the working class and that it is a concern for all of us" (Kolárik 1980, 495). The first exhibition also had a self-legitimizing function for atheist activity and its presence in contemporary Czechoslovakian society. By documenting its long tradition in the modern era, it showed that anticlericalism and atheism were not an invention of the Communist Party but rather a product of a change that originated in the grass-roots of the working class at the end of the 19th century.

The Communist Party was represented as the most genuine and authentic representative and supportive propagator of this worldview and social progress, which struggled in an uneven battle against temporarily more powerful opponents represented by the capitalists and clerical circles of the first Czechoslovakian republic. The goal was to "give the visitors an idea about the atmosphere of such ideological struggles for the minds of our people and persuade them [visitors] to take the side of those who were weaker, whose only strength was the strength of the truth" (Kolárik 1980, 493). By showing religious calendars, police reports, Catholic Church leaflets, bourgeois journals and other historical materials, the authors wanted to demonstrate that "the fight for social progress and new thinking was in Slovakia far more than anywhere else related to the fight against unscientific ideas, superstitions, against religious world-view" (Kolárik 1980, 493).

To sum up, by honoring the beginnings of anticlerical and atheist tradition, the authors were first of all signifying the fact that such tradition existed. This was in itself a strong assertion against rumors denying either the existence of anticlerical tradition in Slovakia *per se*, or belittling its impact. Furthermore, by emphasizing its roots, they were also pointing out the indispensable and very important role of atheism in contemporary society. The collected documents showed the substantial nature of the tradition itself in the recent past, which ought to have implications for the present time and for the future. Finally, the display of artifacts arranged in a careful juxtaposition of "clerical" and "anticlerical" strengthened the overall argument and bestowed on it a tinge of objectivity in the context of a cultural meta-reality associated with the process of musealization. This process is defined by the leading Slovakian museologist Zbyněk Stránský, who sees it as "museal acquisition of reality which is neither satisfied only by collecting of things as such nor by their original meaning because it is also conditioned by memory and cultural value of reality" (Stránská and Stránský 2000, 61). Such understanding points to the fact that the MVSV wanted to construct the past in order to reinforce the ideas of scientific atheism and put them on display.

A huge part of the exhibition strategy and expertise was provided by the MIRA in Leningrad, which readily shipped items for display from its depository. Table 4.1 provides an insight into the extent of the cooperation.

Table 4.1 Exhibitions at the MVSV, 1980–1989

Year	Name of the exhibition	Originator
1980–1981	Our Atheist Traditions (1918–1938)	MVSV
1982–1983	People and Religion in Slovakia	MVSV
1982	At the Sources of Religion	MIRA
1983–1985	Religion of Early Class Societies	MIRA
1986–1987	MVSV closed down for reconstruction	
1987–1989	The Development of Social Consciousness in Slovakia	MVSV
1989	The Origins of Christianity	MIRA

All three exhibitions that were lent to the MVSV by the MIRA thematized the origins of religion, be it the polytheism of "early class societies" or the monotheism of the first Christians. The motivation was to show historical processes that document and confirm the most important epistemic foundations of scientific atheism concerning religion and its functions. Furthermore, the musealized artifacts contributed to the historicization of religion and supported the argument formulated first in the scientific atheist realm of knowledge during the second half of the 1950s and repeated since then, especially by the exoteric thought collective, i.e. activists, promoters and propaganda workers (Tesař 2019, 98–116). In brief, religion was portrayed as the "opium of the masses". As such, it was deemed to spread passivity in people in the face of the uncontrolled forces of nature and society. Moreover, its moral rules and norms were seen as flawed because they stood in the way of a new and better life.

Last but not least, the reactionary role of the Vatican in contemporary times, and the Catholic Church's opposition to progress and sentencing of scholars such as Tycho de Brahe and Galileo Galilei, served as a *pars pro toto* of the hypocritical nature of the Church in general. Whereas the ideas behind the exhibitions were by no means new, the form of presentation, i.e. display of ideas in the form of musealized artifacts accompanied by a text in a museum building, was novel in the Czechoslovakian context. It was also a much-needed element of scientific worldview education, as noted by the atheist specialists involved. This propagandistic effect was particularly strengthened by the display of selected three-dimensional objects; dolls representing spirits of the dead, ritual costumes and various votive objects worked as the main testimonies of the exhibition's narrative structure, embedded in the explanatory texts or the narration of a professional guide.[17]

The biggest change in the exhibition strategy came in 1987 when, after a year-long refurbishment of the MVSV building – the former Matica Slovenská on Pugačevova Street (today Františkánská Street) in Bratislava – the MVSV's first permanent exhibition was introduced.[18] Its title was "The Development of Social Consciousness in Slovakia", and the script was written by Kolárik, Cibulová and Pávová, a specialist in the history of arts. According to the script, the main goal was to "focus on the growth of the main progressive elements in individual forms of social consciousness in a confrontation with non-scientific and above all religious ideas with an accent on the development in our country".[19] The thematic structure of the exhibition resembled the exhibition in Leningrad's MIRA, combined with the earlier exhibitions done by the MVSV.[20]

Therefore, neither the content and presentation, nor the idea was particularly new. It is symptomatic that the motto of the exhibition was a quote from Friedrich Engels: "In the beginning was the deed". A co-author of the exhibition explained it as an "evocation of the fundamental opposition through a well-known citation from the Bible, 'In the beginning was the word'. As such, the effort of authors to confront the starting positions of materialism and idealism is represented" (Kolárik 1988, 420).

To briefly highlight one of the main features of the exhibition, it is useful to analyze its chronological aspect. The symbolic journey through time began and ended at the point when there was no religion, and thus a logical spiral was completed. In order to document the atheist nature of socialist society, the authors used a series of photographs portraying the citizens of Czechoslovakia during various secular rites and ceremonies, focusing predominantly on the socialist rites of passage. The initial idea was to end the whole exhibition with a series of snapshots portraying young men and women leaving the ranks of the Catholic Church in the 1950s, and photographs depicting a secular house of mourning and crematoria; this was abandoned as it was deemed "not suitable". Still, the documentation of the new Man's upbringing was described as one of the weaker parts of the exhibition. Instead of such somber images, the authors in the end decided to show the latest advances of Czechoslovakian science, such as the mobile cardiograph and petrochemical products from the Slovnaft factory (Kolárik 1988, 84). This decision is symptomatic as it shows that even the scientific-atheist specialists, who spent decades researching and perfecting their theories, were clueless when faced with the need to represent the desired changes in society and achieve desired effects.

The issue was related to the need for verisimilitude. The construction of the past through the exhibition could not overstep the cultural memory of society, and the creators from the ranks of the MVSV were aware of that. A lot was at stake. If the past were represented as artificial, the whole construct could collapse and the desired effect of such an exhibition would be not only non-existent but possibly adverse. Precisely the fact that MVSV employees were unable to display socialist rites and rituals as victorious, or at least ascendant, exposes the relative weakness of the atheist project in Slovakia at the end of the 1980s. This assertion can be supported by one of the messages written in the commemorative book, accessible to visitors who could comment on the exhibition: "Christianity has an almost two-thousand-year-long history. It met many ideologies, religions and regimes on its way. Some resisted longer than others … Christianity is expanding over the whole world. The Bible was translated into 1200 languages and dialects across the world. I wish God had opened your eyes".[21]

All exhibitions in the MVSV shared a few common aspects. The most important was that the displayed artifacts could not speak for themselves. Therefore, the main goal of the guide or the accompanying notes was to provide an unambiguous, clear narration to contextualize the individual objects, appropriately decode their meaning in the past and infer conclusions for the present.

Another common denominator was the historicization of religion through careful musealization. By displaying objects such as Christian relics, altar crosses, candles or medallions of Saints outside of their typical environment of a church

and community of believers, a re-framing and re-contextualization took place. In the context of an exhibition, these objects of daily use were changed into artifacts devoid of their original meaning and acquiring a new one, ascribed to them by the museum workers.

Finally, all exhibitions had a strong chronological aspect that underlined the Marxist idea of progress based on historical materialism. The focus was on the development from primitive religious societies of a bygone era to the advent of the highest form of atheist societies during the construction of socialism. The goal was not to display exotic shamanism or items used during inquisition processes in order to bring visitors closer to the culture of societies living in the past; rather, it was to demonstrate how less-developed forms of thinking inevitably and indubitably give way to more progressive ones. Therefore, the outcome was not a re-enactment of a self-sufficient moment, trapped in the bubble of its own historicity through an artifact as if in a "time capsule", but the portrayal of a historical process that was always somehow related to the present.

The Public Impact of the MVSV

The vast majority of visitors who found their way to the MVSV was composed of organized school trips. Organized groups of adults, either from Czechoslovakia or from abroad, were much less common. Individual guests found their way to the museum only rarely, even though the entrance was free of charge. In 1985, school groups accounted for 7,409 visitors and other organized groups for 730 visitors; there were only 320 individual visits and just 67 guests from abroad. The total visitor figures for that year were 8,526.[22] In other words, if it were not for the compulsory school trips, the MVSV would have been mostly empty. This was partly due to the fact that there was almost no advertisement of the museum in the media, so even people from Bratislava often did not know about the museum's existence.

The installation of a permanent exhibition and re-opening of the MVSV in 1987 also helped to attract more visitors (see Table 4.2 for a more detailed overview). During the busiest year – 1989 – the museum was visited by 16,445 guests,

Table 4.2 Attendance at the MVSV

Year (months)	Number of visitors
1980	No data
1981 (II–XII)	2,366
1982	3,100
1983	4,707
1984	7,529
1985	8,526
1986	0
1987 (VI–XII)	4,422
1988	15,645
1989 (I–IX)	16,445

which exceeded the expectations of the director of the museum by 4,445; the plan had been to attract 12,000 visitors that year. Although there is no archival record to help break down this number, it could be maintained that the majority of visitors were made up of organized groups, as the evidence from 1985 shows. Matica Slovenská, which administered the MVSV, probably promoted the exhibition to Slovakian schools. Other organizations, such as the Department of Culture of the Regional National Committee or the Slovakian Youth Union, also contributed to the overall attendance.[23] The increased numbers could also be a reaction of the Party establishment to the Candle demonstration that took place in Bratislava on March 25, 1988. This event, organized by the Catholic activist František Mikloško, attracted around 5,000 people to Hviezdoslav Square, who came together to promote religious freedom in Czechoslovakia. Party officials saw it as a major threat and suppressed the demonstration, with police deploying water cannons, batons and sticks.[24]

However, the comparison of the annual number of visitors with a more typical year – 1983 – reveals that the MVSV attracted approximately the same amount of guests as city museums or regional ethnographic museums in smaller Slovakian towns, such as the Museum of National History and Science in Topoľčany (*Vlastivedné múzeum Topoľčany*, 2,580 visitors) and the Regional Museum of National History and Science in Veľký Krtíš (*Okresné vlastivedné múzeum Veľký Krtíš*, 3,560 visitors). In contrast, the most popular museums in Slovakia attracted hundreds of thousands of visitors, notably the Museum of Slovakian National Uprising (*Múzeum Slovenského národného povstánia*, 284,760 visitors) and the Slovakian National Museum (*Slovenské národné múzeum,* 358,644 visitors) (Múzeum 1984, 89–90).

Furthermore, since it was properly opened only in 1987, the museum did not have enough time to become a part of public awareness. Consequently, no one really wanted to keep the museum after the Velvet Revolution in November 1989. The permanent exhibition installed just three years earlier was dismantled in December 1989, and Habovštiak, the director of the Slovak National Museum, decided that the MVSV would immediately cease its activity and give all available space back to the Matica Slovenská for the purposes of a new museum to document the emigration and life of Slovaks abroad. Employees of the MVSV were relocated to other positions within the Slovakian National Museum, and artifacts in its possession were handed over to other museums.[25]

Conclusion

In conclusion, it can be maintained that after the infamous propaganda lectures of the SPŠPVZ, which pitted religion against science during the 1950s, the brief existence of the Museum for the Development of Social Consciousness in Bratislava was another attempt to show religion in the context of Marxist materialism. Since the vast majority of visitors were in fact school groups, the youth was the main target of the institution, which strived to present religious artifacts in a certain way and frame them into a certain context. Its task was not to showcase a cultural multitude and

inform laymen about different approaches to the sacred in order to promote under-standing and celebrate plurality. Rather, the purpose was to show historical dialectics in a tangible form, to prove and document that religion in general, and Christianity in particular, were irrevocably withering away in order to make room for a new type of consciousness that was traceable, for example, in new rites of passage.

Precisely because it was a museum, it had a veneer of certainty reinforced by the artifacts on display. The accompanying texts anchored the objects in the past and authoritatively explained their purpose. At the same time, the confrontation of visitors with an exhibition juxtaposed the votive artifacts with a new reality. The tentative conclusion from such a visit was that the presented objects belonged to a different era and to a different society that had almost been overcome. It is difficult to say whether the intended effect of musealization was ever accomplished. The archives are silent and the institution itself did not have a big impact due to its short life span. Therefore, its significance was marginal and the resources invested in its formation were lost without possibility of return.

Unlike the Museum in Leningrad, which survived through the collapse of the Soviet Union and subsequent transformation until the present day, no one wanted to preserve the Museum for the Development of Social Consciousness when the winds of change swept through the communist regime in November 1989. If it had been established thirty years earlier, its fate could have been different. The current State Museum of the History of Religion in Saint Petersburg could serve as a testa-ment to such an assertion.

Notes

1 See *Zpráva o stavu příprav na zřízení MVSV, 6.10.1977*, box 1, MVSV, A SNM, Slovakia.
2 *Koncepcia budovania Múzea vývoja spoločenského vedomia pri Slovenskom národnom múzeu v Bratislave*, box Doklady 1978–1987, p. 4, Archive of the Slovakian National Museum (hereafter A SNM), collection of the Museum for the Development of Social Consciousness (hereafter MVSV), Slovakia (hereafter *Koncepcia budovania*).
3 *Koncepcia budovania*, p. 6.
4 See *Současný stav a koncepce budování*, box 1, p. 3, collection MVSV, A SNM, Slovakia.
5 *Konzultace Habovštiaka s Vašečkou*, box Doklady 1978–1987, MVSV, A SNM, Slovakia.
6 *Vědecká rada 24.5. 1977*, box 1, MVSV, A SNM, Slovakia.
7 *Budování a činnot v letech 1980–1985 a s výhledem do 1990*, box 1, MVSV, A SNM, Slovakia.
8 See *Materiál na jednání ředitelské rady ÚSMaG*, box 3, MVSV, A SNM, Slovakia.
9 The title of "candidate", abbreviated as CSc., is an equivalent to a PhD in the system of socialist postgradual education.
10 See *Porada pracovníků 18.9.1979*, box 1, MVSV, A SNM, Slovakia.
11 See *Výroční zpráva 1982*, box 1, MVSV, A SNM, Slovakia.
12 See *Koncepce budování 1982*, box 1, MVSV, A SNM, Slovakia.
13 *Výroční zpráva 1981*, box 1, MVSV, A SNM, Slovakia.
14 The graduates with a specialization in scientific atheism were Tatiana Cibulová, Marta Luptáková and Miloslav Sekela. Apart from Čelko Michal Kolárik and Ján Bielčik were associated with the ISA. However, only two employees, Tatiana Cibulová and Michal Kolárik, had scientific atheist training at the end of 1988. See *Zpráva o přípravě ex-pozice MVSV a další činnosti 1983*, box 5, MVSV, A SNM, Slovakia and *Organizační pořádek MVSV*, box 10, MVSV, A SNM, Slovakia.

15 Tatiana Cibulová was one of the first graduates of the department of scientific atheism at the university in Prešov. She finished her university studies in 1977 and started her study visit at the ISA in Bratislava in the same year. She was chosen to continue as an "aspirant" in 1979. However, her dissertation was not finished when she transferred to the MVSV in 1982. See *Vědecká výchova, Tatiana Blagoeva (Cibulová)*, box 22, file 140, Archive of the Slovakian Academy of Sciences, collection of the Institute of Scientific Atheism, Slovakia.

16 The exhibition itself had the following structure: (1) manifestations of anticlericalism and atheism in the workers' movement until the formation of the Communist Party of Czechoslovakia, (1a) ideological maturation of the proletariat within the Slovakian social-democratic movement, (1b) the importance of the Great October Socialist Revolution for the proletarian education of masses; (2) the development of the anticlerical and atheist movement in the ranks of the proletariat after the formation of the Communist Party of Czechoslovakia, (2a) the fight with clerical reaction in bourgeois Czechoslovakia, (2b) the Union of the Proletarian Godless and its activity (1926), (2c) the development of anticlericalism and atheism in the phase of intensified class struggle before the Second World War. See *Antiklerikální a ateistické traduce v našem dělnickém hnutí do druhé světové války*, box 2, MVSV, A SNM, Slovakia.

17 See *Pri prameňoch náboženstva*. 1982, Bratislava: SNM.

18 The building on Pugačevova Street, which was a former monastery, had been assigned to the museum in the times when Čelko worked as the custodian of Matica Slovenská at the beginning of the 1970s. However, it took many years before the spaces were cleared out and repurposed for the needs of the museum.

19 Cit. *Ideový zámer stálej expozície Múzea vývoja spoločenského vedomia v Bratislave*, box 3, p. 2, MVSV, A SNM, Slovakia.

20 The permanent exhibition in the MVSV was divided into the following units: (1) The world in the imagination of primitive societies; (2) development of social consciousness during the period of the slave society; (3) development of social consciousness in the period of feudalism; (4) development of social consciousness in the period of capitalism; (5) development of social consciousness in socialist society.

21 *Kronika k výstavě Vznik křesťanství*, box 11, MVSV, A SNM, Slovakia.

22 The statistical data are based on multiple sources. For the years 1981–1982, it is *Zpráva o činnosti muzea (23.5.1983)*, box 5, p. 2, MVSV, A SNM, Slovakia. For 1983–1984 it is *Činnost organizace*, box 4, p. 4, MVSV, A SNM, Slovakia. For 1985, it is *Návštěvnost za 1985,* box 6, p. 3, MVSV, A SNM, Slovakia. The MVSV was closed in 1986. The information about the year 1987: *Výroční zpráva za 1987*, box 9, p. 3, MVSV, A SNM, Slovakia. The year 1988 is to be found in: *Výroční zpráva za 1988*, box 10, pp. 6–8, MVSV, A SNM, Slovakia. The year 1989 is documented in: *Výroční zpráva za 1989*, box 11, p. 8, MVSV, A SNM, Slovakia.

23 See *Zhodnocení výstavní činnosti za 1984*, box 5, p. 2, MVSV, ASNM, Slovakia.

24 "Spľasla bublina provokácie." *Pravda* (Bratislava), March 28, 1988, Orgán ústredného výboru komunistickej strany Slovenska.

25 See *Návrh delimitace pracoviště SNM – MVSV*, box 5, file 189, Ředitelství SNM, A SNM, Slovakia.

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5 New Thinking in the Nuclear Age?

Marxist-Leninist Conceptions of War and Peace in the GDR in the 1980s and the Dialogue with Churches and Christians

Stephen G. Brown

Introduction

It was a Bible verse (Galatians 6:2) that provided the title for a film from the German Democratic Republic (GDR), premiered during the 1988 Berlinale and which went on to win a Silver Bear. "Einer trage des anderen Last ..." ("Bear ye one another's burdens …") told the story of two young men confined to the same room in a tuberculosis sanatorium in the GDR at the beginning of the 1950s: one, a policeman, Josef Heiliger, a convinced Marxist; the other, Hubertus Koschenz, a Protestant pastor in training. Heiliger puts up a picture of Stalin and intones the Internationale, Koschenz nails up a cross and sings church hymns.[1] But eventually the two men, despite their fundamental ideological and religious differences, find a way to mutual understanding, and maybe even friendship, in this film that for the first time in the GDR portrayed a Marxist and a Christian as equals. "Since they breathe the same air …" according to the review in the official party newspaper *Neues Deutschland*, "and both are confronted with a life-threatening disease (something that can certainly be understood as a metaphor of the nuclear threat), the communist and the Christian need to seek common ground".[2]

The significance of the film for Marxist-Christian relations was underlined at the premiere on January 28, 1988 at the Kino International in East Berlin. Seated next to each other at the front of the cinema were Kurt Hager, the chief ideologist and politburo member of the ruling Socialist Unity Party (*Sozialistische Einheitspartei*, SED) and the Protestant bishop emeritus Albrecht Schönherr, the former chairperson of the GDR's Federation of Protestant Churches (*Bund der Evangelischen Kirchen in der DDR*, BEK), who helped steer the BEK to a *modus vivendi* with the GDR State in 1978. In its review of the film, *Neue Zeit*, the daily newspaper of the GDR's Christian Democratic Union, recalled the common resistance of Christians and atheists in the struggle against fascism and underlined the central message of the film as being "common interests in the preservation and defence of life, in the search for justice, in striving for peace, in the desire to find a meaningful existence".[3]

When first proposed in 1973, the film was rejected by the Ministry of Culture's film department (*Hauptverwaltung Film*, HV Film), receiving a negative evaluation from its Department for Artistic Production (*Abteilung Künstlerische*

Production).[4] Not only was the script "a sad tale, not suited to the cinema, maybe better as a radio play", but it was set within the "politically unfruitful sphere of the conflict of ideologies".[5] A reworked version again received a negative assessment in 1986 from the Department for Artistic Production.[6] Now, in the third – and successful – attempt to have it produced, Hans Dieter Mäde, general director of the GDR film studio DEFA, underlined: "Political cooperation between communists and Christians is of historical importance for the appeal and international weight of socialism as well as for its internal stability and maturity".[7]

This shift in attitudes can be seen as a cultural expression of a philosophical reorientation in the GDR in the 1980s, a time marked by the East–West confrontation, the arms race, and the dangers of a nuclear inferno. This new perspective stressed the common interests of humanity in survival, challenging traditional Marxist-Leninist notions of the international class struggle, and underscored the need for cooperation between Marxists and Christians in addressing global threats. Although this "new thinking" accelerated with the accession of Mikhail Gorbachev as General Secretary of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union (CPSU) in 1985, ultimately it was unable to provide a sustainable basis for such cooperation with believers, given the significant discrepancy that existed between the approach these changing perspectives implied and the political practice of the SED on the ground in the GDR.

The Political Context of Philosophical Redefinition

Church and State in the GDR

The GDR was the only State in Central and Eastern Europe in which a Soviet-backed government faced a society with a dominant Protestant tradition, which in 1945 had grouped about 90 percent of the population. Organized as *Landeskirchen*, the eight regional Protestant Churches in the GDR initially formed part of the all-German Evangelical Church in Germany (*Evangelische Kirche in Deutschland*, EKD) but separated from their Western counterparts in 1969 to form the BEK. The SED and GDR State had been hostile to the participation of the GDR regional churches in the EKD, whose headquarters were in the Federal Republic of Germany (FRG). However, in 1971, the GDR government officially recognized the BEK, after which meetings at various levels were held, culminating in a meeting in March 1978 between leaders of the BEK and SED General Secretary Erich Honecker (Brown 1999, 342), which became a *de facto* constitutional settlement for the Church. Though closely observed by the *Staatssicherheit* and repeatedly coming under pressure from the State, the Churches were the only institutions in the GDR not formally integrated into the system of "democratic centralism" controlled by the SED: they organized their own affairs, elected their own leaders, and held their own synods (church assemblies) with democratic decision-making procedures.[8] The Protestant Churches in the GDR also had a strong ethical commitment to peace, not only because of the course of 20th-century German history but also because of the presence in their ranks of former *Bausoldaten* (soldiers in construction units), who served in the army but were freed from the obligation

to bear arms, a unique arrangement in Eastern Europe, introduced largely due to Church representations after the introduction of conscription in the GDR in 1962 (Garstecki 2019, 374). Many *Bausoldaten* found most routes to higher education closed off by the State and turned to the Church, studying theology, and becoming pastors or Church workers, disseminating ideas of active nonviolence and the peaceful resolution of conflicts within churches and society (Garstecki 2019, 378).

The East–West Confrontation of the 1980s

In Western Europe, the 1979 decision to station medium-range nuclear-armed missiles in five countries – Belgium, Britain, the FRG, Italy, and the Netherlands – as a response to the Soviet deployment of SS-20 missiles led to the biggest peace movement since the Second World War. In the GDR, this increasingly tense political situation, reflected in an internal militarization of society, led to the growth of independently organized peace groups in churches and parishes, often with the support if not at the active instigation of pastors who had themselves been *Bausoldaten*. While the State attempted to clamp down on such activities, it was reluctant to intervene directly on church premises. Meanwhile at a GDR level, at its synod in Halle in 1982, the BEK rejected "the spirit and logic of deterrence"; the following year at its synod in Potsdam, it widened this renunciation to include the "spirit, logic and *practice* of deterrence" (emphasis added). In so doing, the GDR Churches were critiquing the security logic of the East–West conflict, and although referring to both East and West, within the GDR, this critique was also directed at the policies of the GDR and the Warsaw Pact (Garstecki 2019, 383). The synods went on to make a series of detailed proposals as a way to offer a positive content to their rejection of deterrence and to develop a "new way of thinking" for peace and disarmament (Bund 1987, 6), and, especially, to find ways to translate the proposals for "common security" and "security partnership" of the Palme Commission[9] into concrete political steps as an alternative to deterrence (Bund 1987, 3–10).

Towards a "Coalition of Reason"

Despite the mass protests in Western Europe, NATO began the deployment of Cruise and Pershing II missiles in the final quarter of 1983. This was met by the announcement of "counter-measures" in the GDR and Czechoslovakia. The GDR leadership gave clear signs that it was unhappy about these developments, and especially their implications for its relationship with the Federal Republic. As far as the internal GDR situation was concerned, quite apart from the development of independent peace activities, there were reports from the *Staatssicherheit* of a more general discontent within the population.[10] In March 1983 at the Leipzig trade fair, Honecker announced his wish – "to the amazement of his comrades" (Schiefer and Stief 2021, 14) – to make an official visit to Bonn that year to help advance the cause of peace,[11] something however that was unable to take place until 1987. He spoke of the need to "create peace with ever fewer weapons", a phrase that West German Chancellor Helmut Kohl had used in his election campaign earlier that year, and repeated the phrase the next month

in his address at the official ceremony to mark the 100th anniversary of the death of Karl Marx. While it was important to prevent NATO deploying new nuclear weapons, Honecker stated then, "we advocate a genuine 'zero option', which means a nuclear-free Europe that can ensure our continent has a peaceful future". He underlined that all political and social forces that wanted peace and to avoid a nuclear war, "must work together, irrespective of differing political programmes, ideological positions and religious confessions [*weltanschauliche Positionen und religiöse Bekenntnisse*], across class barriers and everything that may separate us" (Honecker n.d., 16–18). In October 1983, using a phrase that henceforth would become a leitmotif for GDR policy, Honecker called for a "Coalition of Reason" (*Koalition der Vernunft*) of all those wishing to prevent humanity sliding into a nuclear catastrophe and to prevent a new round of the nuclear arms race.[12]

Also in October 1983, *Neues Deutschland* began printing letters from local churches calling for disarmament, such as one from a Dresden parish condemning the counter-measures, calling for a security partnership or a "coalition of reason" between the two German States, and for confidence-building measures that would equate to a unilateral first step (*einseitige Vorleistung*).[13] Neither condemnation of the Soviet counter-measures, nor the call for unilateral disarmament steps were part of the SED's official discourse. However, the letter "would not have been published if it had not coincided with the interests of the Party" (Schmidt-Häuer 1986, 146). Meanwhile, a letter from a West German congregation called for an end to weapons of mass destruction in "East and West",[14] while a Babelsberg parish warned that hope in the GDR was being eroded by "resignation … among Christians and non-Christians in our land".[15]

Philosophical Redefinitions of War and Peace

Against this background, philosophical perspectives on war and peace and on co-operation between Marxists and Christians in preserving peace were being redefined. The history of Marxist-Leninist philosophy in the GDR (Zur Geschichte der marxistisch-leninistischen Philosophie in der DDR) published in 1979 contains no index entries for "war" or "peace", although in several places it condemns the "atom bomb philosophy" of the remilitarization of the Federal Republic in the early 1960s (Akademie 1979, 603–604), and the reactionary ideas of Protestant "political clericalism that threatened peace" (Akademie 1979, 621–626). Atheism, on the other hand, is both indexed and characterized as "an essential feature of the *Weltanschauung* of the working class", and, with reference to a statement by Kurt Hager, dialectical materialism is described as "not only a scientific, but also an atheistic" worldview: "That is why we stand on the ground of science and materialism and not on the ground of religion and idealism" (Akademie 1979, 275).

Even in 1981, a book published in the GDR by its military publishing house could consider that a war "to defend the socialist fatherland has an unreservedly progressive and consistently revolutionary character", to safeguard "the most progressive and just social order in history" (Scheler and Kiessling 1981, 136). With the onset of the East–West confrontation of the early 1980s, and the calls for a "coalition of reason", however, these philosophical perspectives began to change. This raises

the question of the relationship between philosophical and political interests in the GDR. Were the changing philosophical perspectives simply a reflection of changing political interests? According to Küpper, philosophy in the GDR had a threefold character: as an academic social science, as an ideology, and as a component of an overall worldview (*Weltanschauung*) (Küpper 2021, 32). To this could be added that debates on GDR philosophy, especially on questions relating to war and peace, need to be seen in the context of the political developments of the time. Wolfgang Scheler, the head of the philosophy department at the Military Academy "Friedrich Engels" in Dresden from 1974 and professor of dialectical and historical materialism there from 1978 to 1990, described in 2014 how philosophical perspectives at the academy had begun to change in the 1970s, when issues relating to peace and the preservation of peace were explicitly addressed, against the background of the threat of the self-destruction of humanity: "Alongside the deeper theoretical analysis of war and peace through the use of philosophical categories, this created the tentative steps for what later would be the upheaval [*Umbruch*] in worldviews" (Scheler 2014, 115). He argued that it was the "new insights" of the academic and scientific institutions that provided the basis for the statements by Erich Honecker in 1983 on the need for a "coalition of reason and realism". At the same time, such public statements by the SED General Secretary created "open spaces [*Freiräume*] for rethinking the question of war and peace", even before the "qualitatively new basis" of the "new thinking" of Mikhail Gorbachev that revolutionized Soviet conceptions of foreign and security policy (Scheler 2014, 117).

In the process of this shift in perspectives, the VI Philosophical Congress of the GDR in 1984 played a significant role. In his opening address, the president of the scientific council for Marxist-Leninist philosophy, Erich Hahn, stated that:

> What is unique and what is new historically about the current situation lies in the fact that the potential in the hands of humanity has expanded to such an extent that it makes possible in principle the solution of all 'older' and 'newer' global problems; the historically new dimension of the danger lies in the fact that the existence of humanity can be called into question in real terms by means created by human hands.
>
> (Klimaszewsky and Teichmann 1985, 245)

Hahn thus linked the need to avoid the destruction of a nuclear war to the need to tackle the global issues facing humanity. The entire potential of humankind needed to be lifted up and brought together. Forces that were socially and ideologically diverse could find a common, unifying interest in the defence of peace (Klimaszewsky and Teichmann 1985, 246).

The Philosophy of Peace

The clearest expression of this new philosophical perspective came in a book presented at the congress, *Die Philosophie des Friedens im Kampf gegen die Ideologie des Krieges* (The Philosophy of Peace in the Struggle against the Ideology of War),

produced by an author collective of the Military Academy "Friedrich Engels" in Dresden and the Academy of Social Sciences attached to the SED central committee (Militärakdemie 1984).[16] Wolfgang Scheler, who was head of the author collective that produced the book, later stated that although well received, the book "did not yet accomplish the necessary paradigm shift to new thinking on peace, war, and the armed forces but significantly brought forward the process of rethinking [*Umdenken*]" (2014, 119). Nevertheless, even if the book represented only a limited progress, the consequences of a nuclear world war were for the first time in the GDR set out in detail, and the conclusions derived from this presentation of war, were, for the philosophical thinking of the GDR, "revolutionary" (Knappe 2011, 67).

That there was not full consensus among Marxist-Leninist philosophers about the positions put forward in the book, however, can be seen from the account published in 1986 by the *Deutsche Zeitschrift für Philosophie* of a round table at which there was debate about three of the main assertions put forward in the book (Teichmann 1986, 144). First, the struggle for peace was no longer directly related to the clash of socialism and imperialism. Instead, while the "most reactionary" circles of the exploiting class were still promoting war, the movement for peace extended beyond the working class into the ranks of the bourgeoisie. Second, in a nuclear age the saying of Clausewitz that "war is a continuation of politics by other means" no longer applied; the use of nuclear weapons would lead to catastrophic consequences for civilization and for life on earth. Third, the contemporary age was seen as a new historical epoch, namely the "nuclear age" (*Atomzeitalter* or *Nuklearzeitalter*) (Rupprecht and Scheler 1984, 10). The struggle for peace no longer simply represented the interests of the working class but those of humanity as a whole. Each of these assertions challenged traditional Marxist-Leninist thinking. Contemplating the end of human history did not accord with the optimistic prognosis of the Marxist worldview, according to which the laws of history were leading to a transition to socialism in which history would really begin, while the concept of the *Atomzeitalter* contradicted the Marxist understanding of historical epochs based on social processes, the economics of societies, and class relationships (Scheler 2014, 117).

As a result, Marxist-Leninist philosophy was facing a whole range of "completely new questions" requiring historical materialist thinking on issues of peace to be "creatively applied" (Rupprecht and Scheler 1984, 10). In the international class struggle for the realization of the historic mission of the working classes there were "different priorities" than in the past. Quoting the Soviet leader Yuri Andropov, the book underlined that while communists had always struggled against the oppression and exploitation of human by human, "today they are also struggling to preserve human civilization, the preservation of life on earth" (Rupprecht and Scheler 1984, 14).[17] This required the full use of the potential of humanism and reason in the struggle against "the imperialist ideology of war", bringing together not only communists, but also "bourgeois, reformist, pacifist forces that genuinely want peace, including important sections of the churches and religious communities" (Rupprecht and Scheler 1984, 13). This assertion would have direct implications for cooperation with Christians, since the aim was no longer to bring

individual Christian believers or leaders into the struggle for peace of the socialist camp but to contribute to what Honecker had called a "coalition of reason" whose aim was the survival of humanity as a whole.

Philosophical Cooperation between Marxists and Christians in the Struggle for Peace

In such cooperation with churches and religious communities, a separate chapter by Wolfgang Kliem on "religion and the struggle for peace in our age" was devoted to the "historically new dimension of the activities of religious forces for peace" (Kliem 1984, 204). From 1977, Kliem had been responsible for the section (*Fachbereich*) on scientific atheism at the Academy for Social Sciences (*Akademie für Gesellschaftswissenschaften*, AfG) attached to the SED central committee, and then, from 1981, director of the AfG's newly created Problem Council for Worldview Problems of Cooperation between Communists and Believers (*Problemrat Weltanschauliche Probleme der Zusammenarbeit von Kommunisten und Gläubigen*) (Guigo-Patzelt 2021, 614–624).[18]

In his chapter in *Die Philosophie des Friedens*, Kliem began by describing how churches are spread throughout the world: in the capitalist States and in the "developing socialist world system"; in the main centres of capital (some still colonial powers immediately after the Second World War) and in developing countries (many once colonies) which had seen powerful national and social liberation movements; and, not least, on the dividing line between socialism and imperialism (Kliem 1984, 205). As a result, "There is today no important political and ideological issue that has not found a religious expression or form. Religions have become a battleground in the international class struggle" (Kliem 1984, 207). This led, though not without contradictions and resistance from "reactionary political forces", to a religious "*Wende zur Welt*" (turning to the world),[19] taking up responsibility for the world and the great questions facing humanity (*Menschheitsfragen*), and including engagement with society on the basis of humanism and social progress, symbolized by the Second Vatican Council of the Roman Catholic Church (1962–1965) and the 1966 Conference on Church and Society of the World Council of Churches.

Now, in the struggle against the nuclear threat to humanity, Christian commitment to peace, according to Kliem, transcended the involvement of individual personalities, movements, and pacifist religious communities to encompass the main Churches and their leaders, and had taken on an international dimension. Christian commitment to peace was not limited to cooperation with other believers but extended to cooperation with all people of goodwill, international organizations, and even Marxists, whatever differences there might be on specific issues. Moreover, questions of war and peace, he argued, had to be seen within the broader context of the challenge of development in the "third world" and the preservation of the natural conditions necessary for human existence.[20]

Here it was argued that Christian theology itself might offer a basis for cooperation with Marxist-Leninists in tackling the global problems facing humanity and that Christians could be fellow campaigners for a human world without war,

exploitation, and oppression. In the past, Kliem argued, Marxism-Leninism had criticized the Christian doctrine of just war because it had been used to justify war, had ignored the class nature of war, and had been used by imperialist circles to mobilize anti-communism. Now, the doctrine of "just war" was being redefined by Christians and Churches as a doctrine of "just peace", because any use of nuclear weapons would contravene the conditions set down for a just war. As such, it could become the basis for cooperation between communists and Christian peace forces within a "coalition of reason" (Kliem 1984, 234).

If such a Christian theological approach to "just war" and "just peace" might serve as a basis for cooperation between Christians and Marxists, what then of the atheistic nature of Marxism-Leninism as a barrier to such collaboration? While in the *Geschichte der marxistisch-leninistischen Philosophie in der DDR*, atheism had been described, as noted above, as "an essential feature of the *Weltanschauung* of the working class", Kliem asserted that Marxism-Leninism viewed ideological differences between religious faith and the scientific-materialist worldview as secondary to their common interests in preserving life. In Marxism-Leninism, he stated, it was not atheism that was the central focus but the historical mission of the working class. Confrontation with religion was not part of the political programme of the communist movement: "the classical figures [*Klassiker*] of Marxism-Leninism resolutely opposed those anarchist views in the workers' movement that sought to declare the struggle against religion the political task of the workers' party … communists respect religious faith and its practice. They do not impose the scientific-materialist worldview on the followers of a religion or make its acceptance a precondition for cooperation" (Kliem 1984, 222).

Kliem's description of the place of atheism in cooperation with believers on issues of war and peace should be seen against the background of the place of the term "scientific atheism" in general. Although the AfG *Fachbereich* Kliem headed had this designation, the *Problemrat* when it was created in 1981 referred instead to ideological or worldview (*weltanschauliche*) problems of cooperation between communists and believers, symbolizing new priorities (Guigo-Patzelt 2021, 611). Meanwhile, the studies at the AfG had a different focus to the work at the GDR's two other main centres for scientific atheism in Warnemünde-Wustrow (under Olof Klohr) and Güstrow (under Hans Lutter), being "more pragmatic, more philosophical, and less focused on education or propaganda". They were also more concerned with the convictions and doctrines of religious institutions so as to be able to face together the major challenges of the time, rather than with theoretical questions such as the roots of religion or its withering away (Guigo-Patzelt 2021, 617). One of Kliem's special topics was indeed that of peace: "Over the years he wrote and spoke about the ways peace and war are conceived, the articulation between peace and justice, the idea of *shalom*, as well as official declarations and specific statements in various churches around the world" (Guigo-Patzelt 2021, 618).

Kliem ended his chapter on "religion and the struggle for peace in our age" with a consideration of the role of the Churches in the GDR in such a struggle for peace, against military, economic, and political confrontation, and their rejection of the "spirit and logic" of deterrence as an expression of support for peaceful

coexistence as a means of resolving international conflict through negotiations and dialogue. While communists did not ignore different perspectives on particular issues, these could be resolved through discussion. The Marxist-Leninist philosophy of peace, Kliem asserted, is motivated by a commitment to tolerance that is also directed against attempts of imperialist forces to divide Christians and Marxists in the GDR by the call for an "independent Christian peace movement" directed against the peace policies of the socialist State. Nevertheless, "Communists see Christians as fellow campaigners [*Mitstreiter*] for a human world without war, exploitation, or oppression" (Kliem 1984, 238–241).

The Influence of Gorbachev

Under the pressure of the East–West conflict, the desire of the GDR leadership to maintain relationships with the Federal Republic that were threatened by the deployment of medium-range missiles and the Soviet counter-measures, and Honecker's repeated calls for a "coalition of reason", philosophers in the GDR had begun to reassess issues of war and peace and the role of Christian believers. However, Mikhail Gorbachev's accession to power in March 1985 was the "decisive factor" for translating such philosophical considerations into specific proposals for security and disarmament (Schwarz 2014, 62–63). During his first visit to the West as Soviet leader, to Paris in October 1985, Gorbachev stated that Europe's security could not be guaranteed by military means or military strength. This was, he said, "a completely new situation that represents a break with the traditions, ways of thinking and patterns of behaviour that have evolved over centuries, even millennia".[21] In his report to the 27th Party Congress of the CPSU in February 1986, he referred to the "interdependent and in many ways integral world" that was taking shape and the need for "new approaches, methods, and forms of relations between the different social systems, states and regions" (Gorbachev 1986, 26 and 7).

This embrace of new thinking in international relations built on ideas that had already been circulating in academic circles and in the various Soviet institutes for several years, and with which GDR philosophers had been in contact but which had never found expression in official Soviet policy until the Gorbachev era. The change in Soviet leadership allowed the overcoming of approaches that had trapped social sciences in the GDR for decades "in an ideological corset … with numerous blinkers and prohibitions on thinking". Only when "these were lifted was the framework for systematic new thinking in place" (Schwarz 2014, 62–63). Particularly important in this context was the work undertaken by the Institute for International Politics and Economics (*Institut für Internationale Politik und Wirtschaft*, IPW), attached to the central committee of the SED, under its director Max Schmidt.

There was, however, a significant difference in the ways that the GDR and the Soviet Union were dealing with "new thinking". In the GDR, it was limited to inter-state relations and the sphere of security policy, often with a more operational orientation than in the Soviet Union, and resulting in specific proposals for confidence building and disarmament. However, it did not refer to the social order or to domestic and economic policy, unlike the approach in the Soviet Union that was

more comprehensive in its scope but less focused in its special proposals in the inter-state arena (Bruns 1987, 10–11).

Towards a Dialogue between Marxists and Churches

The attention now being given by official institutes to ideas such as "common security" and "security partnership" echoed perspectives that had been articulated within the BEK since the early 1980s, not least from within its Theological Studies Department (*Theologische Studienabteilung,* ThSA). The ThSA was a sort of think tank that included a study unit on peace issues (*Referat Friedensfragen*) headed, unusually, by a Catholic theologian, Joachim Garstecki, and which in the early 1980s published two significant studies on peace and disarmament – one on "security partnership in Europe" (1983) and another on unilateral measures in disarmament (1984).[22] In late 1985, the BEK approached the GDR's League for the United Nations to propose a symposium with Marxist experts on security and disarmament as part of its plans for 1986, the UN's International Year of Peace. This meeting eventually took place in December 1986 with 14 representatives of the GDR Churches and five experts from State institutions – the IPW, the GDR Institute for International Relations, and the University of Greifswald. Picking up the subject of the two Church studies, the theme was "Unilateral action and common security". This was not a Christian–Marxist dialogue about faith and historical materialism, but a dialogue between Christians and Marxists about security and disarmament in the nuclear age. It included lectures, group work, a panel discussion, and informal meetings, as well as biblical meditations "as a contribution to the work of the symposium and included in the discussion" with the Marxist experts (Rein 1987a, 10).

The official Church account of the symposium noted that "a process of rethinking towards a 'New Logic in the Nuclear Age' is apparently currently in full swing among experts, Marxist theorists, and politicians in the GDR … although discussion is only just beginning in some areas and is not without controversy, especially where it is a question of reformulating statements that concern traditional ideological positions".[23] The account highlighted some "remarkable" statements about "new thinking" by the experts:

- Imperialism is capable of peace. There is a common task to shape the future. The system of mutual deterrence must be overcome. We must develop our experience in common security.
- Change can come only if we begin to shed our self-righteousness. We need to accept that people are afraid of us. There are options for foreign policy and domestic policy that can reduce fear.
- Christians in the GDR can also contribute to reducing threat perceptions if, for example, the Churches were to declare that Christians in the GDR would never take part in military aggression.
- The logic of the arms race must be recognized and new approaches to the disarmament process need to be developed, including *with* Reagan [emphasis in original].

In addition, according to the Church report, "our dialogue partners had no reservations about the concept of 'common security'. The fact that it was not a 'socialist invention' might even now prove to be advantageous in terms of credibility if it was now also advocated in our country".

According to Gerhard Rein, a West German journalist stationed in East Berlin, the Churches were astonished that the Marxist experts, who had been sent officially by their institutions, openly expressed their personal views. The Marxists were reported as saying, for example, that "they had to give lectures in the National People's Army on new thinking and defend themselves against very old thinking there, which was still based on feelings of superiority". At the end of the symposium, "the Marxists asked the church representatives to speak out in the GDR in favour of unilateral disarmament steps and to stand up for them. This would help them to make their own position clearer, perhaps even to strengthen it" (Rein 1987a, 10).

The BEK followed up this symposium with a publication prepared by the Committee on Church and Society intended for congregations, titled "New Thinking in the Atomic Age". This offered a compendium first of Church statements since 1982 on Church proposals for disarmament and confidence building, and, second, collected statements by Marxist experts and political figures as an encouragement to develop these new political impulses in peace work within society and with ecumenical partners (Bund 1987, 2).

In an article published in 1988 (though probably written at the end of 1987) on Marxist teaching on the just war, Joachim Garstecki of the ThSA offered cautious support to the changes in Marxist-Leninist philosophical positions on war and peace. New thinking was changing the Leninist principle of peaceful coexistence, he wrote: "Before it was primarily interpreted as the ideological form of the class system; now it has become a minimum condition for a cooperative peace between the two world systems". It was, however, still "an open question how disadvantageous the effect of the social and political realism of the 'new thinking' is for Marxist-Leninist theory about war and peace and how it changes it" (Garstecki 1988a, 98).

The Conflict of Ideologies and Common Security

The most public involvement by Protestant Churches in this process of "new thinking", however, came in 1987 with the publication of the document "The Conflict of ideologies and Common Security" by the Academy of Social Sciences (*Akademie der Gesellschaftswissenschaft*) of the SED, headed by Otto Reinhold, and the Commission for Basic Values (*Grundwertekommission*) of the executive of the Social Democratic Party (*Sozialdemokratische Partei Deutschlands*, SPD) in the FRG, headed by the Social Democratic politician Erhard Eppler. This document was the result of the contacts that had developed between the two parties since the deployment of the medium-range missiles. After publishing two joint documents on the creation of chemical and nuclear weapon-free zones in Central Europe, the *Akademie der Gesellschaftswissenschaften* and the SPD *Grundwertekommission* embarked on their most ambitious endeavour, namely to

develop a joint paper on the ideological cooperation between social democrats and communists in Germany, something that had never been attempted since the split within German social democracy at the end of the First World War (see Reißig 2002, esp. 17–18).

Presented at the end of August 1987, a week before Honecker's long-delayed official visit to the Federal Republic, the document, published in full on the front page of *Neues Deutschland*, referred to the need for "open discussion about the competition of the systems, their successes and failures, advantages and disadvantages" and stated that "criticism, even in sharp form, must not be rejected as an 'interference in the internal affairs' of the other side".[24] It reiterated the need to tackle the "fundamental … interests of humanity", which included, "in addition to peace, the preservation of the biosphere and the overcoming of hunger and misery in the Third World". Although there was no direct reference to the place of religion in this dialogue, at the press conference to present the document, Reinhold referred to the "peace and dialogue initiatives of the churches, with whose aims the joint document often coincides".[25]

For Joachim Garstecki, of the ThSA's study unit on peace issues, "many passages in the SED-SPD document sounded familiar in the ears of Christians in the GDR as though they had been written by their own churches and not by representatives of two political parties". The document was, he wrote, a confirmation of views and positions that the Protestant Churches had been putting forward since 1982 even in the face of "ideological" resistance from the SED. Christians and Churches were now expecting practical consequences in the GDR itself for the coexistence of Marxists and Christians in society, for socialism's ability to learn and its reformability and an "open discussion of its advantages and disadvantages" (Garstecki 1988b, 99).

That Christians could hear echoes of their own statements in the document was maybe not surprising. Since at least the 1970s there had been a network of overlapping relationships between the West German SPD, the EKD in the Federal Republic, and the GDR Protestant Churches. Erhard Eppler, who headed the SPD side in the preparations of the joint document, was a member of the EKD synod from 1968 to 1984 and had numerous contacts with Protestant church leaders in the two German States. He confidentially shared several passages of the joint document with church leaders in the GDR before publication: "In this way, church representatives were informed earlier about the work on the 'conflict paper' than [Erich] Honecker and [Kurt] Hager" (Reißig 2002, 208).

Indeed, several weeks before the publication of the SED–SPD document, the involvement of the Churches was underlined as the document's key protagonists were brought together at a public podium at the Frankfurt *Kirchentag* in 1987 on "the tasks of peace and German responsibility". This was the most public example of dialogue between the Churches and the SED in the 1980s, though, significantly, it took place at the *Kirchentag* in the Federal Republic, and not at the GDR *Kirchentag* a week later in East Berlin. For the first time, a member of the SED central committee, Otto Reinhold, took part in a West German *Kirchentag* podium. Eppler gave the opening address at the podium, which included East German bishop emeritus Albrecht Schönherr, and, offering a view from outside the two German States, Michel Rocard, a senior French socialist politician who was also known as a prominent

Protestant. Reinhold represented the official GDR position on matters such as conscientious objection and military education, but added as well: "Problems that exist in one's own country, contradictions and unresolved questions cannot simply be resolved by sending people away … It is completely clear that it is us [in the GDR] who have to resolve our problems ourselves and with all our citizens in a way that corresponds to the interests of all citizens of our State" (Rein 1987b, 51).

The Challenge of New Thinking

Perhaps the most thorough treatment of new thinking by a GDR theologian came from Heino Falcke, a leading Protestant social ethicist, in a text probably written at the end of 1987, but published in 1988,[26] in which he drew parallels between Gorbachev's "new thinking" and the SPD–SED document. New thinking was "casting off the dogmatic distortions which misrepresent Marxism as a systematized worldview true regardless of specific situations". Nevertheless, Falcke sounded a note of caution about the situation in the GDR:

> While the state broadly approves of the foreign policy and the politics of peace, it has been more cautious about *perestroika* and *glasnost* … Among the people, however, these are already bound up with hopes for the dismantling of bureaucracy, more freedom of opinion and press freedom, and increased opportunities for political participation.
>
> (Falcke 1988, 204)

The new thinking, Falcke stated, had led to uncertainties and debates within the Party, where new thinking conflicted with the need for identity, "which in the doctrine of the class struggle is defined in terms of opposition to capitalism".[27] Here Falcke highlighted a speech given by Kurt Hager at the end of October 1987, in which Hager denied that imperialism was in its essence peaceful, but rather "needs to be made capable of peace".[28] Indeed, though expressed in cautious language, Hager's speech was interpreted as a rejection of the SPD–SED document, despite the document previously having received the support of Honecker and the politburo.[29]

Early in November 1987, talks that had been promised with the BEK on issues such as military service and education were suddenly postponed. Later that month, in the first such raid for many years, the premises of the Zionskirche in Berlin, which also housed an unofficial environmental library, were searched. The action was directed against *Grenzfall*, an unofficial publication printed there by the Peace and Human Rights Initiative (*Initiative Frieden und Menschenrecht*) and led to several arrests. This sparked off a new repertoire of protest, that of intercessory prayers and vigils (*Fürbittgottesdienste* and *Mahnwachen*) (Fulbrook 1999, 236–237). Eppler was minded to break off the talks with the SED, but was prevailed upon to continue because the Churches in the GDR still needed to invoke the statements made in the SPD–SED document (Eppler 2003, 34).[30] The raid on the Zionskirche was followed in January 1988 by a new wave of arrests, this time

of dozens of would-be emigrants who had engaged in protests at the annual SED commemoration of the deaths of Rosa Luxemburg and Karl Liebknecht, as well as a number of peace and human rights leaders. The arrests led to churches throughout the GDR becoming the focus for protest against the actions of the State (Brown 2010, 197), a premonition of the popular protests of 1989 that would herald the end of SED rule and the GDR itself.[31]

Conclusion

Despite the intellectual shifts by Marxist-Leninist philosophers towards coopera-tion and dialogue with Christians on issues of war and peace, the political realities in the GDR under the SED limited the implementation of these new perspectives. The experiences of the period between 1984 and 1987 demonstrated a readiness by Marxist-Leninist philosophers and intellectuals and by the Churches to engage in dia-logue with each other. However, the focus of the "new thinking" in the GDR on se-curity policies and international relations did not generally extend to broader social, economic, and domestic reforms, and the extent to which the SPD–SED paper did pick up on these areas, it was not politically acceptable to the SED leadership. The premiere of the film "Einer trage des anderen Last ..." was supposed to celebrate the 10th anniversary of the 1978 Church–State summit that had led to a *modus vivendi* between Church and State. Instead, it was happening in the midst of the worst crisis between Church and State that the GDR had seen since Honecker's coming to power:

> The film came too late. Since the mid-1980s, the SED leadership had been confronted with a network of church groups from which a political opposi-tion was forming. A few days before the film premiere in January 1988, the *Staatssicherheit* arrested a number of leading opposition figures. A wave of protest rolled across the country, intercessory prayers and solidarity services were more political than ever before. The ideological debate between atheist State doctrine and Christian beliefs that the film portrays, on the other hand, had faded into the background.
>
> (Ökumenischer Arbeitskreis Prenzlauer Berg 2013)

Notes

1 All German quotations, unless otherwise indicated, have been translated by the author, who also gratefully acknowledges the assistance of Elizabeth Ward for the background to the film *"Einer trage des anderen Last ...."*
2 "DEFA-'Auftakt '88 mit dem Film 'Einer trage des anderen Last' ...,'" *Neues Deutschland*, January 29, 1988, 4.
3 "Zusammenfinden in Verantwortung," *Neue Zeit*, January 29, 1988, 1.
4 Officially there was no censorship of film in the GDR but projects had to be approved by the HV Film, for which the assessment by the Department for Artistic Production provided the basis.
5 Bundesarchiv, Zulassungsunterlagen der HV Film beim Ministerium für Kultur, DR/1/Z/61, Abt. Künstlerische Produktion, Friedel von Wangenheim, "Stellungnahme zum Szenarium von Wolfgang Held '... und jeder trage des anderen Last'," undated.

6 Bundesarchiv, Zulassungsunterlagen der HV Film beim Ministerium für Kultur, DR/1/Z/61, Abt. Künstlerische Produktion, H. Willkening, "Einschätzung 'Einer trage des anderen Last'," Berlin, December 8, 1986.

7 Bundesarchiv, Zulassungsunterlagen der HV Film beim Ministerium für Kultur, DR/1/Z/61, Hans Dieter Mäde, VEB DEFA-Studio für Spielfilme, General Direktor, "Stellungnahme zum Film 'Einer trage des anderen Last. .'," Babelsberg, October 19, 1987.

8 Of the many discussions of the role of the Protestant churches in the GDR in the 1980s, see, for example, Brown (2010); Fulbrook (1997, 87–128); Le Grand (2000); Kowalczuk (2011, 192–132).

9 The Independent Commission on Disarmament and Security Issues, chaired by the former Swedish Prime Minister Olof Palme, challenged the doctrine of nuclear deterrence by advancing the notion of "common security" – the idea that international security should be based not on mutual deterrence but on mutual interests in avoiding nuclear war and that security can best be achieved with, rather than against, the adversary: "In the Commission's view, security is shared, not zero-sum" (Wiseman 2005, 46).

10 See, for example, Bundesarchiv, Ministerium für Staatssicherheit, Zentrale Auswertungs- und Informationsgruppe, ZAIG 4172, "Reaktion der Bevölkerung auf Stationierungsbeschluss (2. Bericht)," pp. 21–30 [no date but probably December 12, 1983], https://www.ddr-im-blick.de/jahrgaenge/jahrgang-1983/report/reaktion-der-bevoelkerung-auf-stationierungsbeschluss-2-bericht?type=1487504640.

11 "Messerundgang von Mitgliedern der Partei- und Staatsführung: Maschinen- und Anlagenbau der DDR mit leistungsfähigen Erzeugnissen," *Neues Deutschland*, March 14, 1983.

12 "Schreiben Erich Honeckers an Bundeskanzler Helmut Kohl," *Neues Deutschland*, October 10, 1983. The first use of the phrase "Koalition der Vernunft" recorded in *Neues Deutschland* was by Honecker with West German communist leader Herbert Mies on September 21, 1983. See "Vordringliches Erfordernis unserer Zeit: Neue Runde des atomaren Wettrüstens verhindern," *Neues Deutschland*, September 22, 1983.

13 "Rüstungsabbau durch entschiedene Verhandlungen das ist das Gebot der Stunde: Evangelisch-Lutherische Kirchengemeinde Dresden-Loschwitz an Erich Honecker," *Neues Deutschland*, October 22–23, 1983.

14 "Für den Frieden in der Welt gegen Massenvernichtungsmittel in Ost und West: Schreiben der Kirchengemeinden Hausen, BRD, an Erich Honecker," *Neues Deutschland*, October 22–23, 1983.

15 "In Verantwortung für den Frieden keine Möglichkeit ungenutzt lassen: Brief der evangelischen Kirchengemeinde Babelsberg," *Neues Deutschland*, November 3, 1983.

16 Such was the interest in this book that a second revised edition was published in 1986.

17 According to Patman, the beginnings of new thinking in Soviet foreign policy can be traced back to the Andropov era; he had designated Gorbachev as his successor, although political machinations placed Chernenko in this role (Patman 1999, 586–591).

18 Guigo-Patzelt describes how this new activity under Kliem at the Academy for Social Sciences represented a third centre for studies on scientific atheism in the GDR alongside those of Olof Klohr in Warnemünde-Wustrow and his former student Hans Lutter in Güstrow, and with which Kliem had something of a competitive, if not antagonistic, relationship (Guigo-Patzelt 2021, 614– 628).

19 The chapter does not go into detail of the reasons for such a "Wende zur Welt," except to say that this developed "as an expression of the fundamental laws of our own epoch [as] the attitude of religions to the new situation in which they found themselves" (Kliem 1984, 207). The author states that this "Wende zur Welt" is to be distinguished from a more general process of religious secularization which, as an expression of the crisis of religion under the conditions of the general crisis of capitalism, also includes the strengthening of a politically reactionary "Weltzuwendung".

20 The article makes a direct reference to the resolution on "peace and justice" adopted at the sixth assembly of the World Council of Churches in Vancouver, July–August 1983 (Kliem 1984, 203). For the text of the statement, see World Council of Churches (1983).

21 "Rede Michail Gorbatschows in Paris: Neue Vorschläge der UdSSR an USA zum Stopp des Wettrüstens," *Neues Deutschland*, October 4, 1985, 1–2.

22 Theologische Studienabteilung, "Sicherheitspartnerschaft und Frieden in Europa: Aufgabe der deutschen Staaten, Verantwortung der deutschen Kirchen," *Beiträge* B 9 (1983); "Möglichkeit und Unmöglichkeit einseitiger Abrüstung: zum Konzept des Gradualismus," *Beiträge* B 11 (1984).

23 Evangelisches Zentralarchiv, EZA/0101/4619, "Bericht über das Symposium 'Unilaterale Maßnahmen und gemeinsame Sicherheit', Zingst, 8. - 10. 12. 1986 (Tagung der Konferenz der Evangelischen Kirchenleitungen 9./10. 1. 1987)." What follows will be quoted from this report, unless otherwise indicated.

24 "Akademie für Gesellschaftswissenschaften beim Zentralkomitee der SED/Grundwertekommission der SPD: Der Streit der Ideologien und die gemeinsame Sicherheit," *Neues Deutschland*, August 28, 1987, 1.

25 "Dokument 'Der Streit der Ideologien und die gemeinsame Sicherheit' der Öffentlichkeit vorgelegt," *Neues Deutschland*, August 28, 1987.

26 On Heino Falcke, see, for example, Brown (2010, 38–62).

27 On the disquiet in the leading circles of the SED about the consequences of the SPD–SED paper, see Reißig (2002, 123–137).

28 "Kurt Hager: Mitglied des Politbüros und Sekretär des ZK der SED: Friedensicherung und ideologischer Streit," *Neues Deutschland*, October 28, 1987, 3.

29 Some have questioned how the document was able to receive the support of Honecker without first apparently being vetted by Hager. According to Wolfgang Schwarz, there was a belief that Otto Reinhold had a direct connection to Honecker and had sent him the text directly where it got his official support ("Einverstanden EH") (Schwarz: 2012).

30 The "naïveté with which the politburo agreed to the document and the cynicism with which Kurt Hager and Erich Mielke then less than two months later applied the emergency break ... led me already in 1988 to the conviction that this dictatorship of old men [*Altherrendiktatur*] was now beyond any help" (Eppler 2002, 388).

31 For an overview of the events see *epd-Dokumentation* 9/1988,"'Dokumenta Zion', die Ereignisse nach der 'Luxemburg'-Kundgebung, Texte zum Verhältnis Staat–Kirche, DDR-Thesen über Th. Müntzer," February 22, 1988.

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6 Shifting Paradigms

Religiosity and Atheization in Socialist Slovenia

Gašper Mithans and Mateja Režek

Introduction[1]

The promotion of atheism by the new regime in Yugoslavia after the Second World War radically affected the sphere of religious worship and even more so the relations between State authorities and religious institutions. These social changes were, particularly in Slovenia, stimulated by the phenomenon of individualization of religious beliefs and gradual disestablishment of the dominant majority religion, i.e. the Catholic Church, with slow religious pluralization since the late 19th century. Examples of this include individual religious conversions and threats of collective conversion to Orthodoxy and/or the Greek Catholic Church (Verginella 1994; Cvelfar 2017). Atheization in socialist countries of Central and Eastern Europe presents a specific form of diminishing religiosity, which scholarship has most often neglected. As Borowik points out, the reluctance to venture outside specific examples of select atheist communities and to make use of theory to explain the emergence, nature, and spread of atheism has also been observed in Western research on atheism (Borowik, Ančić and Tyrała 2013, 627–628).

Studying religiosity, on the one hand, and atheism, along with the processes of atheization, on the other, is particularly challenging in socialist countries, as they legislated and enacted changes in religious policies with varying degrees of disfavor toward public displays of religiosity, resulting in observable differences even within a single country. The modernization of society and the restriction of dominant religions' activities in the public sphere set in motion at least two processes, which also transpired in socialist Yugoslavia and, as we will see in more detail, Slovenia. These were a decreasing influence of religious institutions and a decline in attendance at religious services, which in turn reflected a diminished display of religious affiliation. However, non-attendance of religious worship is not necessarily related to the loss of religious beliefs – particularly not in the period of increased repression and deterioration of relations between State authorities and the Catholic Church as the dominant religious institution in Slovenia – nor was attendance necessarily an expression of deep faith (Schnell and Keenan 2011). In the latter case, it could also have been a gesture of political rebellion against the regime or merely a result of tradition. To address the processes of regime-propagated atheization of society, the focus here will be in particular on education, with an analysis of school

curricula and textbooks for the subject of Moral Education, which was introduced in 1952 after the ban of religious education in public schools.

This paper does not seek to sort out the terminology used in the studies of leaving religion, such as non-religious, atheist, non-believer, agnostic, "nones", non-Church membership, irreligion, unbelief, etc. (see Zrinščak 2004; Bullivant and Ruse 2013; Enstedt, Larsson and Mantsinen 2020); however, it acknowledges their significance. Instead, one of its primary objectives is to examine the heterogeneity of atheism through an analysis of historical contexts.

On the model of Baer's proposal of four categories for conversion (Baer 2014, 25–26), Szpiech outlines a system of four categories of leaving religion, which aligns with the main emphases of this paper – i.e. various forms of religious change, including abandonment of religious practices and beliefs, mechanisms of promoting atheism, and related individual choices:

- "distancing" (cultural and geographic separation that indicates a departure from belief systems and a decline in ritual practice without a specific change of beliefs);
- "de-ritualization" (abandonment of former practices and beliefs with simultaneous preservation of a generalized spiritual sensibility);
- "deconversion" (a marked temporal and historical break with the old ways and beliefs without a specific, either positive or negative, attitude toward any new spirituality); and
- "secularization" (complete rejection of any religious sensibility in favor of a non-religious worldview and practice) (Szpiech 2020, 262; cf. Streib, Hood and Keller 2016, 19–20).

This final break with religion, a deconversion, leaving religion, atheization, or whatever term is used, cannot simply be identified with disaffiliation from membership in a religious community, nor is formal disaffiliation a precondition. Deconversion encompasses a change in the individual's religious orientation during a certain period of life, which results in the transformation of religious identity and the system of beliefs or worldviews, and in re-structuring one's way of thinking, moral frame of thought, and dealing with authority with particular emphasis on the process of departing from the established paths and seeking alternative ones (Streib 2009, 23).

Atheization in socialist countries manifested in various ways: there was a noticeable decline in religious participation, and sociological surveys and censuses indicated an increase in the atheist population. Additionally, many young and educated individuals with career aspirations were expected, if not required, to join the Communist Party, and the condition they had to meet in order to become members was that they be convinced atheists. This meant not only denying the existence of God but also actively participating in the propagation of atheist views (Borowik, Ančić and Tyrała 2013, 624).

Changes in Religion in Socialist Slovenia

While analyzing the State-religion relations in socialist Slovenia, most of the attention is on the Catholic Church, not just because an overwhelming majority of believers

identified themselves as Catholic, but because the Catholic Church was determining the relations between the State and religious communities in the socialist republics of Slovenia and Croatia. As in other socialist countries in Europe, the Catholic Church was regularly targeted by the State authorities as a reactionary pillar of an ancient regime, while the other two major religious institutions in Yugoslavia, the Serbian Orthodox Church and the Islamic community, were considered more prone to subordination to State authorities. Indeed, the Catholic Church and Pope Pius XII, in particular, rejected any collaboration between Catholics and communists or socialists. Furthermore, the relations between the State and the Catholic Church suffered significant strain because of the reluctance of Church authorities to align with the partisan resistance movement during the Second World War; moreover, a notable part of the clergy chose to collaborate with the Italian and German occupying forces. In the immediate postwar period, the Yugoslav authorities were convinced that the Vatican only served Italian interests and that the Catholic Church hierarchy and priests in Yugoslavia were not sufficiently patriotic. Henceforth, the authorities supported endeavors to make the Catholic Church more national-oriented – but to no avail (Režek 2008, 212–216; cf. Radić 2002). In 1952, Yugoslavia severed diplomatic relations with the Vatican due to internal tensions between the Catholic Church and the Yugoslav authorities, and the appointment of Alojzije Stepinac, Archbishop of Zagreb, as Cardinal.

When analyzing postwar changes in religion in Slovenia, it is necessary to address one fundamental characteristic: censuses conducted prior to the Second World War reveal an extremely homogeneous society in terms of religious composition, with only two minority religions exceeding 0.5% of the population and a near absence of non-believers (see Table 6.1). In 1953, the percentage of atheists was 10.3%, and the authorities, dissatisfied with these results, removed this option from later censuses (Šircelj 2003). At the same time, the number of members of non-Catholic religions decreased both in absolute terms and as a percentage of the population. The data show that the level of the regime's oppression, even during the period when it was objectively most adverse to religious participation, did not reach a point where more people felt compelled to declare themselves atheists (even the "unknown" and "refuse to answer" options were chosen by a relatively small number of respondents).

Table 6.1 Religious composition of Drava Banate and the Socialist Republic of Slovenia according to the 1921, 1931, 1953, 1991, and 2002 censuses[2]

	Catholics	*Protestants*	*Orthodox*	*Muslims*	*Greek Catholics*	*Jews*	*Other religion*	*Spiritual, but not religious*	*Non-religious, atheist*	*Refuse to answer*	*Unknown*
1921	96.57%	2.6%	0.62%	0.06%	0.05%	0.09%	(17 people)	/	0.01% (122)	/	/
1931	96.75%	2.25%	0.59%	0.08%	0.21%	0.07%	0.025%	/	0.02% (257)	/	(8 people)
1953	82.8%	1.5%	0.3%	0.05%			0.02%	0.13%	10.3%	/	4.9%
1991	71.6%	0.9%	2.4%	1.5%			0.04%	0.2%	4.4%	4.3%	14.6%
2002	57.8%	0.8%	2.3%	2.4%			0.2%	3.5%	10.2%	14.6%	7.1%

Much more informative are the comprehensive and ongoing Slovenian Public Opinion (SPO) surveys regularly conducted by the Faculty of Social Science of the University of Ljubljana since 1968. One specific question was chosen from the annual polls that distinguishes between institutional and deinstitutionalized religiosity to the highest extent possible, while acknowledging the heterogeneity within atheism, such as attendance at religious worship services despite being non-religious, as well as religious non-affiliation. In Figure 6.1, some of the categories have been combined to facilitate comparison.

Figure 6.1 also includes data from previous censuses, as they are the only statistical sources in Slovenia and the Drava Banate regarding self-identified religious affiliation or non-affiliation. The watershed year of 1978 should be highlighted, as it was the only time when the number of believers was not a majority. This was followed by a marked trend of gradual growth in the number of believers (and a decline in non-believers) throughout the 1980s, which can be linked to the religious upsurges in Eastern Europe and some other parts of the world during that period (cf. Berger 1999, 4–11). The 1991 census data, according to which only 4.4% of the population was non-religious or atheist, gives a distorted picture due to an unusually high number of respondents falling into the "unknown" (14.6%) and "refuse to answer" (4.3%) categories. It can be assumed that some of the non-religious and atheists who refused to answer the question about their religious affiliation are "hidden" there, because according to Figure 6.1, 18.9% of the population still described themselves as non-religious in 1991. In the World Values Survey from the same year, 17.7% of Slovenians were undecided and 23.2% were not religious (Toš 1993, 33). Furthermore, under the special circumstances of the transition year 1991, cultural religiosity was even more pronounced.
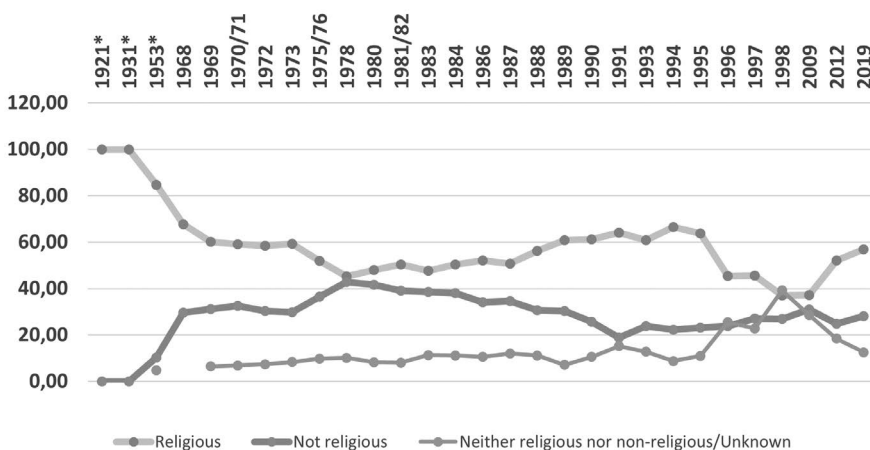
Figure 6.1 (Non-)religiosity according to the surveys of Slovenian Public Opinion and censuses (*) (in %).[3]

As expected, the trend continued into the mid-1990s, after which the share of believers sharply decreased, most likely as a consequence of scandals in the global Catholic Church, the wars in Yugoslavia (where religion was a strong factor in ethnic conflict), and the process of modernization (Smrke 2016, 281–283).

In general, socialist Yugoslavia fostered two approaches toward religions: one was the separation of religious institutions from the State, including the declaration of faith to be a private matter, assurance of religious freedom and religious equality (which was nothing but a matter of interpretation); the other was the support of "progressive" Marxism in the "liberating" process of the fading away of religion, which was deemed inevitable. Yugoslav communists intended to introduce equality and attain reconciliation by building socialism on the basis of "scientific materialism" (Zveza komunistov Jugoslavije 1958, 479–490; Mojzes 1992, 343–344).

After the mid-1950s, the implementation of atheization in Yugoslavia was characterized by a strict separation of the State and religion. This was complemented on a societal level by previously implemented measures to confine religion to the personal sphere through "soft" persuasion: by abrogating or restricting religious media and religious schools; restricting or hindering the performance of public religious ceremonies; introducing the compulsory civil marriage ceremony and revoking the Church's competence as registry office; canceling religious holidays; banning religious education in public schools; and actively propagating atheism within different organizations linked to the Communist Party (after 1952, the League of Communists), schools, and other State institutions, etc. Concomitantly, the regime celebrated Yugoslav "brotherhood and unity" among various nationalities and tried to inhibit the varied nationalisms through restrictive policies toward religion. Initially, though, it was openly oppressive toward religious institutions (Alexander 1979; Režek 2008; Mirescu 2009, 63; Jogan 2023, 183).

The key points of public criticism by individual Catholic intellectuals were: discrimination in employment; distorted representations of religion in the media; disagreement with the status of second-class citizens, to which the religious population felt demoted in the atheist education system; and prevention of charitable activities (Fejérdy et al. 2018, 461; Režek 2022, 45–46; cf. Radić 2002). The authorities deemed the leading religious communities as mainly accountable for atrocities during the Second World War and hostility between the different Yugoslav ethnicities (Mojzes 2011a, 2011b). As such, to understand Yugoslav religious policy it is also necessary to take into account this matrix of religion as a cultural marker and its seemingly coherent links to ethnic identity (Mirescu 2009, 62).

By the early 1950s, the number of priests in Slovenia decreased almost by half, falling from around 2,000 (in 1945) to 1,100, largely owing to emigration, but in some cases incarceration. In the first postwar decade, the administrative authorities ordered penalties in as many as 1,033 cases against priests, while 319 priests were tried in court (Režek 2008, 221). The State authorities were encouraging the establishment of priestly societies, granting their members certain benefits, particularly social security and health insurance, as well as permission to teach religious education in public schools (up to 1952). Members of these societies, the Cyril-Methodius Society of Slovenian Catholic priests, for example, were progressive

clergymen who believed – at least some of them did – in the possibility of coexistence between Christianity and socialism (Fejérdy et al. 2018, 461; Režek 2022, 45–46; cf. Radić 2002).

The League of Communists of Slovenia was always strict about preserving "purity" in its ranks, even when this led to extremes and absurdities. In 1953, they began to carry out a "purge" among their members who attended church despite the ban. In that year alone, 1,105 members of the League of Communists of Slovenia were expelled due to attendance at religious ceremonies, going so far as to exclude even those who attended a church funeral (Režek 2008, 232). An outward display of religiosity was the second most frequent reason for the expulsion, following non-attendance at meetings and non-payment of the membership fee. Vida Tomšič, one of the leaders of the League of Communists of Slovenia, later repeatedly pointed out that the lower Party committees frequently misinterpreted the provision that religiosity was incompatible with Party membership, failing to distinguish between "when a member of the League of Communists personally engages in a religious ceremony and when, for example, out of human decency, they attend something that constitutes a sort of religious ceremony, such as a church funeral", and urged the committees to adopt less restrictive approaches to "purging" the Party ranks (quoted in Režek 2005, 131–132, 187).

The restrictions on religious communities loosened over the years, starting with the Federal Law on the Status of Religious Communities that was passed in 1953 (cf. Dolinar 1995, 28–29), and mostly put a stop to the nearly open hostility toward the Catholic Church endorsed by the League of Communists. In the 1960s, the State granted religious communities greater autonomy of organization, press freedoms, permission for priests to travel abroad and foreign religious dignitaries to visit Yugoslavia, and even new religious communities were allowed to be established. The pressure on religious officials decreased, but discrimination against lay believers persisted. Public religious services in the assigned places of worship were never severely hindered, although special permissions were still needed to organize religious ceremonies outside those premises, and donations collected during religious services were taxed (Mithans 2020).

The Second Vatican Council and the Vatican's *Ostpolitik* gave an impetus for the agreement between Yugoslavia and the Holy See to be signed in 1966, followed by a reinstatement of diplomatic ties with the Vatican in 1970. Hence, Yugoslavia, with its special version of socialism – i.e. Yugoslav self-management socialism – developed after the split with the Cominform in 1948, became, along with Cuba, one of two socialist States with a diplomatic mission to the Holy See (Božić 2020; Ramšak 2021).

The situation for the religious communities improved, particularly in the late 1970s, with the introduction of the Law on the Legal Status of Religious Communities in Slovenia in 1976, although certain questions were left open. Lay believers continued experiencing some level of discrimination in practice, especially teachers, professors, and clerks, whose professions were considered incompatible with religious beliefs, something that was openly objected to by Catholic religious representatives (Ramšak 2015). It should be noted that besides

constitutions and some federal laws, republics, and autonomous provinces adopted separate legislation on religion. As a result, restrictions on religious communities were generally the least severe in Slovenia, followed by Vojvodina, an autonomous province in Serbia, and Croatia.

A useful source for studying deinstitutionalized religiosity as a form of individualization of religious beliefs is the share of believers and non-affiliated who do not attend religious worship, i.e. autonomous religiosity that may include "distancing" and "de-ritualization" in terms of categories of leaving religion (see Figure 6.2). This type of religiosity can be developed in all regimes, although for somewhat different reasons, and can be affected by the discrimination of believers, unease, and oppression from the regime, along with advanced age, illness, and distrust of religious institutions. There is no clear pattern in the period between 1969 and 1995, with the percentage mostly ranging between 12% and 15%, and no significant change after 1991. When analyzing the groups of non-affiliated and religious non-attenders at religious services separately, we can observe in the latter a slightly more noticeable rise and fall during the 1970s, with another minimum reached in 1978, while there is minimal change in this category after 1991. As anticipated, the occurrences of "anomalous" manifestations of religious practices, or variations of atheism among individuals attending religious services without identifying themselves as religious, are relatively rare. Within this phenomenon, which requires further detailed investigation, there are even fewer deviations: there is a small overall increase, more pronounced between 1983 and 1988, but otherwise the share generally falls between 4.5% and 6.5%. However, the first three surveys carried out after 1991 indicate a trend of slow decline in these practices. Insofar as, particularly after Slovenia's independence, there has
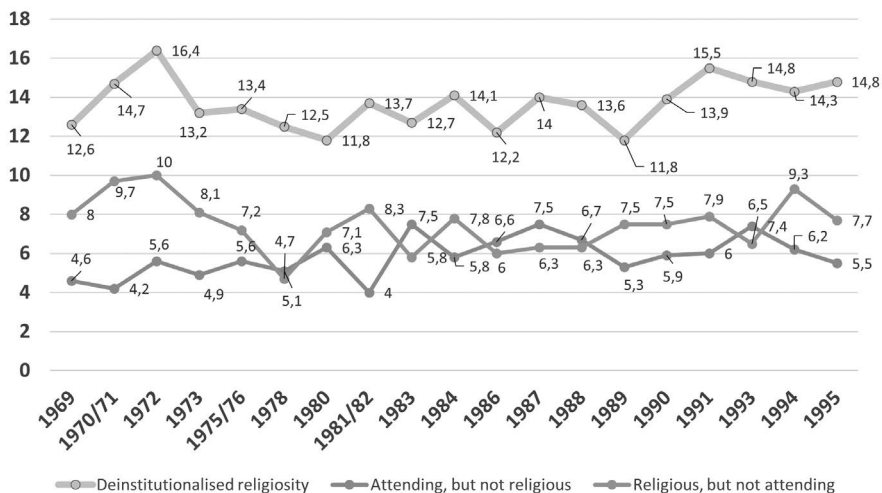
Figure 6.2 Percentages of non-attending believers and attending non-believers (Slovenian Public Opinion).[4]

been an increase in religious identification, even then the trend of religious up-surge did not have as much impact on institutionalized religiosity as might have been expected, unlike in most other post-socialist countries (Toš 2000, 212, 226; cf. Lavrič and Friš 2018). There was no decline in the numbers of religious and non-affiliated non-attenders that could possibly result from the liberalization of society either. On the contrary, a slight increase can be observed, which suggests that this category does not include a large number of believers who did not attend services for fear of repercussions from State authorities. In addition, there are generational differences in attitudes toward religion that should also be taken into account. Somewhat higher attendance at religious services observed in some eco-nomically less-developed Slovenian regions may not exhibit the "true" religious sentiments of people, but rather a mere public declaration of religious affiliation (Lavrič and Friš 2018, 58).

Socialist School and Religious Education

The Communist Party's interest in education was deeply rooted in its ideological and political program, which envisaged not only the building of a new country but also the creation of a new socialist society and the cultivation of a new socialist hu-man. The society that had broken with tradition and replaced previous values with new ones required new schools and a new system of education that would contrib-ute to the development of a new identity for society as a whole (Režek 2020, 20).

The orientations and goals set by the new government in the education sector were evident from the very first postwar years. Party commissions for various fields as-sumed control over the educational system, surpassing the influence of the Ministry of Education. They oversaw the publication of textbooks and other teaching materi-als, took part in designing curricula, influenced the education budget allocation and spending, supervised human resource policies, etc. The goal of these measures was to minimize the impact of politically and ideologically divergent individuals and groups in the school environment, including the Catholic Church (Gabrič 2009, 93–94).

In 1945, all private schools, i.e. religious schools, in Slovenia were nationalized, except for the Faculty of Theology, which was excluded from the University of Ljubljana in 1949 and lost its status as a State institution in 1952. In the 1950s, the government re-authorized the establishment of religious secondary schools – the only one in Slovenia was founded in Vipava in 1957 – but students attending reli-gious educational institutions became officially equivalent to those attending State schools in terms of legal status only in 1976, and even then the most significant difference between State and religious schools, i.e. that the latter were not allowed to issue public documents, was preserved (Gabrič 2009, 154, 158, 160, 171, 173).

Already in the autumn of 1945, special courses for the "political education" of schoolteachers were organized, and more followed in subsequent years. A circular of the Ljubljana Commission of Education and Culture emphasized: "We need to improve ourselves ideologically. We need to re-educate our youth. But the prereq-uisite for this is to completely re-educate ourselves" (quoted in Šuštar 1991, 273). The authorities could not dismiss teachers who participated in religious ceremonies

on a large scale, since they already did not have enough teachers. Hence cases of firing teachers because they were attending religious services were a rare occurrence in Slovenia. The exception was the first postwar years, when the "selection" of "appropriate" teachers (just like in the State administration, army, etc.) included cases of imprisonment, forced retirement, transfers, and rejections; several left their jobs on their own volition (although often encouraged), while in parallel, recruitment of new teaching personnel was in force. The purge was an attempt by the new authorities to remove as many politically suspect individuals as possible from the educational process (Gabrič 2009, 93–94; cf. Okoliš 2009).

In 1945, religious education was allocated the status of an elective subject, and the authorities sought every possible way to limit both the teaching and student attendance of religious lessons. In order to be able to teach religious education at schools, priests were required to obtain a special permit, but this was only granted to those who were loyal to the new authorities, or at least refrained from opposing them. According to the records of the Slovenian school authorities from 1949, 43% of all schoolchildren in Slovenia attended religious education. However, at schools where religious classes were offered more or less regularly, attendance was 67% (Režek 2005, 96; see Figure 6.3).

At that time, priests could get a penalty – or even go to prison – if they were teaching children outside school. In fact, religious education was allowed at public schools precisely because it was easier to control this way. The authorities and schools, particularly in the 1945–1952 period, tried to keep children away from attending religious education through sports and leisure activities, excursions, pioneer organizations, and "scientific arguments", by changing parents' attitudes toward the question of religious education, etc. (Šuštar 1991, 276–280). In 1952, religious education was banned in schools and allowed only on church premises.

Even during the 1950s, when the relationship between the State and the Catholic Church was most strained, individual left-leaning or pro-socialist Catholic priests attempted to establish a dialogue with the State authorities and initiate a public debate on the cooperation between Christianity and socialism in schools, but to no avail. Among these priests, the theologian and philosopher Janez Janžekovič stood out for his views the most. He searched for common ground in the field of ethics, where the ruling Marxist ideology and Christianity could not only meet but work together, identifying many shared moral principles, particularly in the ideal of the "good man" and in the notion of self-sacrifice for the benefit of the community (Režek 2022, 50–53).

Although religious education was removed from public schools in Slovenia as an elective subject relatively late, according to surveys among high school students, around 50% of Slovenian children still received religious education at the parish houses in the 1960s (Kerševan 1989, 96). Even though the data from 1949 on religious education attendance as one of the markers of religiosity and atheization do not demonstrate real religiosity, since the teaching of religious education was hindered, they are consistent with the data in Figure 6.1, as well as with those gathered through SPO surveys. In the latter, in 1976 and 1982, respondents were asked: "Do you currently send your children to religious education, did you
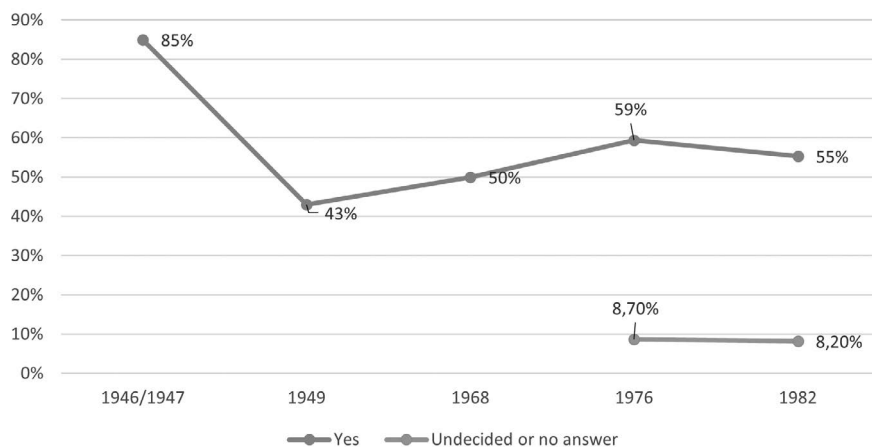
Figure 6.3 The proportion of children receiving religious education.[5]

send them in the past, or do you intend to send them in the future?" The data in Figure 6.3 clearly show that banishing religious education from schools to church premises, and consequently significantly reducing regulation and supervision, resulted in an increase in religious education attendance. The percentages of individuals in favor of religious education attendance and believers are also comparable (Toš et al. 1990).

Promoting Atheism through the School Subject of Moral Education

The Yugoslav Constitution guaranteed freedom of religion and respect for religious rights, but defined religion as a private matter, thus rendering it irrelevant and invisible in public. At the same time, non-religiosity and atheism as the official stances of the ruling Communist Party were mediated through all spheres of social life. Dialectical materialism developed into the only recognized "scientific" way to explain the world and cope with the "ultimate questions", while religion was considered a sign of ignorance, an illusion, and alienation of the people.

Marxist ideology was largely asserted through the education system. Due to the multi-ethnic structure of the Yugoslav State, the diversity of its peoples, and the federative State system, there never existed a completely unified education system in Yugoslavia. While the basic educational principles, applicable throughout the country, were adopted by the Central Committee of the Communist Party of Yugoslavia, the details and implementation were left to the republican governments and its Ministries of Education. The field of education, like those of culture and science, was the responsibility of the individual republics and not of the federal authorities; consequently, there was no federal ministry of education in Belgrade, as these

ministries only existed at the republican level. Moreover, the approval of education curricula was the sole responsibility of the republics. As a result, the textbooks differed across the republics, although their core message was similar, if not the same, in all parts of the Yugoslav State (Režek 2020, 20–21).

In Slovenia, the "scientific" interpretation of the world and of social relations was taught in the subject of Moral Education, introduced in 1952, immediately after the elimination of religious education in schools. The first instructions for teaching Moral Education emphasized that it was not a substitute for religious education, but rather education in the spirit of the moral values dictated by socialist society considering the development of science (Objave Sveta za prosveto in kulturo 1952, 2). As there were no specially trained teachers of Moral Education, the lessons were conducted by teachers of other subjects from the fields of social sciences and humanities, such as history teachers.

Another considerable problem was the lack of textbooks. The first textbook for Social and Moral Education (as the subject was renamed in 1972) was published only in 1977, 25 years after its introduction in primary schools. Until then, the teaching primarily relied on instructions and recommended readings that teachers were supposed to study and then pass the knowledge on to pupils. The recommended literature included works by Marx, Engels, and Lenin, as well as writings by Yugoslav politicians, Party ideologists and Marxist theoreticians from sociology, philosophy, and related fields.

Teachers selected the topics to be covered from materials containing descriptions of the subject matter, which gradually became more detailed and extensive, eventually resembling comprehensive teaching manuals. The materials addressed various topics from the realm of social relations, including the role of religion, but presenting the latter from a Communist Party perspective. The guidelines for teachers stressed the freedom and equality of religions and religious communities, insofar as they did not oppose the socialist system, and acknowledged believers as valuable members of socialist society, so long as they fulfilled their obligations toward the society and refrained from actions against socialism. The subject also covered the historical role of the Church, in Slovenia particularly focusing on the role of the Catholic Church. This was portrayed and presented to youth in distinctly negative terms: focusing on Medieval obscurantism, the Church's serving of the ruling classes, its conservative nature, clericalism, rejection of socialism and communism, and notably, the collaboration of the Catholic Church leadership and most of the clergy with the occupying forces during the Second World War. This grim image of the Catholic Church was slightly mitigated by the decisions of the Second Vatican Council, the Church's attempts to adjust to the changing situation in the world, as well as the emerging dialogue between Christianity and Marxism (for example, see Artač 1969).

During the liberal 1960s, the relationship between the State and the Catholic Church improved considerably, leading to a gradual restoration of diplomatic ties between Yugoslavia and the Vatican. The public sphere was increasingly open to diversity in opinions, but the relaxed social atmosphere was short-lived. In the early 1970s, the conservative wing of the League of Communists,

with Tito at the helm, took decisive measures against the political leaderships of the republics, including Slovenia. It accused them of promoting overly liberal tendencies, which they had allegedly spread not only into the spheres of politics and economy, but culture and education as well. This led to a bitter political campaign that extended into the realm of education, sparking a clash between the aspiration for an "ideologically neutral school" and the concept of a "socialist-committed school", promoted by the League of Communists (Ramšak 2016).

In 1977, the first textbook for Social and Moral Education was published in Slovenia. The chapter titled "Church, Morality and Socialism", authored by philosopher Vojan Rus, addressed the relationship between religion and society. Rus underlined that in Yugoslavia, all doors to societal participation were open to believers who staunchly opposed clericalism and fervently defended socialism. Conversely, he depicted believers as "unfortunates" with whom the communists sympathized, for they understood that belief in an afterlife stemmed from social position and the helplessness of the backward and poorer classes. The textbook also discussed the double moral standards of Christian churches: one for the ruling classes and another for the subservient peasants and the impoverished (Rus and Šter 1977, 56–71). The past and present of the Catholic Church were portrayed in an even dimmer light than in the earlier guidelines for teachers of Moral Education. Such a presentation of religion and the Church deeply upset a group of younger Slovenian theologians, who labeled Rus's claims an imposition of dogmatic Marxist atheism, a "Stalinist-inspired anti-religious pamphlet" even, and published their findings of historical and anthropological inaccuracies in this textbook in the Slovenian Catholic weekly *Družina* (Ramšak 2016, 105–106).

During the 1980s, the awareness of discrimination against believers and the urgency for a revision of the existing religious policy was increasingly present in the public and even among the new generations of communist politicians who emerged in the mid-1980s. One of the signs of withdrawal from the dogmatic stance on religion was the new textbook for Social and Moral Education, published in 1987. The chapters concerning religion were written by the well-known left-leaning professor of theology and one-time Auxiliary Bishop of Maribor, Vekoslav Grmič, also known as "the red bishop". Defying the previous mantra about the gradual dying and eventual extinction of religion, Grmič wrote that religion does change, but it cannot die out, only the forms in which it exists can die out. He described the fundamental values of Christianity and socialism as "profoundly related", particularly in terms of the precedence given to the community and its interests, of freedom, equality, and solidarity. He insisted that there were no insuperable oppositions between the two and that, on the contrary, they were quite similar, diverging only in those moral norms that concerned one's relation to God. "Socialism strives for the elimination of class differences and for a classless society, and Christianity strives to bring the Kingdom of Heaven on Earth, which is at least in part the same as a classless society", Grmič claimed (Šter, Jogan and Grmič 1987, 79).

Barely three years after the publication of this textbook, the potential for the further development of dialogue and peaceful coexistence of Christianity and Marxism was abruptly halted with the change of regime. In the early 1990s, the subject of Social and Moral Education was eliminated from the curricula of Slovenian primary schools; however, public schools soon became an ideological battlefield once more, the issue in the foreground this time being the reintroduction of religious education.

Conclusion

In the context of religious policy and actual practices in socialist Yugoslavia, particularly in Slovenia, the paper analyzes trends in religiosity and non-religiosity based on sparse existing statistical data. These were selected to capture the heterogeneity of the manifestation of both phenomena as comprehensively as possible. Even though the data are partly distorted as, for example, information on the attendance of religious worship services usually does not include deinstitutionalized religiosity, the data on religious identification also include some non-believers who did not practice religion in any form. Moreover, the share of children who attended religious education before its banishment from the public education system in 1952 was lower than the parents' interest in it would have been, due to the restrictions of the regime. The specifics of most statistical sources, which indicate a relatively high share of believers – only 10% of non-believers in the 1953 census, for example, or the shares of believers recorded in the SPO surveys, standing at 68% in 1968, falling to 45% in 1978, and rising again to 64% in 1991 (Figure 6.1) – lend more weight to the data. At the same time, the data suggest that the sphere of religious practice (to the extent that it was practiced as a private matter of individuals and was not politicized) was indeed regulated, but, except for a few high-profile professions, largely without restrictions or discrimination. Accordingly, the attendance at religious education or the share of adults in favor of sending their children to religious education increased (remaining at slightly over 50% since the late 1960s) once it was no longer taught in public schools and as such deemed less obtrusive by the authorities, being pushed out of the public sphere.

Furthermore, based on school curricula, textbooks, and other historical sources, this study examined two processes of atheization in the realm of school education, which were to a considerable extent connected. On the one hand, there was the laicization of education through the restriction and close supervision of the teaching of religious education conducted in public schools until 1952, when it was completely removed. On the other, there was the introduction of the new school subject of Moral Education, which was one of the most obvious mechanisms of the atheization of schoolchildren and the shaping of a new socialist human. To achieve this goal, it was also necessary to "redesign" the entire teaching personnel, with the profession of teacher remaining one of those in which open expression of religiosity was undesirable. For over two decades, the teaching of the subject of Moral Education relied solely on recommendations and, over time,

increasingly strict instructions to teachers, with the first textbook only published in 1977 – virtually at the same time as the highest percentage of non-believers was identified. The textbook portrayed the Church in a highly negative light and was extremely patronizing toward believers. The second textbook, published in the late 1980s, conveyed a completely different message, with auxiliary bishop Vekoslav Grmič, one of the contributors, describing the fundamental values of Christianity and socialism as closely intertwined and in no insurmountable opposition.

Notes

1 This chapter results from the research project N6–0173 "Religious change in Slovenia and Yugoslavia: Religious conversions and processes of atheization" and research program P6-0272, both funded by the Slovenian Research and Innovation Agency (ARIS).
2 See Šircelj (2003).
3 See Toš et al. (1990, 1998, 2004); Šircelj (2003). The categories in the survey question "Could you tell us whether or not you are religious and whether or not you attend religious worship?" explained:

   • Religious: religious and regularly attending religious worship; religious and occasionally attending religious worship; religious and not attending religious worship.
   • Not religious: not religious, but I am attending religious worship; not religious and not attending religious worship.
   • Neither religious, nor non-religious: cannot say I am religious or not, but I am attending religious worship; cannot say I am religious or not, but I am not attending religious worship; unknown: the category included in the 1953 census.

4 See Toš et al. (1990, 1998).
5 See Toš et al. (1990). The data explained:

   • In 1946/47, attendance at religious education in primary schools was restricted by the authorities; in the countryside, where it was mostly allowed, the attendance was practically 100% (Gabrič 2009, 156).
   • Attendance at religious education in primary schools in 1949 was 43%, but where religious classes were held more or less regularly, the attendance was 67% (Režek 2005, 96).
   • The data from the years 1968 is based on the survey "Slovenski srednješolci in religija"/"Slovenian high school students and religion" (1982) (Kerševan 1989, 96).
   • For the years 1975/76 and 1981/82, in the SPO survey, a question was posed to the representative pattern of the (adult) population "Do you currently send your children to religious education, did you send them in the past, or do you intend to send them in the future?"

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Realignments of Communism and Atheism in Varying Religious Extra-European Contexts

7 "Muslim Communists"

Afghan Atheism in the 20th Century

Sayed Hassan Akhlaq

Introduction

Situated at the crossroads of the Middle East, Central Asia, and South Asia, Afghanistan boasts a rich history intertwined with various influential cultures, from the Achaemenid Persian Empire to the Parthians, Sasanians, Kushans, and Hephthalites, eventually embracing Islam. This historical tapestry renders Afghanistan a unique nexus of diverse cultures and ideologies. Notably, its proximity to two significant sources of Marxism, the Soviet Union, and China, exposed Afghanistan to the atheistic tenets associated with communism-Marxism in the modern era.

However, atheistic tendencies were not entirely novel to Afghanistan. While not explicitly atheistic, elements of a-theism, paganism, skepticism, and agnosticism were part of its frequently overlooked history. The conversion to Islam was a gradual process spanning over 8–11 centuries, during which time Afghans adhered to various faiths such as Zoroastrianism, Buddhism, regional ethnic beliefs, and Hinduism. Despite some attempts at proselytization, particularly during the reign of Akbar in 1582 (Green 2017, 13), parts of northeastern Afghanistan retained non-Muslim populations. Historical records suggest that around the 1880s, approximately 60,000 pagans, known as Kafirs, inhabited the region known as Kafiristan or the Land of the Infidels (Adamec 2005, 186). However, by 1906, due to widespread conversions to Islam, it was officially renamed Nuristan or the Land of Light. The people of this region played a significant militant role in Afghan history for the ensuing 80 years (Barfield 2010, 151).

Although categorizing these beliefs as outright atheism may be inaccurate, traces of a-theism, agnosticism, and skepticism toward the meta-narratives of theism can be discerned in the long history of Persian literature, where cities like Herat, Ghazni, and Balkh played pivotal roles in its development. However, a notable shift occurred in 1978 with the emergence of a collective atheism spearheaded by the People's Democratic Party of Afghanistan (PDPA). This study explores the modern and collective forms of atheism in Afghanistan, particularly examining activists who navigated between Islam and communism. It examines how 20th-century Afghan communists understood Islam and atheism, how they navigated between these ideologies, and what their own sources reveal about their strategies and rationale. Additionally, it incorporates reports from the Soviet Union, which

served as both an inspirational and guiding source for Afghan communists, as analyzed by Vassily A. Klimentov. It also investigates the areas where they promoted their agenda and to what extent, with a particular focus on their administrative and higher education policies.

To truly understand this phenomenon, it is imperative to investigate the socio-intellectual landscape from which these movements emerged and found resonance. Afghan Communism cannot be comprehensively understood without considering the country's modernization process and the Islamic push for egalitarianism and social justice. Following a brief overview of the historical context, this study will examine the communist movement in Afghanistan and its atheist agenda permeating both public culture and academic structures.

The Pre-Modern Context

Before the 18th and 19th centuries, Afghan intellectuals were divided into two distinct groups concerning religious beliefs. The first group, rooted in religious tradition, typically received education from Islamic madrasas. Meanwhile, the second group, inclined toward literary pursuits, acquired knowledge encompassing Islamic teachings, Persian literature, philosophy, logic, natural sciences, and medicine. During the 18th and 19th centuries both trends suffered a marked decline. The religious trend became increasingly doctrinaire, focusing on commentaries and annotations while losing sight of original texts and intellectual dynamism. Conversely, the literary trend expanded its scope, drawing inspiration from external sources to the extent of diluting its own identity (Majrooh 1989, 7).

As the 20th century unfolded amid the backdrop of Western imperialism, a new breed of Afghan intellectuals emerged. These intellectuals, categorized by Majrooh as classic intellectuals and modern intellectuals, differed in their educational backgrounds, perspectives, and objectives. However, they shared a forward-looking mindset and were influenced by Western advancements in science and technology. Both groups recognized the shackles of ignorance, outdated traditions, and poverty afflicting Afghanistan, yet they diverged on the path forward and the need for compromise.

The classic intellectuals, deeply rooted in historical literacy, spearheaded a genuine renaissance in arts and literature during the first half of the 20th century. They assimilated Western scientific and technological achievements, adopting new literary forms and historical methodologies from the West. Rejecting intellectual pursuits solely for personal satisfaction, they studied Western works in Persian, Arabic, and Turkish translation to apply them practically. They approached history as a foundation for nation-building, extending their focus beyond Islamic history to encompass pre-Islamic eras such as the Greco-Buddhic period and even more ancient epochs. Embracing Western attire and relocating from provincial settings to Kabul, some even joined government administrations to advance their agenda. Their dual adversaries were Western colonial powers and entrenched religious dogma.

On the contrary, the modern intellectuals showed little affinity for national history or preceding literary trends. They were disconnected from these aspects, having been educated in the new Westernized schools that emerged under colonial influence. These schools, such as Habibiya Lycee (teaching in English), Amania Lycee (teaching in German), and Istiqlal Lycee (teaching in French), did not follow the traditional curriculum of madrasas or the modern national education system of maktab. Graduates of these prominent schools often received scholarships to study abroad, gaining firsthand exposure to Western culture and ideals. As Majrooh noted, these intellectuals found themselves in a perplexing state of neither fully Western nor authentically Eastern, feeling estranged from both their society and themselves. They grappled with reconciling their East-conditioned subconsciousness with their West-trained consciousness (Majrooh 1989, 13).

While the classical intellectuals aimed to critique religion as a catalyst for societal awakening and modernization, the latter group held more negative views toward religion as a whole.[1] Interestingly, Marxist-oriented intellectuals came predominantly from the West, notably the USA, while anti-Marxists hailed from the East, particularly the Soviet Union. For example, Taraki and Amin, the first leftist but rival heads of State in 1978, received their education respectively in British India and the United States. Taraki also served as a cultural press attaché at the Afghan Embassy in Washington DC for a few months in 1953. Following the Soviet invasion of December 1979, a significant number of Soviet-educated intellectuals fled Afghanistan (Majrooh 1989, 17). This peculiar phenomenon sheds light on the unique trajectory of promoting atheism in modern Afghanistan, spearheaded by Marxist-oriented intellectuals in the political arena and higher education system. They presented a revolutionary solution to combat various societal issues, including the perceived oppressive belief in God, through a coup d'état and the use of governmental force, rather than allowing cultural and intellectual change to occur slowly and gradually.

From Islamic Monarchy to Implicit Atheistic Political Regime

The pivotal moment came with Mohammad Daoud Khan's coup against the monarchy, led by King Zahir Shah, in 1973, aided by the PDPA, aiming to transition the monarchy into the modern structure of the Democratic Republic of Afghanistan. The PDPA emerged from the amalgamation of several smaller socialist and Marxist organizations on January 1, 1965. Its origins trace back to the Awakened Youth movement, which emerged in the late 1940s advocating for secularization, wealth redistribution, women's rights, universal education, and the establishment of a Pashtun State within the newly independent nation of Pakistan. Mohammed Daoud Khan, a founding member of the Awakened Youth, ascended to the position of Prime Minister in 1953. However, Daoud's alignment with US allies, including Iran, Pakistan, and Arab countries, eventually led to his downfall, costing him his government, as well as affecting his family and personal life (Ansari 1390, 183–184; Lansford 2017, 358–360).

The Communist takeover, labeled the Saur (April) Revolution in 1978 by the PDPA, marked a bloody coup d'état. While the Party publicly shunned the label "communist" to avoid appearing subservient to Moscow, both Afghans and Soviets commonly used the term in private discussions (Klimentov 2023, 283).

PDPA: Factions, Dynamism, and Opposition to Religion

The PDPA's two primary publications lent their names to the Party's two main factions: Khalq (Masses) and Parcham (Banner). The Khalq faction, led by Taraki, espoused a Soviet-style revolution, adopting a more radical approach and garnering significant support from rural ethnic Pashtuns. On the other hand, the Parcham faction, led by Karmal, advocated for a gradual transition to a socialist economy and drew its main support from urban areas, as well as from other ethnic groups such as Tajiks and Uzbeks.

In March 1977, the Soviets brokered reconciliation talks between Khalq and Parcham in a bid to create a unified opposition against Daud Khan. Eventually, the leaders devised a plan to oust Daoud, with Taraki slated to assume the presidency and Karmal as his deputy, as per their agreement. Taraki, a founding member of the PDPA, developed an interest in communism and Marxist ideology during his student days in India (Lansford 2017, 447).

During his presidency from 1978 to 1979, Nur Muhammad Taraki proposed 28 measures aimed at reshaping Afghanistan along Marxist-Leninist principles. His speech, apart from a customary Islamic preamble and token acknowledgment of Islam, notably lacked references to Islamic teachings. Strikingly, none of the 28 measures put forth by the PDPA addressed religious matters. This departure from the local culture was so startling that the US embassy in Kabul warned that the PDPA risked its standing by swiftly shedding its "initial veil of Islamic nationalism" (Kilmentov 2022, 6). Taraki's administration did not overtly pursue anti-religious agendas, but rather targeted traditional economic and political elites, including Islamic authorities, while challenging centuries-old religiously aligned traditions. However, due to poor planning, lack of local support, and corrupt practices, these reforms provided fodder for religious and established authorities to portray them as atheistic measures.

These initiatives included land redistribution, literacy programs for women, integration of mixed-gender classes, abolition of the bride price, and a deliberate blurring of distinctions between urban and rural populations through changes in appearance and behavior, such as shaving beards, discarding traditional headwear, donning European-style suits, and altering greeting customs. Additionally, reforms to the Afghan judiciary system were perceived by angered elites as undermining the authority of rural mullahs. Although these reforms were not explicitly aimed at religion, they were perceived as such due to their unintended consequences. Furthermore, instances of disrespect toward religion, such as burning religious texts, prohibiting morning prayers, and allowing donkeys into mosques, further fueled the perception of an anti-Islamic agenda (Klimentov 2022, 7).

In October 1978, the administration removed all Islamic symbols from official statements and the national flag, including the traditional preamble "In the name of God, the Merciful, the Compassionate",[2] despite Afghanistan being a Muslim-majority society. Instead, Soviet-style symbols were imposed, with Kabul residents mandated to paint their doors red. By 1979, Taraki's discussions with Komitet Gosudarstvennoy Bezopasnosti (KGB), Committee for State Security, officials included promises of emptying Afghan mosques within a year, indicating a radical approach toward religious institutions. This stance prompted some members of the PDPA to caution Soviet officials that Taraki's crackdown on "bearded men" was stoking unrest and hindering efforts to engage with moderate insurgent leaders (Kilmentov 2022, 10).

Due to the radical reforms advocated by the PDPA, by spring 1979, numerous provinces in Afghanistan were engulfed in open rebellion. Hafizullah Amin (1929–1979), the influential foreign minister entrusted with overseeing the military for the Party, was perceived as unsuccessful in tackling the crisis and encountered internal dissent within the Party ranks. With Soviet backing, Taraki launched an unsuccessful bid to depose Amin from power in September. In retaliation, Amin arrested and executed Taraki on September 14, subsequently assuming the presidency. Amin, a graduate of Columbia University in 1958, developed a strong affinity for Marxism during his time in the United States (Covarrubias 2017, 34–35). He advocated for the establishment of a "dictatorship of the working class" in Afghanistan (Kilmentov 2022, 9). Despite his presidency lasting only two weeks, Amin's radical approach left a lasting impact on the country. He is often held responsible for orchestrating a campaign of repression against various groups perceived as threats to the regime, including religious and tribal leaders, students, teachers, military officers, and members of the rival Parcham faction. It is estimated that around 50,000 people were executed during his brief tenure from April 1978 to September 1979.

Faced with Soviet backing for his removal, Amin sought to navigate a delicate balance between the two superpowers and lessen Afghanistan's reliance on Moscow. However, his radical policies and shifting alliances led to a change in the Soviet stance of non-intervention. The Soviets expressed their intention to send a small contingent of troops into Afghanistan ostensibly to assist in suppressing the mujahideen, religious fighters, although it is widely believed that their primary objective was the removal of the Afghan president.

On December 27, 1979, the Soviets launched Operation Storm 333, during which Amin and his son were killed by Soviet troops in an assault on a heavily fortified military facility in Kabul (Covarrubias 2017, 35). This marked the end of Khalq's rule and the beginning of the Parcham government, which adopted a less radical approach toward Islam.

In summary, the radical, unfeasible, and ambiguous approach of the Khalq faction played a significant role not only in alienating a major cultural institution, Islam, but also in turning it into a tool of opposition and rebellion. For instance, the massive revolt in Herat in March 1979, framed in religious terms, resulted in around 20,000 deaths. This event starkly illustrates the Marxist influence in

transforming Islamic faith into a political and militant ideology, leading to the weaponization of faith and the subsequent rise of what are termed by the Soviets as "religious fundamentalists", "religious fanatics", and "Islamic fundamentalists" (Klimentov 2022, 11). However, there is evidence indicating that Soviet leaders were cautioning against the misguided policies advocated by Taraki and Amin, particularly regarding religion. Moscow believed that the Afghan regime failed to effectively convey to the Muslim population that their socioeconomic reforms were aligned with Islam and would not infringe upon religious beliefs. The Herat uprising prompted KGB operatives in Afghanistan to conduct a more thorough examination of the situation (Klimentov 2022, 11).

A KGB office in Kabul devised a five-point plan to address Islam, which included considering the potential reactions of Muslim clergy to government actions, urging Afghan authorities to cease repression against religious leaders, fostering closer ties with official clergy, organizing visits by Soviet Islamic authorities to Afghanistan, and increasing communication with Sayyid Ahmed Gailani, a leader of a Sufi group and moderate mujahid, to encourage his return to Afghanistan (Klimentov 2022, 13). This marked a shift toward tolerating or even exploiting Islam for a covert atheist agenda.

USSR's Push for a Shift from Symbols to Ideology

The USSR commenced its invasion of Afghanistan on December 25, 1979, continuing until 1989. Amid the political upheaval following Taraki's assassination and Amin's rise to power, Karmal found himself in enforced exile in Prague. However, following the December invasion and Amin's demise, Karmal was strategically placed in power with the backing of the Soviet Union. This move aimed to garner domestic support for the PDPA. Karmal, a carefully chosen figure and one of the PDPA's founding members, had received his education from Kabul University. He also served as the leader of the Parcham faction (Covarrubias 2017, 237–238). According to Mikhail Slinkin, the primary Soviet advisor in the PDPA's International Development, Afghanistan required to "get out of international isolation, predominantly in the Islamic world" (Klimentov 2023, 286). After Karmal assumed power in 1980, the PDPA underwent a significant shift in its approach, reaching out to Muslim countries – excluding Pakistan due to its pro-mujahideen stance – in an effort to break out of international isolation. This transformation involved the strategic adoption of policies aimed at appealing to Islamic sensibilities. The PDPA tactically expressed its "respect" for Islam and convened conferences involving loyal Islamic scholars. The inaugural conference, presented as a historic event in Afghan history, explicitly called upon Muslim nations to recognize and support the PDPA.

To counter propaganda portraying the PDPA as godless, the Soviets published an English-language pamphlet titled "The Truth about Afghanistan". This pamphlet contained official speeches, press articles, and testimonies aimed at dispelling misconceptions about the PDPA. Karmal's "Appeal of Presidium of the Revolutionary Council to Muslims in Afghanistan and All Over the World" marked a turning

point, as it redefined the April Revolution as a national-democratic endeavor rather than a proletarian one. It was framed as part of a broader global Muslim anti-colonial struggle (Klimentov 2023, 289).

In an interview with Kuwaiti newspaper al-Watan, Karmal expressed solidarity with Muslims worldwide, alleging that Israel played a central role in an unde-clared war against Afghanistan. He emphasized Kabul's desire to strengthen rela-tions with Muslim and Arab countries, positioning himself as an ally in the fight against imperialism. Following counsel from the Soviet Union, Karmal penned a letter to Ayatollah Khomeini shortly after assuming power. Eager to adopt an Is-lamic stance, the Afghan communist commenced his letter with the phrase "In the name of Allah, the Almighty and the Merciful, to the great brother Imam Ayatol-lah Khomeini". Karmal attributed bilateral tensions to the Khalqis, likening them to the deposed Shah of Iran. He accused them of devising an "offensive policy" against the "liberating Islamic Revolution", alongside US imperialism. Karmal advocated for improved relations between the DRA and Iran, offering security as-surances given the presence of Soviet forces. Additionally, he proposed a personal meeting. Like elsewhere, he sought to bolster his traditional and charismatic legiti-macy by linking the April Revolution with the Islamic Revolution, attempting to equate himself with Khomeini (Klimentov 2023, 294).

Soviet involvement in religious matters remained limited until late in the war, primarily due to the lack of understanding among most personnel regarding Af-ghan culture, traditions, and Islam. Handbooks and briefings distributed to person-nel cautioned against certain behaviors, such as avoiding proximity to shrines and cemeteries, disrupting or mocking daily prayers, and approaching veiled women (G. Arzumanov and L. Shershnev, eds., Sovetskomu Voinu ob Afganistane (Tash-kent: Politicheskoe Upravlenie Krasnoznamennogo Turkestanskogo Voennogo Okruga, 1981), as cited in Klimentov 2022, 16).

One handbook addressing the PDPA's stance toward Islam highlighted Karmal's newfound tolerance for the religion without overtly criticizing the earlier policies of the Khalq faction. It advocated for a delicate balance between acknowledging religion as a historical artifact and recognizing its pragmatic necessity (necessary evil). The handbook concluded that, given the deep religiosity of the population, the limited political consciousness of many workers, and the country's extreme backwardness, "openly atheistic positions" were ineffective in mobilizing the masses (Klimentov 2022, 17). In May 1979, the Soviet embassy in Kabul organ-ized an exhibition showcasing modern industrial achievements from Central Asia, including a booth dedicated to Islam in the USSR that distributed Qurans printed in the Soviet Union. Additionally, in January 1980, as part of people-to-people exchanges, the Afghan head of the Religious Council and 15 mullahs visited Tash-kent and Tajikistan. In their report, they emphasized the respect shown to religious practices and Islam in the USSR, noting that it exceeded what they had observed in Saudi Arabia (Klimentov 2022, 18).

Understanding this background sheds light on the internal policy of the PDPA and Karmal toward Islam, revealing how it was utilized as both a means and an ideology to justify their policies and legitimize their regime.

Karmal's "Islamic Socialism"

On January 19, 1980 Karmal introduced a new rhetoric on Islam in the official New Agency of the government, Bakhtar, claiming the April Revolution was a "materialization of the will of the country's Muslim people toward the assertion of authentic social justice and a huge step on the path to the materialization of the ancient aspiration of true Muslims". Here is clear shift; the April Revolution transformed from a "proletarian" achievement to part of a global Muslim struggle for liberation. Thus, both the April Revolution and Islam converge around social justice. In addition, Islam and PDPA shared an international mission to fight imperialism.

A week later, on January 26, Karmal diverged explicitly from his predecessors' approach to Islam in a speech. He emphasized the sacred nature of Islam, national traditions, and ancestral customs, considering them as an invaluable heritage belonging to the Afghan people. He denounced the persecution carried out by Amin and his cohorts against spiritual leaders, mullahs, and tribal elders. Karmal, speaking on behalf of the Revolutionary Council, reaffirmed the unconditional freedom of religious sects, national customs, and traditions. He emphasized that every individual, regardless of whether they were Sunni or Shia, had the right to follow their traditions and practice their faith without fear of repression (Klimentov 2022, 21). Karmel used Islamic concepts so extensively that, at the first Conference of the Ulema and Clergy (June–July 1980), he likened opposition to the regime to the criminal and seditious tribes of Medina who opposed the Prophet Muhammad. In doing so, the party redefined the opponents of the Revolution as "hypocrites" (munafiq), a Quranic term used to discredit their religious appearance (Olesen 1996, 260–262).

Karmal relentlessly portrayed the regime as a staunch defender of religion, going as far as to assert, on April 28, 1980, that it was imperative, according to the principles of the holy Quran and Sharia, to punish those who flagrantly violated the ideals of Islam.

Furthermore, Karmal's speech on January 26 outlined legal measures aimed at supporting Islam. For instance, religious figures were promised the restoration of their offices, positions, and assets if they aligned themselves with the regime. Public celebrations of Muslim holidays, such as Eid al-Fitr and the birthday of the Prophet Muhammad, became commonplace, with PDPA members actively participating in Islamic rituals. In 1985, the entire Party and State leadership joined in the Eid al-Fitr prayer. The PDPA also undertook efforts to restore religious buildings, constructing 527 mosques in Kabul alone between January 1980 and August 1985. Additionally, stipends were provided to mullahs, and funding was allocated for pilgrimages to Mecca. The Party sought to engage mullahs and Islamic authorities in the reconstruction of Afghanistan, organizing religious assemblies that brought together clergy from across the country (Klimentov 2022, 22).

Upon Karmal's arrival, the regime established the High Council of Ulama and the Clergy, as well as the General Department of Islamic Affairs, the latter of which was overseen by Khademat-i Ettela'at-i Daulati (KHAD), or State Information Service, the intelligence service. In April 1985, this department was transformed into

the Ministry of Islamic Affairs and Waqfs. As Klimentov suggests, similar to the mujahideen, the PDPA utilized religion to mobilize the population for war, even recruiting mullahs into the military to lead prayers and engage in propaganda activities (Klimentov 2022, 23).

A notable example of this occurred in January 1981, when the regime enacted a law on compulsory military service. Mullahs were tasked with explaining to the population the Islamic obligation to resist invaders – in this case, the mujahideen acting on behalf of imperialism – and to remind Afghans of their duty of jihad and serving in the army as a sacred obligation.

In April 1980 the regime changed the national flag from all-red to the traditional tricolor that also featured the mihrab (niche) and minbar (pulpit), two pieces of mosque architecture. Karmal described this change as the objective realities of Afghan society. In March 1980, Karmal revised earlier land redistribution following advice from the Soviet Union. Now, waqf lands (religious endowments), surpluses of land areas in the plots of religious scholars and chiefs, the tribal elders, could not be seized.

Despite Karmal's statement in a June 1984 interview that the PDPA's goal was not to eradicate religion but to integrate it into the revolution, Afghan Muslims remained skeptical. They perceived him as a true atheist communist masquerading as a loyal Muslim. Although the regime adjusted many measures to comply with Islamic principles, it did not abandon its atheist and Marxist ideals. When asked by *Der Spiegel* in November 1985 if he had started attending mosques to appease conservative segments of the population, Karmal briefly responded that the April Revolution had ensured respect for Islam. However, he declined to offer a profession of faith when pressed further. Between 1984 and 1985, Karmal's major speeches included only superficial references to Islam, a pattern that mirrored the approach of most PDPA leaders toward religion. According to a Soviet adviser, they lacked an understanding of the language and sentiments of the Afghan people. Throughout Karmal's tenure, Islam and loyal Islamic figures were utilized to project an Islamic facade for the regime. However, despite such rhetoric, the PDPA maintained its Marxist character (Klimentov 2022, 26). Karmal's attempts to present himself as a true Islamic socialist failed to convince many, as he was perceived as a puppet of hidden atheism despite his Islamic-themed rhetoric. However, before delving into the further transformation of the communist agenda, I would like to focus on the higher education policies introduced and implemented by the Party to promote the atheistic cause.

Overhauling the Framework and Syllabus of Kabul University

A crucial aspect of the atheist agenda pursued by the communists in modern Afghanistan becomes evident when examining the academic activities and initiatives overseen by the Soviet-backed PDPA. Here, I shall highlight some key points about Kabul University to provide insight into its ambitious yet ambiguous mission, drawing from the most detailed available report by Dr. S. S. Yusuf Elmi, titled "A Brief Look at The Sovietization of Afghan Education".

The Soviet advisors played a direct role in what some scholars have termed the "Sovietization of Afghan education". They arrived in Afghanistan in early 1978 and immediately began implementing changes, particularly at Kabul University. In June 1978, the first Russian advisers arrived at the Faculty of Letters (formerly the Faculty of Social Sciences) and introduced radical alterations to its curriculum. Traditional Islamic subjects, such as the history of Islamic civilization and Islamic art, were replaced with topics like Historical Materialism, Revolutionary History of Workers, History of Russia, New History of Afghanistan, Dialectical Materialism, Scientific Sociology, and History of World Literature. Furthermore, new departments for Russian and Spanish languages were established, with enrollment becoming compulsory. Sociology and the New History of Afghanistan were integrated into the curriculum across all 13 faculties of Kabul University. The latter subject, rewritten by Ghulam Dastgir Panjsheri, a former Khalqi and later Parchami, depicted Afghanistan's independence from British rule as achieved through the efforts and internationalist cooperation of the Soviet Union.

Russian advisors and heads of various departments exerted significant influence, with the Faculty of Social Sciences directly controlled by the Central Committee, instructing professors to align their teachings with Marxism-Leninism. Philosophical subjects such as Greek Philosophy and its impact on Islamic thought and Problems of Philosophy were replaced with materialism, while Psychology and Anthropology were labeled as "bourgeois reactionary sciences" and substituted with "Scientific Sociology". The Faculty of Theology was compelled to omit chapters of the Quran related to Jihad, instead emphasizing the compatibility of the Quran with socialism, particularly focusing on verses promoting equality among human beings. Arabic language studies were transferred to the Faculty of Language and Literature, while Fiqh (Islamic jurisprudence) was relocated to the Faculty of Law, aiming to fragment Islamic culture and align it more closely with the communist agenda.

Under the influence of Russian advisors, vacation periods were shifted to the summer months to ensure students would participate in collective works and engage in battle against the mujahideen. This pressure on non-Party professors and the ideological reshaping of the university led to a significant exodus of teaching staff. By 1987, out of 750 teaching staff members, 276 had emigrated, 35 were executed, and 6 were imprisoned,[3] fundamentally altering the landscape of intellectualism within academia (Elmi 1987, 5–9). This systematic endeavor to transform education and academia from religious to anti-religious or non-religious occurred across various levels of education, ranging from high schools to different colleges.

The Evolution from Atheist Marxism to "Authentic" Islam

As the Soviet conflict in Afghanistan dragged on and mujahideen fighters gained momentum, Moscow pressured Afghan President Babrak Karmal to step down in 1986, replacing him with another member of the Parcham faction, the loyal Muhammad Najibullah. Before his presidency, Najibullah held the position of head of the intelligence service, KHAD, where, as a major general, he wielded immense

power and instilled fear throughout Afghanistan. He maintained direct access to policymakers in the Kremlin. Upon assuming the presidency, he oversaw the drafting of a new constitution aimed at granting Afghans greater rights and increased access to the political system (Pierpaoli Jr. 2017, 305–306). His inclusive policies and reputation for toughness made him a desirable choice for the Soviet Union.

Mikhail Gorbachev, the new leader in the Kremlin, sought to withdraw Soviet troops from Afghanistan, viewing the conflict as a "bleeding wound" fueled by counterrevolution and imperialism (Klimentov 2022, 26). Najibullah initiated a "national reconciliation" plan, advocating for Islam and pro-regime Muslim figures to play a significant political role. In his early addresses to religious leaders, he emphasized the importance of patriotic clergy as vital assets in the war effort, aligning Islam's principles of freedom, justice, and equality with Party slogans.

In June 1986, the Telegraph Agency of the Soviet Union (TASS) concluded that while Khalq policies had alienated the Afghan clergy, Karmal's approach had acknowledged mistakes and demonstrated genuine respect for religion. The Afghan Muslim population began to discern between those who genuinely respected religion and those who merely instrumentalized it for political gain. This new perspective was reflected in a brochure distributed to Soviet political workers in Afghanistan, which depicted two contrasting forms of Islam: one driven by the authentic holy war for faith led by the working class and the other characterized by foreign-backed insurgency serving imperialism (V. Shur, Real'naya Sushchnost' Islamskoi "Svyashchennoi Bor'by za Veru" (Tashkent: Politicheskoe Upravlenie Krasnoznamennogo Turkestanskogo Voennogo Okruga, 1987), cited by Klimentov 2022, 28). Najibullah's national reconciliation plan aligned with this vision, emphasizing harmony with Gorbachev's speech and the handbook for Soviet troops. Building upon Karmal's efforts to bolster the regime's Islamic credentials, Najibullah aimed to broaden its base and foster stability through religious inclusivity.

In November 1987, Valentin Varennikov, a key Soviet decision-maker in Afghanistan, sought to deepen the understanding of Islam, the division between Sunni and Shia Muslims, the nature of Islamization, and utilize Islam as a tool for peacebuilding. Kim Tsagolov, a political advisor to Varennikov, revealed that Soviet forces had advised the PDPA to embrace Islam. Tsagolov claimed to have contributed to the drafting of Najibullah's speech on national reconciliation. He believed that this policy needed to be championed by "the clergy" due to the PDPA's loss of credibility as a political force. In this context, Najibullah made Islam the central pillar of his new policy. In his address to the mujahideen, he emphasized the need for both sides of the conflict to focus on their common ground: a shared belief in Islam, a shared homeland, and a deep love for the people (Klimentov 2022, 29–30).

Upon becoming the PDPA General Secretary, he shed his moniker "Najib" and was instead referred to as "Dr. Muhammad Najibullah", a name with more Islamic resonance. Known for his oratory skills, he frequently quoted the Quran in his speeches.[4] In November 1986, Najibullah argued that the April Revolution and Islam shared a common purpose: to serve Afghanistan's diligent Islamic population. He emphasized the role of the PDPA and "patriotically geared mullahs" in serving the revolutionary people. In February 1987, an Islamic Study Center

was established with financial support from Moscow. By May 1987, the regime had restored 1026 mosques, funded the construction of 231 new ones, and provided housing for 147 families of mullahs. Additionally, salaries for religious figures were doubled. Najibullah instructed Party committees and State organizations to prioritize the needs of mosques and clergy. Newspapers and television stations promoted religious programming and information, while Kabul hosted a Quranic reading competition featuring participants from predominantly pro-Soviet Muslim countries. Afghan army officers who perished in the war against the mujahideen were honored as religious martyrs. Karmal's tolerance of religion had evolved into the portrayal of the State as authentically Islamic. Here is an excerpt from Najibullah's speech in February 1987:

> In the course of the politics of the national reconciliation, [the PDPA] will even more actively support and develop the respectful attitude that the Muslim people [of Afghanistan] have toward Islam. Our commitment to Islam is enacted in the emblem and the state's flag; it is apparent in the restoration of Islamic values and the establishment of the condition for the free practice of religions. Our adversaries cannot silence such undeniable facts as the election of 750 mullahs into our local organs of state authority, and the nomination into the revolutionary council of 12 representatives of the clergy. [The] Afghan people and the clergy are convinced: Islam is in danger not from the side of the April revolution. Islam is threatened by the enemy of the liberation movement of the Muslim world – the international imperialism headed by the USA.
>
> (quoted in Klimentov 2022, 32)

Najibullah Islamized the Marxist ideology of the Party, contending that the April Revolution itself "had happened by the Will of Almighty Allah". The government established the People's Islamic Party of Afghanistan in a clear effort to enhance the PDPA's Islamic legitimacy and weaken the opposition. He framed the leaders of the main Islamist parties in Pakistan as reactionary, feudal, and capitalist, portraying them as aligned with British colonial landlords, or as agents of the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood and the CIA (Olesen 1996, 263). The deliberate choice of a name for the new party echoed that of insurgent groups in Pakistan. In September 1987, the regime introduced *Ershad Islami* (Islamic Guidance), a weekly publication issued by the High Council of Ulemas and the Clergy, with the aim of uniting Afghan Muslims for peace and national reconciliation. The same year saw the introduction of a de facto constitution as the culmination of the process of institutional Islamization. This involved shortening the country's name from the Democratic Republic of Afghanistan to the Republic of Afghanistan and removing the red star from the flag. The Soviet-style Revolutionary Council was replaced by a parliament, the National Council. The leader of Afghanistan was henceforth referred to as the "president", and an advisory council of Islamic figures was established. The preamble to the constitution made no reference to the April Revolution, while the second article affirmed Islam as the country's official religion.

Religious subjects were now taught six times a week in schools, compared to three times previously, and religion returned to a prominent and visible position in society. Identity cards were redesigned to include a column for religious affiliation, high-ranking Party members were mandated to attend mosque prayers, and the title "comrade" was replaced with "honorable" or "dear". By 1987, religious figures made up 20% of the total membership of local state power and administrative organs (Olesen1996, 263). Soviet leaders endorsed this policy as a "realistic approach", believing that Afghanistan's identity was inseparable from Islam. The conflict between the government and the mujahideen shifted from religious to power struggles.

A representative of Hizb-e Islami, one of the most radical insurgent Islamic parties, remarked to Najibullah that he had embraced Islamic issues to such an extent that he could be given a membership card in their party. While previous leaders had merely respected Islam, Najibullah actively promoted Islamic teachings, leading to the transformation of the PDPA from a Marxist anti-religious movement to a blend of Islam and socialism aimed at retaining power, with the approval of Moscow. In August 1990, Gorbachev and Najibullah discussed the PDPA's transformation and expressed concerns about a potential Islamist threat to the USSR. Gorbachev was particularly concerned about the possibility of the US exploiting Islam against the Soviet Union (Klimentov 2022, 38). Najibullah sought to steer Afghanistan's course in the opposite direction, advocating for Islam to be incorporated into the framework of a communist State as a means to combat global imperialism. However, Najibullah's efforts at Islamization did not prove beneficial for him. Following the withdrawal of Soviet forces from Afghanistan in the spring of 1989, a coup d'état led by his own defense minister, breakdowns in negotiations, and shortages of food and fuel in Kabul, Najibullah agreed to resign in March 1992. Subsequently, on April 28, 1992, the Mujahideen, his Islamist adversaries who rejected Najibullah's Islamic facade, invaded Kabul.

Conclusion

The predominant surge of atheism in 20th-century Afghanistan emerged with the communist movement. This movement, fueled by the ideals of modernization and Marxist ideology, sought to modernize the country. However, this endeavor failed to align with the needs and desires of the masses, and its proponents lacked deep-rooted connections to regional and local culture, values, and traditions.

Unlike the classical intellectuals who advocated for secularism rooted in historical and cultural context, the new elites, while leaning toward atheism, struggled to effectively communicate with the masses and establish trust. Despite their initial portrayal as heralds of a progressive world, the communists underwent significant transformations in their interactions with the people. They transitioned from a vanguard Marxist movement to moderate socialists seeking to reconcile Islam and socialism and eventually adopted a rhetoric of full Islamization to reinvigorate Islam as a tool against imperialism and to pursue egalitarian goals.

As they advocated for self-awareness among the people, they experienced a detachment from their ideological roots. In their attempts to counter accusations

of atheism from the mujahideen, the communists embraced Islam and portrayed themselves as true Muslims. Friedrich Nietzsche's words in *Beyond Good and Evil* echoed this sentiment: "Whoever fights monsters should see to it that in the process he doesn't become a monster" (1989, 89). Initially, Afghan communists aimed to counteract what they perceived as regressive Islam and Islamization. However, they ultimately ended up endorsing Islam and Islamization – intertwining Islam with political ideology – and reshaping it to align with their goals of combating imperialism and capitalism.

While occasional disagreements occurred between Afghan communists and their Soviet inspirations, ultimately, they underwent these transformations based on the advice or approval of the Soviet Union. This process of submission and transformation validated their enemies' criticisms of their lack of self-agency. Unfortunately for them, most Afghan communists lacked a critical understanding of atheism and its theoretical foundations.[5] Their atheism became more passive and reactionary in response to underdevelopment in Afghanistan, rather than embodying creative and pioneering thinking.

Their oscillation between communism and atheism conveyed a confusing message to their audiences and depleted their energies. In their approach, atheism became politicized, reducing all aspects of life and humanity to political agendas. Moreover, their fully top-down approach to societal change contradicted not only local culture but also Marxism, which sought to unite proletarians and liberate them from oppression. Ultimately, this unclear and politicized wave of atheism only added to the burdens of the oppressed people and perpetuated endless conflict by transforming faith into a political ideology. However, atheism as a worldview persists in Afghanistan, albeit no longer following the same trajectory.

Notes

1 The modern intellectuals gave rise to two radical political factions: (1) Marxist groups (including Khalq and Parcham, aligning with the Soviets, and Shola-e Jawid, embracing Maoist ideologies); (2) Muslim movements which later evolved into the mujahideen. Both factions advocate for revolution, drawing inspiration from external political sources, and concentrate their efforts within universities and colleges. However, this study does not delve into the activities of Islamist groups.

2 For an exploration of the significance, meaning, and prevalence of the preamble in Islamic culture, irrespective of its geographical diversity, refer to Akhlaq, Sayed Hassan. 2021. "Introducing Concept of Basmalah and Luther's Commentary on the Ten Commandments." In *Religion, Sustainability, and Education: Pedagogy, Perspectives, and Praxis towards Ecological Sustainability*, edited by Mary Philip, Chad Rimmer and Tom S. Tomren, 141–168.

3 Comprehensive information regarding all these figures can be found in: A S. M. Yusuf Elmi. 1987. *A Brief Look at the Sovietization of Afghanistan*. Peshawar: Afghan Jehad Works Translation Centre.

4 I met individuals from Muradkhani, a Shia-populated area in Kabul, who recounted memories of Najibullah as a young man attending their religious gatherings. They recalled how he would recite poetry and essays, which not only contributed to his understanding of religious ceremonies and literature but also honed his skills in public speaking and presentation.

5 Professor Abdullah Samandar Ghuryani, a faculty member in the sociology department specializing in philosophy, revealed that he engaged in discussions with Soviet advisors at the university, highlighting discrepancies in their philosophical understanding, including Islamic philosophy and epistemology (Ghuryani 1398, 61–81). Additionally, he contends that the Persian translation of Marx's *Capital* was subject to misinterpretation (Ghuryani 1398, 83–98). This translation was undertaken by the Tudeh Party of Iran, which wielded considerable influence on Afghan Marxists. Consequently, when numerous non-communist instructors at Kabul University were compelled to vacate their positions, some of these vacancies were filled by members of the Tudeh party (Elmi 1987, 4).

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8   Navigating "Superstition", Science, and (Non-)Belief

Religious Engineering and Dynamics of Secularism in the Democratic Republic of Vietnam, 1955–1975

Thao Nghiem

Introduction

Some years ago, scholars urged a closer investigation of communist atheism to fully understand secularism as a modern, global phenomenon (Ngo and Quijada 2015). Contrary to the "Western" Weberian model of secularism, that is, a gradual "disenchantment"/cultural rationalization of society (Weber, Fischoff and Parsons 1971), communist cases offer valuable insights into the disappearance of the sacred as a state-sponsored project. Put differently, it represents a form of coerced secularization imposed by the State. In this sense, to borrow Kenneth Dean and Peter van der Veer's term, secularism in communist countries can be better understood as a "political project" rather than a "historical process" (Dean and Veer 2019, 2). Much research has been conducted on the atheist propaganda of communist regimes, their attacks on religion, and the subsequent effects and aftermath in Soviet Russia, Ukraine (Luehrmann 2011; Wanner 2012; Smolkin 2018), China (M. M. Yang 2008; Goossaert and Palmer 2011; Yang 2012), and other Soviet republics (Pelkmans 2009; Quijada 2019). However, there remains limited scholarship on other communist cases such as North Korea, Laos, and Vietnam.

This paper aims to address this gap by examining the Vietnamese state-sanctioned promotion of communist atheism during the Second Indochina War (1955–1975). Drawing on primary sources collected from the Vietnam National Archives Center III and the National Library in Hanoi, this study seeks to understand how top leaders of the Democratic Republic of Vietnam (hereafter DRV) employed atheist propaganda as a form of nation-building and how they navigated the question of religion and the boundaries between religion and superstition in their governance. Despite certain similarities with other communist cases, such as a new-found obsession with science and technology, and a determined drive toward modernization, how does the Vietnamese case further illuminate the communist perspectives on atheism in the 20th century? This paper seeks to address three questions: How were ideas of communist atheism incorporated into the DRV's post-colonial state-building? What constituted legitimate forms of religiosity, thus accepted and tolerated? What was considered superstition, thus needing to be eradicated? To answer these questions, I delve into the design and implementation of selected State formal

initiatives, such as the New Life Movement, the Anti-Superstition Campaign, and the establishment of patriotic religious associations.

The study argues that, contrary to general assumptions, the Vietnamese communist State did not aim to systematically exterminate religion. Instead, it sought to confine religion in its own sphere and to co-opt and compromise religion in service of socialist state-building. This conclusion is reached by demonstrating that, in communist Vietnam, the religious and the secular did not exist in mutual opposition, but their interactions instead formed a trinary relationship of atheism-religion-superstition. This finding echoes similar developments in China (Nedostup 2009; Tay 2019) and Japan (Josephson 2012; Maxey 2014). As such, the tripartite paradigm complicates a conventional religious/secular dichotomy and reveals its historical peculiarities and local variations, thus showing how these universal categories were not simply imported, but actively appropriated and transformed by local actors, relying on existing intellectual frameworks and contemporary political requirements. The tensions and inconsistencies once again confirm that we should not look at religion as a bracketed domain of social and cultural life, but locate it through its deep entanglement with politics and culture. The findings, therefore, expand our understanding of the nature and limits of secularism as a fundamental facet of modernity.

The New Life Campaign: Atheism and the Production of Socialists Rites of Passage

The New Life Campaign was launched in 1946, but the long anti-French war disrupted any realistic achievements it hoped to attain. Upon regaining independence in the North, the DRV revived and expanded this ambitious project, tasked with creating and promoting new socialist rituals to replace traditional life-cycle ceremonies and their meaning-making function in people's lives. This radical cultural endeavor entailed challenges faced by a post-colonial State, in which the fledgling regime needed to forge a new promise of nationhood and citizenship that generated and mandated loyalty to the State, instead of allegiance to local religious affiliations. The invented Socialist Rites of Passage, for this reason, served two main purposes. First, they were designed to fight against "feudalism" – to break old social bonds and to terminate any affective dependence on the supernatural. With these rites, people were to become masters of their own lives and to believe in the proletariat's own strength, centered on their labor and production. Second, they promoted the central role of the Party, with cultural houses and workers' clubs – the Party's presence in local life, construed as new "civic temples" where people rested and entertained after work, celebrated their life's milestones, and found their sense of belonging. The Party-State's presence and active role in these intimate moments of life invoked people's compliance and obedience. In the Soviet Union, historian Victoria Smolkin's documentation of State efforts provides insight into the suppression of traditional religions, the promotion of atheistic beliefs, and the establishment of a new civil religion, centered on the sacralized images of the State and the Party (Smolkin 2018). Similarly, in Hungary, the Institute

of Public Education was tasked with developing a new set of secular rituals as alternatives to religious rites of passage, fitting ideas and standards of the new "socialist way of life" (Tóth 2016).

One significant area targeted for reorganization was rituals related to weddings and marriage, where feudal social relations were most evident. The new marital regime aimed to reflect the State's values of freedom, progressiveness, and egalitarianism. The vision for this new marital order was initially codified in the Law of Marriage and Family, ratified by the National Assembly on 29 December 1959. This legislation abolished several feudal marital customs, including polygamy, underage marriage, and forced or pre-arranged marriages. Additionally, it established a minimum marriageable age of 18 for girls and 20 for boys. By enforcing the novel principle of "one wife, one husband", the State planned to revolutionize former domestic relations and promote gender equality. Furthermore, the State professed its sole authority over validating marital unions. Article 11 prescribed that marriages must be approved by the local administrative authority of either the groom's or the bride's place of residence, declaring that "all other forms of marriage ceremony were not legally valid".[1]

Not only did the State seek to redefine permissible forms of marriage, it also exerted extensive control over the organization of wedding ceremonies. Traditionally, pre-revolutionary weddings involved pre-meetings between two families to agree on ceremony dates and dowry amounts. On the wedding day, the groom, accompanied by relatives and friends, would escort the bride from her home to his in an important ceremony called "Welcoming the Bride". At each of their houses, the couple made offerings to their ancestors and asked for permission to marry, while the families introduced their members and relatives to each other. At the groom's home, senior male kin delivered speeches to formalize the marriage, welcoming the new in-laws into the family. These ceremonies were followed by elaborate feasts on both sides to celebrate the new conjugal union. When the cultural reform was introduced, weddings relocated from private homes to village's cultural houses, with ceremonial speeches redirected to local officials instead of senior family members. Detailed guidelines were introduced to standardize celebrations, recommending quantities of meat, poultry, and wine to be served, and discouraging excessive festivities. To save resources, local administrations were advised to organize so-called "collective" weddings, in which multiple couples were married in a single ceremony, followed by a modest reception featuring tea, cigarettes, and biscuits (Malarney 2002, 150).

The general rules for organizing new life-cycle ceremonies were drafted in the "Conventions of the New Life", purportedly discussed and agreed upon by local villagers. The core standards for new rituals were "simplicity" and "frugality". Table 8.1 demonstrates drastic changes in wedding celebrations among residents of a commune in Bac Giang. The former practice of classifying girls based on their family status was abolished, and the quantities of food and beverages permitted at weddings were remarkably reduced. In the same report, a "model" wedding between a certain Ly Giao Lien and his bride Trieu Mui Thong in 1959 was highly praised. Held at the administrative committee's headquarters,

Table 8.1 Changes in wedding ceremonies of Thong Nguyen commune, Ha Giang province (1962)[3]

| | Pre-revolutionary society | | | The New Life |
	Girls from wealthy families	Girls from average families	Girls from poor families	All girls
Wedding payment (dong)	160	120	70	30
Pork used in wedding ceremonies (kg)	1000	800	600	180
Rice (kg)	800	700	400	250
Wine (kg)	700	500	300	150
Chicken (kg)	300	100	80	40

the wedding was officiated by Mr. Phan Giao Chau, the Party's district official. Despite hosting 124 guests, the wedding only cost two bags of pumpkin seeds and one kilogram of tea.[2]

The Bac Can Cultural Office documented changes in wedding ceremonies within local communes, such as Viet Thang, where the tradition of bowing to ancestors and family members was abolished. Similarly, villagers in Bang Lang ceased the practice of consulting auspicious dates for marriages or building new houses.[4] The Bac Can Convention introduced some additional rules: eliminating the wedding payment in silver or gold and the practice of compensating matchmakers, reducing the amount of offering to ancestors (sticky rice cake, sugar, betel and areca), and canceling burdensome and "irrational" customs, such as choosing the direction to enter the house, stepping on the bride's footprints, hanging the groom's pants on the threshold for the bride to pass, or covering the stove when the bride entered the house.[5]

If weddings primarily regulate relationships with the living, funerals are rituals designed to adjust one's connection with the dead. In Vietnamese tradition, a funeral does not mark one's end point, but merely signifies a transition from the earthly realm to the afterlife. For this reason, funerary practices are geared to assist the deceased in this transitional journey or to ensure their "smooth" start in the afterlife. The reformist DRV leaders were determined to change the form and content of funerary practices, specifically targeting their supernatural aspects. Funerary reforms were meticulously crafted to advance the new ideals of the revolutionary State, that is, to cleanse them of any references to metaphysical relations, to promote a secular worldview, and to exhibit the egalitarian nature of the new socialist society (Malarney 1996). The Party-State banned outright any funeral rituals that showed an attempt to communicate with the spirit world, eliminating any notion of the living seeking divine intervention. To achieve this, the Party outlawed the tradition of selecting astrologically auspicious burial times, a common practice in the pre-revolutionary society. Instead, deceased individuals were to be buried promptly after death, typically within 24–48 hours, to promote

public health and hygiene. A report from Viet Bac complained about practices observed by some ethnic groups to keep the body inside the house for 7–15 days, during which time the deceased's children were prohibited from washing their faces, brushing their teeth, or consuming meat.[6] These customs were discontinued as part of the New Life reforms. Here, the secular agenda of public health – a marker of modernity – served to justify a sweeping alternation of centuries-old practices, seen as remnants of antiquated mindsets. Ceremonies involving any form of contact with the spirit world, such as summoning the souls of the dead or burning votive paper objects, were strictly forbidden. Shamans were prohibited from making offerings or accepting donations. Instead, citizens were instructed to hold respectful, simple, and solemn funerals solely to express affection and commemorate the deceased's lives, without attempting to contact or manipulate the spirit world on their behalf.

Like weddings, the Party expanded its role in people's funerary practices, asserting its presence during these key life events. The reform requested more active participation of local cadres, occupying roles previously assumed by family members or religious clergy. A "funeral committee" replaced the shaman's central role, with cooperatives tasked with supporting members in organizing funerals.[7] In Viet Bac, cooperatives were instructed to assist their members according to a set "quota" for each funeral at "100 kg rice, 15 m textile, 30 kg meat, 1 coffin, and 20 labor units".[8] The New Life conventions criticized the wastefulness of traditional funerary practices, promoting the new "quick" and "frugal" funerals. Resources should be prioritized toward economic recovery and socialist construction. For this reason, as in weddings, conventions specified acceptable quantities of food. A guideline from Viet Bac permitted the slaughter of one pig and "some" poultry to host close family members, relatives, and burial assistants. Bac Can province established a standard of 40 kg of meat for each funeral.[9] Multiple-day feasts, as traditionally observed, were abolished.

Reports from local cultural offices indicate that cadres were mindful of the sensitivity surrounding funerary reforms. Funerals served as occasions for villagers to express their "sentiments" *(tinh cam)* and support for one another, while also demonstrating filial piety to their ancestors, a fundamental value in Confucian morality. Large feasts and multi-day gatherings were seen as tangible expressions of deep sorrow for the deceased, and hosting such events and showing hospitality to guests allowed children to fulfill their duties to their late parents. Acknowledging the need for gradual change, a common approach was to enlist "gatekeepers" within each community. These families, having good reputations and being respected among the communities and loyal to the Party, would implement changes in funerary practices according to new standards, facilitating acceptance and adherence among the people. One notable example is the Duong family of the H'Mong ethnic group. According to the H'Mong tradition, the deceased's body would be left in the open, inside the house, for several days after death awaiting the return of family and relatives. The Duong family pioneered encouraging fellow villagers to change their "unhygienic" habits by placing the

body in a coffin. Before his death, elder Duong Van Lu instructed his children to use a coffin for his funeral:

> Our family has followed the Party all our lives, and our children and grand-children often work according to the Party's call. The Party and the people have worked diligently to cure me, but I could not recover because of my old age and weak health. When I pass away, please put me in a coffin to maintain hygiene for my children and grandchildren.[10]

Challenges and Resistance

Efforts to rapidly transform people's cultural lives proved challenging, as the New Life Campaign encountered numerous obstacles. These setbacks generally fell into three categories: ideological, material, and personnel challenges.

First, the Party grappled with the task of convincing both the general populace and lower-ranking cadres of the importance of cultural initiatives. Some cadres openly criticized the resources spent on constructing cultural houses and developing performing art programs, arguing for their redirection toward economic development,[11] while others were concerned that cultural activities would divert attention away from production.[12] On one occasion, the deputy minister had to directly meet with the board of directors of Gia Lam Train Factory to persuade them about the advantages of setting up a cultural club.[13] Reports to the Ministry of Culture highlighted the low cultural proficiency of local cadres at the commune level, indicating a need for extra education and training. For instance, in Thanh Hoa province, officials cited the failure of several projects due to the inadequate literacy of committee members responsible for cultural work. In one district, the cultural official could not even read and write well.[14]

Second, the Vietnamese revolutionaries were also facing remarkable material deficits. In Kien An province, cadres of the Cultural Office reported financial constraints in establishing a library, complaining that funding was often redirected to organizing exhibitions and other activities. Despite a promised allocation of four million dong from the Ministry of Finance, this funding was never delivered.[15]

Last, most issues appeared to be personnel-related. In Interzone III, "embarrassing" incidents involving members of performance troupes engaging with village girls in Ha Dong province led to public outcry. Villagers attributed these scandals to the "romantic" atmosphere ignited by cultural activities and called to boycott them to protect their women.[16] More importantly, internal disagreements emerged regarding the implementation of new conventions, particularly in rituals associated with familial ties. Changes in funeral practices elicited confusion and discord. In Viet Bac, tension arose when families of war dead invited local shamans to perform funeral ceremonies for the deceased. Common people also expressed their resistance. When forced to hold a simple funeral, some villagers complained: "Nowadays, dead people are not even as respected as animals".[17] As such, Party cadres were faced with a dilemma: on the one hand, following official instructions, and on the other hand, showing veneration to their deceased parents by holding a lavish

funeral as a marker of filial piety. Reports indicated that some cadres chose to ignore orders: a certain H.T., a juror of the Tuyen Quang Provincial People's Court, hosted a three-day funeral for his father, inviting sorcerers and throwing abundant banquets with a team of up to 150 servers.[18] Others abstained from attending family funerals altogether, fearing that they could not stop family members from violating the New Life conventions.[19] These divergent responses revealed varying degrees of resistance, both among the people and within the Party ranks, as the top leadership sought to impose a sweepingly over-simplified and over-politicized view of old life-cycle ceremonies. They insisted that these practices were merely set up by dynastic rulers to sustain their political power and uphold unequal social relations.

The new Rites of Passage initiated a significant transformation in the population's cultural life, that is, a new worldview devoid of gods and spirits. The Party installed atheist rituals as the new standard, promoting trust solely in this-worldly realm: the Party's leadership. These atheist rituals necessitated that citizens of the DRV redirect their loci of trust and resources to immanent concerns, particularly the nation's reconstruction and economic development. These efforts collectively formed the first pillar of the tripartite relationship: atheism. Notably, the 1959 Constitution reaffirmed the government's commitment to freedom of religion or belief, explicitly protecting the right "to follow or not to follow a religion" in Chapter III, Article 26.[20] It should be acknowledged that this concept of non-adherence to any religion was relatively novel to the traditional Vietnamese commoner, whose worldview was often shaped by the traditional "Three Religions" *(Tam giao dong nguyen)* of Buddhism-Confucianism-Taoism. The introduction of Catholicism had already created tensions within this traditional framework, but it still involved the conversion from one religion to another. The idea of omitting faith altogether was unprecedented, particularly as it was officially introduced and guaranteed by the highest political authority. "Non-belief" became a viable and favored choice. In promoting this new, somewhat foreign concept, the Party also actively combated what it perceived as its antithesis: superstition.

The Cult of Science and the Anti-Superstition Campaign

The underlying rationale to eradicate superstition was that these beliefs and practices were "backward", "irrational", or "unscientific", thus hindering the country's progress toward modernization. This initiative was grounded in the leaders' growing enthusiasm for the potential and power of science and technology, a sentiment not uncommon among countries in the communist Bloc. Science and technology were elevated, seen as solutions not only for industrial and economic challenges but also for bringing about ideological and political changes.[21] Science, as a result, was assigned a central role in the creation of a "new socialist person", holding the power to dethrone the influence of religion and superstition over the masses. Against this backdrop, in March 1959, the Vice Minister of Education Nguyen Khanh Toan announced the establishment of a "State Science Committee", tasked with leading, organizing, and coordinating research across various scientific disciplines to advance the revolution.[22] One central mission of this committee was

to fight against "superstition", which, according to the vice minister, prevailed not only among the working class but also among the intelligentsia and scientific circles. The technical and cultural revolution, considered part and parcel of the socialist revolution, must therefore go together. The creation of the State Science Committee in 1959 showcased the DRV's fascination with technology and an emphasis on modernization in its state-building. Science was championed as the ultimate remedy for backwardness, serving as an ideal antidote to cure people's "mental obstacles" toward progress.

As the communist regime sought to enforce secularization and modernization, they established and disseminated certain normative categories such as religion, superstition, popular belief, and magic. These are ideologically and politically charged signifiers. By categorizing certain practices as "superstition" or "magic", communist rulers portrayed them as remnants of feudalism, thus positioning them as primary targets in their campaign against the old societal order. The eradication of these customs was deemed essential for liberating the masses. However, the delineations between these categories, in practice, are far from clear-cut. As scholars of communism have highlighted, efforts to denounce certain faith traditions as irrational and declare war against the power of the sacred often involved the utilization and evocation of the very power and sensibilities that religion supposedly relinquished. In the Soviet Union, for instance, the Party attempted to recreate certain forms of "public rituals" to inspire a collective emotion and morality, closely resembling "sacred values and goals" (Lane 1981; Stites 1989; Steinberg and Wanner 2008). The head of State was channeled into a devotional cult, venerated as a saint and prophet (Tumarkin 1983). Similarly, in communist China, following the excesses and destruction of the Cultural Revolution, top leaders crafted a new discourse of socialism "with Chinese characteristics", a label under which certain spiritual practices could be deliberately rebranded as expressions of national character and tradition. This included the revival of neo-Confucian ethics and the legitimization of practices like *qi-gong* – once condemned for their feudal and magical associations – as state-sanctioned forms of "traditional" medicine and scientifically endorsed techniques in service of public health (Tu and Tucker 2003; Yang and Tamney 2012; Veer 2014). These boundary shifts were contested among policymakers, cultural officials, Marxist ideologues, and scientists, reflecting not only conceptual formation and transformation but also power struggles and particular political calculations.

The Anti-Superstition Campaign

Following the restoration of independence in the North, traditional village festivals resumed after being disrupted by years of war. Together with these celebrations, various practices that had spiritual connotations were also reenacted, causing significant concerns for the Ministry of Culture. Founded in September 1955, the Ministry of Culture was tasked with developing "optimistic and healthy cultural activities" to inspire productivity and political struggle while enhancing the "cultural level of the masses".[23] From the very beginning, eliminating superstition was

deemed crucial for this political struggle, since the Party asserted that "we cannot bring a superstitious mindset to building socialism, because superstition is identical to backwardness and poverty".[24] Consequently, certain practices were prohibited as "anti-scientific" and detrimental to the people's well-being,[25] labeled as "superstitious vices" and "immoral practices and depraved customs".[26] These practices included, but were not limited to, making offerings to the stars to ward off bad luck (*cung sao giai han*), cleromancy (*soc the*), fortune telling (*boi toan*), burning of votive papers (*dot vang ma*), and mediumship (*len dong*).

Struggling between adhering to the recently announced decree on religious freedom[27] and effecting revolutionary changes, the Ministry classified village festivals into four categories: those commemorating historical heroes and events (Dong Da, Kiep Bac, Den Hung); those celebrating the seasonal harvest; those involving scenic sightseeing and simple rituals (chua Huong festival, chua Thay festival); and those considered superstitious (Phu Giay festival, Song temple festival). The first two categories were promoted, the third managed carefully to minimize deviations, and the fourth discouraged from restoration.

Next to the management of traditional festivals, spiritual practitioners were summoned for "re-education courses" (*lop cai tao*). These courses were generally organized into two parts: (1) providing more information and clarity on religious policies and the path toward socialism, emphasizing the superiority of the new social structure, and highlighting the future prospects for peasants and the working class; and (2) exposing the origins and adverse effects of superstitious practices. In 1958 and 1959, a series of these re-education courses were held across the northern provinces. Participants included fortune tellers (*thay boi*), spirit priests (*thay cung*), ritual musicians (*cung van*), Taoist masters (*thay phu thuy*), spirit mediums (*co dong*), physiognomists (*thay tuong*), and geomancers (*thay dia ly*). Despite the significant number of spiritual practitioners documented in each area, cultural offices reported low attendance at these courses, as many were skeptical and concerned about their future. For instance, Ninh Binh reported only 130 attendees out of 360 enlisted individuals.[28] At the end of these courses, participants renounced their professions and pledged to rejoin the production force.

During these meetings, typically two main activities were featured. First, sessions included testimonies from individuals considered "victims" of superstition, who shared how advice from spiritual workers had negatively impacted themselves and their families. The second set of activities constituted what was named *phan tinh*, or a critical reflection, during which spiritual workers disclosed the secrets and techniques of their professions. Sometimes, these *phan tinh* sessions were performed publicly as a means of exposure, preventing participants from returning to their previous profession. One such performance was recorded in Phu Tho province, where participants staged a show of spirit possession on the last evening of a four-day re-education course, attended by approximately 1200 people. The performance lasted for approximately an hour, depicting a barren couple who sought a magical cure from a spirit priest. The priest allegedly summoned the spirits of General Tran Hung Dao and the Six Princes, employing a variety of miraculous gestures common in séances, including piercing his cheeks with a pin (*xien linh*),

strangling necks (*that co*), spitting burning oil (*phun dau*), pressing his foot against the red-hot knife (*di chan vao dao nung do*). One exception was that, in this case, there was a second medium who "held a speaker to explain all the false tricks in the séance… telling the mysteries that until now the spirit mediums and masters had never dared to speak publicly".[29]

These "false tricks" were later printed into propaganda booklets and widely disseminated to expose the misconduct of superstitious professionals. One such booklet, titled "The Secrets of the Professions of Selling Gods and Trading Saints", was published by the Son Tay Cultural Office in September 1959. After explaining the Party's official policy regarding religion and belief, the booklet narrated stories collected from provincial *phan tinh* sessions. Fifteen stories depicted how fortunetellers, spirit mediums, or Taoist masters employed psychological manipulation and deceptive tactics to exploit people's poor judgment. For example, master Nguyen Phu Huu in Quoc Oai admitted that to perform the miracle *tam thai*, a trick of spraying boiling oil over a woman's body to cure barrenness, he mixed boiling oil with rice wine and magnesium silicate powder (*thach lanh*) to lower the temperature. He also secretly sipped rice wine before drinking the lukewarm mixture to avoid being burnt.[30]

Challenges and Resistance

The sweeping reforms were not immediately welcomed. Reports indicate varying degrees of negotiation between the State and the people, and the lower cadres were constantly reminded that the elimination of these activities should not involve coercive measures but rather focus on long-term education and persuasion of the masses. For instance, Interzone III advised people to voluntarily abandon springtime festivals, but if they resist, cultural cadres must allow and guide villagers to organize these celebrations "in a simple manner".[31] Among the practices, wasteful feasting and killing buffaloes for rituals should definitely be banned. Similarly, the Administrative Committee of Son Tay Province told their officials not to abruptly prohibit people from offering sacrifice, but to educate and mobilize them to gradually reduce the practice. However, soliciting donations for such sacrifices from other villagers was deemed illegal and outlawed.[32] Internal debates among Party ranks were evident, with some arguing for the positive impact of traditional festivals in fostering a jovial atmosphere in rural areas and hence easing the tension caused by land reform mistakes, meeting "legitimate" needs of the people for entertainment, consolidating the sense of community, and preserving aspects of traditional culture.

Despite fervent rhetoric, cultural activities faced immense challenges in terms of organizational structure, particularly at the district and commune levels. There were insufficient cultural officials, which meant cultural work at these localities was absorbed by propaganda cadres. The machinery of the State and the Party overlapped, causing frustration and confusion, as echoed by a cultural official in Interzone 4: "[We] should not prolong the situation in which those who are members of the Propaganda and Ideological Training Committee are also directly in

charge of the provincial cultural office, causing problems for the leadership of the professional branch".[33]

Another major challenge in combating superstition was North Vietnam's multi-ethnic and multi-religious landscape. The Viet Bac Autonomous Zone, which served as the revolutionary headquarters during the war, comprised a wide array of ethnic minorities inhabiting mountainous areas. This led to two main difficulties. First, it was neither easy nor straightforward to identify the "enemy of the people". Unlike Soviet Russia, where the cultural war was primarily waged against the Russian Orthodox Church, there were far fewer of these institutionalized enemies in the mountains of Viet Bac. In fact, most shamans, fortune tellers, spirit mediums, and spirit priests were among the poor, and their ritual performances were often supplementary to their primary professions. The Viet Bac Cultural Office reported that most attendees of re-education courses were farmers, still working in the field during the day, and only performing superstitious services in their spare time.[34] Speaking at an experience-sharing conference in Hanoi, a certain cadre named Bac reported that most superstitious practitioners were poor people, even among the lowest rank of the "impoverished peasants" (*thanh phan ban nong*), most with minimal education. He listed them among the blind, disabled, abandoned wives, and those rejected by their families, collectively deemed "victims of the old society". Lacking means of livelihood, they resorted to deceitful fortune-telling to survive.[35] These observations contradicted other reports that, due to the absence of discernible enemies, Party cadres at times politicized the Anti-Superstition Campaign by viewing it solely through the lens of class struggle. In this light, quarrels over the banning of old customs were attributed to conspiracies and blamed on the lingering influence of landlords in the countryside, who were believed to be deeply hurt by the land reform and trying to orchestrate opposition to disrupt the new government's cultural agenda. For instance, in the Ta Ngan zone, the Administrative Committee suggested publicly prosecuting landlords who exploited people's beliefs.[36] Similarly, the Bac Giang Administrative Committee claimed that landlords were behind the revival of superstitious practices, manipulating fear to undermine governmental reforms.[37] This purely theoretical and overtly reductionist analysis might have hindered cadres from fully grasping the deep cultural roots and underlying factors contributing to the resurgence of village festivals, thus making their cultural program even further removed from people's realities.

Second, the cultural and religious diversity of the region posed the challenge that not one uniform approach could be readily applied. Each minority group had its own traditions and distinctive customs. In many cultural reports, State officials and cadres repeatedly emphasized the importance of understanding the diverse cultural and spiritual practices of these different ethnic groups. For instance, the Viet Bac Cultural Office instructed cultural cadres on the existence of various superstitious disciplines, such as mediumship (*dong bong*), divination by sticks (*boi que*), astrology (*boi tu vi*), card reading (*boi the*), sand divination (*boi di*), poetry divination (*boi tho*), spirit writing (*thanh giang but*), witchcraft (*phu thuy*), sorcery (*phap su*), and spiritual chanting (*cung van*), each with its own professional methods and tactics that needed to be learned separately.[38] A Resolution dated 6 November 1960

by the Viet Bac People's Council stressed the importance of understanding local customs in the Anti-Superstition Campaign: "Superstitious practices and customs vary from region to region, and among different ethnic groups […] Therefore, this campaign must be tailored to each place and each ethnic group, setting different requirements for the level of reduction or elimination, appropriate to the circumstances and level of each place and each ethnic group".[39] The Bac Can Cultural Office reminded its staff that, for the campaign to succeed, the most important factor was "to thoroughly understand the beliefs and religions of the mountainous people in specific terms".[40]

In most of these reports, cultural cadres confidently asserted that re-education courses helped spiritual workers and the general population distinguish between religion and superstition, likening the differentiation to discerning between "black and white" or "fragrance and stench".[41] Together, these campaign efforts formed the second pillar of the DRV's cultural policy: the eradication of superstition, defined as practices deemed harmful or wasteful to the production and well-being of practitioners. However, the reality showed significant confusion and ambiguity, as no categorical criteria were provided to identify superstition, resulting in differing perceptions of similar practices across various locations and ethnic groups. This showed that the definition and meaning of superstition remained obscure. The clear distinctions between religion, belief, and superstition were therefore more plainly asserted than demonstrated, suggesting that labeling something as superstitious was politically arbitrary. Nevertheless, the realities of wartime conditions meant that religion could not be immediately eradicated. This raises important questions: What place was reserved for religion in the Vietnamese communist imaginary? And how did the regime respond to the incongruence between ideological aspirations and realpolitik?

The Patriotic Religious Associations: Religions in Service of Socialism

Concluding that Vietnamese communists were outright anti-religious and found every means to exterminate religion from society would be providing an incomplete view. While deploying modernizing programs, religion was largely viewed as a retrograde factor that held the country back. Nevertheless, next to an understanding that total eradication of religion would be a long-term and gradual process, Party cadres were determined to redirect religious resources, both intellectual and material, to serve the revolutionary causes. Put differently, the DRV's treatment of religions was significantly shaped by wartime conditions. Besides superstitious forms of religion, the communist authorities sought to co-opt and control "recognized", or "legitimate", religions. These efforts were evident in the early establishment of state-friendly religious associations, envisioned to bring religious communities under the Party-State's dominion, starting with Catholics in 1955 and Buddhists in 1958. Shortly after Hanoi's liberation, the national Catholic conference was convened at the Opera House in March 1955, which established the Liaison Committee of Patriotic and Peace-Loving Catholics (LCPPC – *Uy ban lien lac nhung nguoi Cong giao yeu To quoc yeu hoa binh*), with Fr. Vu Xuan Ky as

president and the lawyer Duong Van Dam as vice president. Three years later, Buddhist delegates gathered at the Quan Su pagoda and formed the United Buddhist Sangha of Vietnam (UBSV - *Hoi Phat giao Thong nhat Viet Nam*), with Venerable Thich Tri Do as president. Among their ranks arose certain "religious spokespersons" who made public appearances and delivered unwavering support for the State's socialist agenda, and proudly defined how to be "good" believers in the new society. Speaking at a religious convention held in June 1959, one such figure, an unnamed priest of the Viet Bac LCPPC, took the stage and generously praised the economic and technological accomplishments of the Soviet Union. Directly channeling the communist exaltation for science and technology, the priest reported that in 1958, the Soviet Union successfully launched three artificial satellites and compared that to four failed attempts by the US during the same year.[42]

These "supportive" clerics played a central role in the State's Anti-Superstition Campaign. Because many of the superstitious practices were observed by Buddhists or took place at Buddhist temples, the involvement of Buddhist clergy in the cultural work was more prominent. As such, cultural offices organized public talks with monks and nuns at local pagodas, selecting those who aligned with the new cultural agenda to educate the public. For instance, in Kien An province, the Fatherland Front convened meetings with monks, nuns, and elders in Tien Lang, and a similar gathering was held at the Tru pagoda (Kien Thuy) involving 40 clerics and 200 believers. In addition, an essay authored by the chief monk Thich Tri Do, president of the UBSV, elucidating the "true" meaning of the Ghost Festival (*ram thang Bay*), was printed and widely circulated.[43] In Ninh Binh, Buddhist representatives were invited to give speeches during the provincial re-education classes, explaining the "true" origins of selected antiquated customs, e.g. burning votive paper, or tossing coins to ask for spirit approval (*xin am duong*).[44] These individuals were regarded as new religious exemplars, empowered to authoritatively distinguish between "acceptable" and "unacceptable" religious practices. The Buddhist participation in government anti-superstition activities virtually created and reinforced a religious hierarchy in the DRV. Forms of religion that supported and aligned with the new cultural agenda were protected and promoted, while others were strongly discouraged and banned.

The treatment of religion could also be examined from a pragmatic point of view. The DRV leaders were trying to govern and win the war simultaneously, a situation demanding them to rally support from every segment of the population. Internal Party documents repeatedly cautioned cadres against hasty actions that could antagonize the populace and lead to social discord. Additionally, recognizing the mobilizing potential of religion during the war, authorities expressed a willingness to engage religious communities in the pursuit of national unity. A Central Committee directive of 29 May 1968 ordered cadres to intensify their patriotic mobilization among the Buddhist, Catholic, and Cao Dai followers, protecting "normal" religious activities, prohibiting vandalism of religious sites, and granting financial subsidies to impoverished clerics. The directive reasoned that good treatment of Buddhism, Caodaism, and Protestantism in the North would enhance the government's religious legitimacy in general and thus ease their relationships

with the Catholics, and garner support, both domestically and internationally, from their fellow religionists, since Buddhism, Catholicism, and Protestantism were all major world religions.[45]

In October 1968, the LCPPC requested approval from the Central Committee for International Affairs to send a delegation to East Germany, responding to an invitation from Gerald Götting, chairman of the East German Christian Democratic Union (CDU), to attend its XII Congress. The request letter from the LCPPC Standing Committee reasoned that, since the CDU Congress was a large event gathering Catholic delegations from multiple countries, it was a prime opportunity to propagate Vietnam's "just war of resistance, the correct path of the Party and the State towards the revolution in general, and specifically towards religions".[46] In November 1973, the Prime Minister's Office approved another request to send a delegation of (North) Vietnamese Catholics to attend the Third International Christian Solidarity Conference with the Peoples of Vietnam, Laos, and Cambodia in Turin, Italy. All costs, including airfares, visa fees, daily expenses, and even "allowances for souvenirs", were sponsored by the State.[47] From this perspective, religion became a tool for diplomacy and international relations.

As can be seen, in communist Vietnam, religious practices could still be tolerated and accepted, as long as they were "modern", "logical", and "hygienic", or most importantly, reminiscent of national heroes and the country's struggle against foreign invasion. These "tolerated" forms of religion comprise the third anchor in the tripartite relationships of atheism-superstition-religion. In this model, religion survived and was given a designated space, with narrow parameters laid down by the State, once it rebranded itself in service of the nation. This process is an act of "immanentization" of the sacred, that is, believers' attempt to reimagine their religions within the "immanent frame", to insert the spiritual into the temporal, engaging in appeals to otherworldly forces for earthly purposes, that is, independence and peace for their country.

Discussion and Conclusion

The DRV's processes of governing religions, constructing new rituals, and altering people's cultural life uncovered multiple points of contention and inconsistency. While some cadres seemed to unequivocally articulate the State's clear cultural vision, portraying religion as a detrimental residue of old societies, and religious groups as nurturing "reactionary" elements, other offices maintained a more moderate stance. These voices advocated for a more gradual approach, emphasizing the primacy of education and propaganda over coercive measures. One way to reconcile these discrepancies, as historians and political scientists of successive Soviet governments have maintained, is to view them through the very tension between, on one hand, the "fundamentalists", who were ideologically committed and determined to drive out religion "by whatever means it takes", and the "pragmatists", who were more moderate and prepared to subordinate religious policy to more urgent national concerns (Bociurkiw 1973; Anderson 1994). These two schools of thought formed a spectrum and revealed the complexity of interactions

between political and religious forces under communist regimes, that it was always more than "a simple story of religion standing opposed to modernization or being supplanted by it" (Steinberg and Wanner 2008, 5). Acknowledging these broad possibilities of responses helps us escape a simple binary approach of suppression/ resistance and more wholly embrace the diverse modes of communist secularism. In short, the DRV's policy toward religion and belief was framed by communist ideals of modernization, manifested in its systematic control and rigid surveillance of religious institutions and activities. Nevertheless, wartime conditions necessitated pragmatic choices, motivating authorities to mobilize and collaborate with religious groups to achieve the larger goals of independence and reunification.

The interactions between secular power and the sacred formed a tripartite relationship between atheism-religion-superstition, encompassing other fluid categories such as "science", "politics", "tradition", "belief", and "custom". The act of labeling a practice under one of these categories also shows how the religious was actively instrumentalized by the political. For example, the Party often instructed cultural cadres to classify local spiritual customs into different groups, such as "positive", "valuable", "neutral", or "harmful" customs. This categorization required not only the individual's good understanding of the practice's origin and meaning, but was also usually steered by a particular political calculation. The entwined relationships between these categories negate a direct, classical religious/ secular opposition, as well as their strict separation. The secular is not necessarily anti-religious, and processes of secularization do not necessarily lead to religious disappearance or extermination, but rather to its transformation. If anything, the arrival of the secular expands the "religious field", launching the secular State as a new player. It established its new set of (atheist) beliefs, a new band of trained "clergy", i.e. bureaucratic officials and cultural cadres, and steadily accumulated its own group of adherents. While the secular State did not succeed in its mission of driving out religion, it forever changed the "religious field" by introducing non-belief as a viable religious option.

Last, these ambivalences and fluid categories inspire new directions for future research. While this paper primarily focuses on the policies and strategies of the DRV, it was by no means the only actor operating within these "fissures". Future projects could look into how local communities and indigenous practitioners found creative ways to appropriate these categories and change their labels, for example, from "superstition" to markers of "traditional culture" or "national identity". In other words, they navigated categorization for their protection and survival. Furthermore, the gaps and tensions between the national and the local, the elitist view and society, or even among different echelons of the State apparatus, can be best understood within the framework of the paradoxes of re-framing religious pluralism, that of traditional Vietnamese culture, with a novel exclusivist worldview. While promoting atheism as the new standard, the State simultaneously approved certain forms of religiosity while outlawing others deemed as backward or superstitious. It effectively assumed the role of quasi-priest, making theological judgments and adjudicating between orthodoxies and heterodoxies. At the same time, the State inserted and introduced itself as the new main subject of worship, propagating its

role as a key provider of both material and emotional needs for the people. This aspect of the Vietnamese State's secularism was not the main focus of this paper, thus inviting future research to explore how the Vietnamese State blurred the lines between the secular and the religious while implementing its secularization agenda. In what way did the DRV sacralize its ideals and images to win people's loyalty, filling the void previously occupied by traditional religious practices, and exploiting the very modes and feelings of religiosity that they normatively and publicly preached against? Such inquiries would further elucidate the complexities of these boundaries and the entangled dynamics of religion with broader socio-cultural and political changes.

Notes

1 Vietnam National Archive Center III (hereafter VNACIII), Cong Bao [Government Gazette], "Luat Hon Nhan va Gia Dinh" [Law of Marriage and Family], 1960, 4:54–7.
2 VNACIII, Fonds: Administrative Committee of the Viet Bac Autonomous Zone, dossier 10010, "Bao cao thuc hien Nep song moi o xa Thong Nguyen, huyen Bao Quang, Ha Giang" [Report on the New Life Campaign in Thong Nguyen commune, Bac Quang district, Ha Giang province], p. 10.
3 Assembled by the author according to VNACIII, Fonds: Administrative Committee of the Viet Bac Autonomous Zone, dossier 10010, "Bao cao thuc hien Nep song moi o xa Thong Nguyen, huyen Bao Quang, Ha Giang".
4 VNACIII, Fonds: Administrative Committee of the Viet Bac Autonomous Zone, Bac Can Cultural Office, dossier 9756, "Bao cao ve Quy uoc giam bot hu tuc Me tin" [Report on the Convention on Reducing Superstitious Practices].
5 VNACIII, Fonds: Administrative Committee of the Viet Bac Autonomous Zone, Bac Can Cultural Office, dossier 9756, "Ban Phu luc bo sung cho Quy Uoc Giam bot Ma chay Cuoi xin va mot so te tuc o Nong thon" [Additional Appendix to the Convention on Reduction of Wedding and Funeral Requirements, and Outdated Customs in the Rural Area].
6 VNACIII, Fonds: Administrative Committee of the Viet Bac Autonomous Zone, dossier 10228, "Bao cao Tong ket Phong trao Van dong Nep Song Moi trong toan Khu" [Summary Report of the New Life Campaign in the whole Zone], p. 5.
7 Traditional spiritual specialists have their own titles and rankings, each with different religious competence and duties. They often include the shaman (thay tao): the highest form of diviner, usually know Chinese and can recite Chinese texts, can host funerals, perform fortune telling or magical healing; the witch (thay mo): one less ranking, who can still make offerings to the spirits and perform magical healing; and the then and but (lesser ranks of diviners): must be appointed by the shamans, can make offering to relieve bad luck but cannot host funerals. These explanations are derived from VNACIII, Fonds: Ministry of Culture, Bac Can Cultural Office, dossier 193, "Bao cao tinh hinh thuc hien quy uoc giam bot ma chay cuoi xin va mot so te tuc khac o vung thap tinh Bac Kan tu 1959 den nay" [Report on the implementation of conventions to reduce spending in funerals, weddings, and some other bad customs in Bac Kan province from 1959 to present], p. 9.
8 VNACIII, Fonds: Ministry of Culture, Bac Can Cultural Office, dossier 193, "Bao cao tinh hinh thuc hien quy uoc giam bot ma chay cuoi xin va mot so te tuc khac o vung thap tinh Bac Kan tu 1959 den nay".
9 VNACIII, Fonds: Ministry of Culture, Bac Can Cultural Office, dossier 193, "Bao cao tinh hinh thuc hien quy uoc giam bot ma chay cuoi xin va mot so te tuc khac o vung thap tinh Bac Kan tu 1959 den nay".

10 VNACIII, Fonds: Administrative Committee of the Viet Bac Autonomous Zone, dossier 193, "Bao cao cua ban gia truong dong ho Duong" [Report of the elders of the Duong Family], p. 12.

11 VNACIII, Fonds: Ministry of Culture, Bac Ninh Cultural Office, dossier 3105, "Bao cao Tong ket v/v xay dung cong tac van hoa va Nha Van hoa thi diem o xa Quoc Tuan, Vo Giang" [Summary Report on Cultural Work and the Pilot Cultural House in Quoc Tuan commune, Vo Giang], p. 14.

12 VNACIII, Fonds: Ministry of Culture, Bac Ninh Cultural Office, dossier 3105, "Bao cao Tong ket v/v xay dung cong tac van hoa va Nha Van hoa thi diem o xa Quoc Tuan, Vo Giang", p. 17.

13 VNACIII, Fonds: Ministry of Culture, dossier 07, "Tong ket Hoi nghi Thi diem Nha Van hoa Nong thon toan mien Bac" [Final Report on the Pilot Conference on Rural Cultural Houses throughout the North].

14 VNACIII, Fonds: Ministry of Culture, Quang Binh Cultural Office, "Bao cao tong ket cong tac van hoa nam 1956 o Quang Binh" [Summary report of cultural activities in 1956 in Quang Binh], dossier 14, p. 18.

15 VNACIII, Fonds: Ministry of Culture, Kien An Cultural Office, dossier 3105, "Bao cao Tinh hinh tien hanh xay dung nha Thu vien tinh Kien An" [Report on the Construction Progress of Kien An Provincial Library], p. 31.

16 VNACIII, Fonds: Revolutionary and Administrative Committee of Interzone III, Ha Dong Cultural Office, dossier 3647, "Bao cao Cong tac thi diem Nha Van hoa xa" [Report on the Pilot Cultural House].

17 VNACIII, Fonds: Administrative Committee of the Autonomous Zone Viet Bac, dossier 10821, "Bao cao Tong ket Phong trao Van dong Nep Song Moi" [Summary Report of the New Life Campaign], p. 8.

18 VNACIII, Fonds: Administrative Committee of the Autonomous Zone Viet Bac, dossier 10228, "Bao cao Tong ket Phong trao Van dong Nep Song Moi trong toan Khu" [Summary Report on the New Life Campaign throughout the Entire Zone], p. 8.

19 VNACIII, Fonds: Administrative Committee of the Autonomous Zone Viet Bac, dossier 10821, "Bao cao Tong ket Phong trao Van dong Nep Song Moi", p. 8.

20 English translations of these articles are taken from the government's white book on religion: The Government Committee for Religious Affairs, "Religion and Policies Regarding Religion in Vietnam" (Government Committee for Religious Affairs, 2006).

21 For more on the Soviet Union and Scientism, see Graham (1993); Slezkine (1994); Andrews (2003).

22 *Hoc Tap* [The Study], 03/1959.

23 VNACIII, Fonds: Ministry of Culture, dossier 2, "Bao cao tong quat tinh hinh hoat dong van hoa cua nuoc Viet Nam Dan Chu Cong Hoa trong hai nam hoa binh (tu thang 1 nam 1955 den thang 9 nam 1956" [General report of the DRV's cultural activities in the two years of peace (from January 1955 to September 1956)]. Quoted according to Ninh (2002, 169).

24 Vietnam National Library, Ha Bac Cultural Office, 1963, "Bai tru me tin di doan" [Eliminating Superstitions], p. 10.

25 VNACIII, Fonds: Ministry of Culture, Administrative Committee of the Ta Ngan Zone, dossier 47, "Thong tu ve viec ngan chan hu tuc me tin di doan" [Circular on deterring supersititous practices]. VNACIII, Fonds: Ministry of Culture, Son tay Cultural Office, dossier 97, "Bao cao tong ket lop giao duc cai tao nhung nguoi lam nghe me tin di doan khoa 4 mo o Quang Oai va Bat Dat" [Summary report of the 4th re-education course for superstitious practitioners in Quang Oai and Bat Dat].

26 VNACIII, Fonds: Administrative Committee of Interzone III, dossier 3670, "De cuong lanh dao hoi he, van dong, giao duc nhan dan tru bo me tin di doan, doi phong bai tuc trong dong xuan" [Proposal for organizing festivals, mobilizing and educating people to eliminate superstition and corrupt customs in winter and spring].

27 Decree 234/SL on the Religious Question was issued on 14 June 1955.

28 VNACIII, Fonds: Ministry of Culture, Ninh Binh Cultural Office, dossier 97, "Bao cao ket qua lop thi diem giao duc nhung nguoi lam nghe me tin di doan tai huyen Yen Khanh" [Report on the results of a pilot class to educate superstitious practitioners in Yen Khanh district], p. 13.

29 VNACIII, Fonds: Ministry of Culture, Phu Tho Cultural Office, dossier 97, "Bao cao ket qua viec mo lop thi diem cai tao nhung nguoi lam nghe me tin di doan tai huyen Tam Nong (tu ngay 1 den ngay 6/7/1959)" [Report on the results of a pilot class to educate superstitious practitioners in Tam Nong district], p. 26.

30 Vietnam National Library, Son Tay Cultural Office, 1959, "Nhung Bi Mat Trong Nghe Buon Than Ban Thanh" [The Secrets of the Professions of Selling Gods and Trading Saints].

31 VNACIII, Fonds: Administrative Committee of Interzone III, dossier 3670, "De cuong lanh dao hoi he".

32 VNACIII, Fonds: Ministry of Culture, Administrative Committee of the Son Tay Province, dossier 47, "Thong tri ve viec ngan ngua nhung hien tuong me tin di doan" [Announcement on preventing superstitious practices].

33 VNACIII, Fonds: Ministry of Culture, dossier 7, "Bien ban Hoi nghi Van Hoa LK4 ngay 27 va 28/9/1956" [Record of the proceedings of the Conference on Culture of Interzone 4, 27–28 September 1956]. Quoted according to Ninh (2002, 172).

34 VNACIII, Fonds: The Viet Bac Interregional Administrative Committee (1948–1956) and the Administrative Committee of the Autonomous Zone Viet Bac (1956–1976), dossier 1958, "May kinh nghiem dau tien ve mo lop cai tao nhung nguoi lam nghe me tin o nong thon" [Some initial experiences in organizing re-education classes for those engaged in superstitious professions in rural areas], pp. 1–5.

35 VNACIII, Fonds: State Planning Committee, Period 1955–1995, dossier 20747, "Kinh nghiem ve viec mo nhung lop cai tao tu tuong cho nhung nguoi lam nghe me tin di doan" [Experience in organizing re-education classes for those engaged in superstitious professions], pp. 33–35.

36 VNACIII, Fonds: Ministry of Culture, Administrative Committee of the Ta Ngan Zone, dossier 47, "Thong tu ve viec ngan chan hu tuc me tin di doan" [Circular on deterring supersititous practices].

37 VNACIII, Fonds: Ministry of Culture, Administrative Committee of the Bac Giang Province, dossier 47, "Thong tri ve viec ngan ngua cac hu phong hu tuc, me tin, di doan, te lau cua xa hoi cu hien dang lac dac choi day o mot so dia phuong trong tinh" [Announcement on preventing old social superstitious practices that are now sporadically resurfacing in some localities in the province].

38 VNACIII, Fonds: Administrative Committee of the Autonomous Zone Viet Bac, dossier 2259, "May kinh nghiem dau tien ve mo lop cai tao nhung nguoi lam nghe me tin o nong thon" [Some initial experiences in reeducation courses for those engaged in superstitious professions in rural areas], p. 3.

39 VNACIII, Fonds: Administrative Committee of the Autonomous Zone Viet Bac, dossier 2440, "Nghi Quyet cua Hoi dong nhan dan Khu Tu tri Viet Bac khoa hai, hop ky thu nhat ve mo cuoc van dong 'xoa bo va giam dan te tuc me tin di doan'" [Resolution of the People's Council of the Viet Bac Autonomous Region, second term, first session, on launching the campaign "Eliminate and gradually reduce superstitious practices"], pp. 97–98.

40 VNACIII, Fonds: Administrative Committee of the Autonomous Zone Viet Bac, Bac Can Cultural Office, dossier 9756, "Tinh hinh me tin va Te tuc o Bac Can trong nam 1959" [The Situation of Bad Customs and Superstitious Practices in Bac Can in 1959], pp. 12–22.

41 VNACIII, Fonds: Ministry of Culture, Phu Tho Cultural Office, dossier 97, "Bao cao ket qua viec mo lop thi diem cai tao nhung nguoi lam nghe me tin di doan tai huyen Tam Nong", p. 25.

42 VNACIII, Fonds: Administrative Committee of the Autonomous Zone Viet Bac, dossier 2259, "Bao cao Tinh hinh phong trao Cong giao thi dua yeu nuoc nam 1958, va tu dau nam 1959 den nay cua Uy ban Lien lac Cong giao khu Viet Bac" [Report on the situation

of Catholic patriotic movement in 1958 and from the beginning of 1959 to present by the Liaison Committee of Patriotic and Peace-Loving Catholics of the Viet Bac zone].

43 VNACIII, Fonds: Administrative Committee of the Ta Ngan Zone, Kien An Cultural Office, dossier 941, "Bao cao ket qua cong tac tuyen truyen van dong giam bot chi tieu trong ngay ram thang 7" ["Report on the results of propaganda work to reduce expenses on the full moon day of the 7th month"], p. 45.

44 VNACIII, Fonds: Ministry of Culture, Ninh Binh Cultural Office, dossier 97, "Bao cao ket qua lop thi diem giao duc nhung nguoi lam nghe me tin di doan tai huyen Yen Khanh", p. 15.

45 VNACIII, Fonds: Ministry of Education, dossier 14855, "Chi thi ve cong tac van dong dong bao theo dao Phat, dao Cao Dai, dao Tin Lanh truoc tinh hinh va nhiem vu moi" [Directive 161-CT/TW on the work of mobilizing followers of Buddhism, Cao Dai, and Protestantism in the new situation].

46 VNACIII, Fonds: Prime Minister Office, dossier 8288, "Ho so xet duyet cac doan ra, doan vao cho Uy ban Khoa hoc Nha Nuoc, Uy ban Lien lac Van hoa voi Nha Nuoc, Uy ban Lien lac Cong giao Viet Nam" [File for approval of outgoing and incoming delegations for the State Scientific Council, the Committee for Cultural Relations with the State, and the Liaison Committee for Vietnamese Catholics].

47 VNACIII, Fonds: Prime Minister Office, dossier 1791, "Cong van v/v dong y cu Doan dai bieu di du Dai hoi Ki-to giao quoc te doan ket voi nhan dan Viet Nam, Lao, va Cam-phuchia tai thanh pho Tu-rin (Y)" [Official letter regarding approval for a delegation to attend the international Christian solidarity conference with the people of Vietnam, Laos, and Cambodia in Turin, Italy].

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