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“A Sacred Space Is Never Empty”: Soviet Atheism, 1954-1971

by

Victoria Smolkin-Rothrock

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requirements for the degree of

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in

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in the

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of the

University of California, Berkeley

Committee in charge:

Professor Yuri Slezkine
Professor John Connelly
Professor Thomas W. Laqueur
Professor Olga Matich

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For my family

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Abstract

“A Sacred Space Is Never Empty”: Soviet Atheism, 1954-1971

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This dissertation is a study of Soviet atheist education and socialist life-cycle rituals in the postwar period. The narrative follows two distinct, yet overlapping, life-cycles: that of Marxist-Leninist scientific atheism, as it attempted to transform religiosity and fill the space that had been occupied by religion with a distinctly Soviet spiritual content, and that of Soviet citizens, whose lives were ordered and made meaningful by Soviet beliefs and rituals. By analyzing the efforts of the Soviet Party-State to fulfill the administrative, psychological, and philosophical functions inherited from religious institutions, I examine the resurgence of interest in atheism and rituals and analyze why, despite its totalizing ideological agenda, the Soviet Union did not introduce socialist rites on a mass scale until the Khrushchev era. I argue that ideologists became ever more aware of the contradictions that revealed themselves when they attempted to transform ideological beliefs and rituals into everyday convictions and practices. As a result, renewed attention to the spiritual lives of the revolution’s “human material” became central to interpretations of Marxism-Leninism, as well as to the fate of the Soviet political experiment. On a broader scale, my work investigates the significance and functions of private rituals in modern society, and evaluates the state’s ability to direct this aspect of individual and social life.

Introduction

Свято место пусто не бывает.

- Russian proverb

On January 2, 1956, the writer Aleksei Aleksandrovich Surkov, Secretary of the Soviet Writer's Union, sent a curious note to the Central Committee of the Soviet Communist Party regarding a letter sent to the Writer's Union by a T. I. Kubrikova from Saratov. In her letter, Kubrikova pointed out that while the Soviet regime had waged war on religious beliefs and rituals, it had yet to produce its own Soviet replacements, and called on Soviet writers to create new socialist rituals. Relaying Kubrikova's request to the Central Committee, Surkov characterized her letter as both naïve and poignant.

This letter, written by an elderly person, might at first glance seem primitive and even somewhat funny. And yet the questions posed by the letter have worried the people for all the years following the October Revolution. In point of fact, nothing was given to the people in exchange for the colorful church rituals that formalize the birth, marriage, and death of a human being—rituals that affect the imagination.¹

The Writer's Union, Surkov pointed out, was a professional organization and could not address an issue of such magnitude and significance. Therefore, he concluded, he felt duty-bound to bring it to the attention of the Party. Shortly thereafter, Surkov was invited for a discussion with the Central Committee's department of Culture, where he reportedly "agreed" with Party leaders that "manufacturing everyday rituals and disseminating them in a directed fashion was not advisable (*netselesoobrazno*).” As for Kubrikova, B. Riurikov, the department's deputy director, suggested that Surkov should notify her that meeting her request "does not appear to be possible (*ne predstavliaetsia vozmozhnym*).”²

The above exchange—between an ordinary woman, a prominent writer, and the Party Central Committee—provides a window into the dilemma that is the topic of this dissertation: the story of the Soviet Party-State's struggle to fill the “sacred space” made empty by the regime's war against religion. As atheist propaganda experts came to see, their prospects for

¹ Rossiiskii gosudarstvennyi arkhiv noveishei istorii [henceforth RGANI], f. 5, op. 36, d. 14, l. 3.

² RGANI, f. 5, op. 36, d. 14, l. 4.

resolving the dilemma of Soviet spiritual life largely hinged on their ability to solve the ritual problem. Indeed, rituals are, in many ways, at the center of a question that haunted the Soviet project from inception: in the revolutionary effort to transform society, culture, and human nature, what should be shed and discarded, and what kept and promoted? Should the revolutionary state produce its own distinct spiritual content and ritual forms—a new Soviet cosmos? And if so, who would create it, what would it look like, and how would it be disseminated and inculcated?

To get at the significance of atheist education efforts in the late Soviet period, consider this: forty years after the 1917 revolution, the vast majority of Soviet citizens experienced the most important transitions in their lives simply as a bureaucratic procedure at the ZAGS bureau.³ Whether the occasion was marriage, the birth of a child, or the death of a family member, the state's involvement was confined to the act of “registering” their change in civil status.⁴ This was true whether the citizen in question was an ordinary laborer or a member of the political elite, a Kubrikova or a Khrushcheva. As Khrushchev's son-in-law, Aleksei Adzhubei, recollected in his memoirs, his 1949 marriage to Khrushchev's daughter, Rada, consisted of the couple “registering” their union at the ZAGS. “The idea of a marriage ceremony was completely foreign to the Khrushchevs,” Adzhubei writes. “This only made Rada and me happy. On 31 August 1949, accompanied by Vasilii Bozhko of Khrushchev's security forces, we went to the district ZAGS and received the necessary stamps in our passports.”⁵ Keeping in mind the totalitarian aspirations of the Communist Party and Marxism-Leninism, this oversight is peculiar, as is the fact that Party did not address the issue for several decades.

The Central Committee's response to Surkov and Kubrikova signals the low priority that the ritual question still had in 1956. Indeed, it points to the confusion of everyone involved—from ordinary citizens, to the intelligentsia, to the Party itself—about who was in charge of such existential concerns in the Soviet Union, and suggests that the Party had yet to assume responsibility for Soviet “matters of the heart.” Yet over the course of the Khrushchev era, this situation was to change significantly and in many surprising ways. By late 1964—shortly after Nikita Sergeevich Khrushchev was replaced by Leonid Il'ich Brezhnev—the Soviet leadership had mobilized an unprecedented amount of resources and professional expertise to transform the beliefs and practices of Soviet citizens. In a few short years, the idea of managing Soviet spiritual life and creating socialist rituals went from being, in the words of the Party leadership, “not advisable,” to becoming a priority that inspired plenums and resolutions; created specialized committees and institutes; revived academic disciplines such as ethnography, the sociology of religion, and “scientific atheism”; trained a new cohort of specialist cadres; and called for an ongoing series of congresses, conferences and seminars organized by Party, state, academic, cultural, and enlightenment institutions. Atheist education went from being a neglected component of the regime's ideological enlightenment program to the center of intensive debate. Rituals, meanwhile, went from being a “meaningless survival” to the impetus for the creation of a great number of ritual spaces, services, and material attributes; ritual art, songs and dances, ritual methodology and professionals; and of course, rituals themselves. At heart, the debate was

³ ZAGS is an acronym for *Zapis' aktov grazhdanskogo sostoiiania*, the bureau for Registration of Acts of Civil Status.

⁴ Indeed, over the course of the Soviet period, the verb “to register” (*zaregistrovat'*) became synonymous with, and even replaced, the words for marriage.

⁵ Aleksei Adzhubei, *Krushenie illuzii* (Moscow: Izdatel'stvo SP “Interbuk,” 1991), 16.

about the nature and future of religion and atheism within socialist modernity, the ways that the latter could effectively “overcome” the former, and the state’s role in the management of Soviet spiritual affairs. This dissertation tells the story of how the Soviet state discovered that it had to become a church, of Communists’ discovery that they must become a priestly caste, and of the revolutionary attempt to turn a political ideology into a religion—not just in theory, but in practice.

Ideology, Religion, and Atheism

The officially atheist Soviet system and its Marxist-Leninist ideology have often been likened to a religion. In this respect, the Soviet case is not unique. Indeed, soon after the French Revolution, Alexis de Tocqueville addressed the relationship between political ideology and religion in the revolutionary process when he observed that, despite its anti-religious rhetoric, the French Revolution “assumed all aspects of a religious revival”—so much so that, Tocqueville observed, “it would perhaps be truer to say that it developed into a species of religion, if a singularly imperfect one, since it was without a God, without a ritual, or promise of a future life.”⁶ The comparison of the Soviet experiment to the French Revolution, and of the ideologies of both revolutionary states to religion, reveals a great deal about the eschatological nature of revolutionary ideology. Yet while scholarship on the French Revolution has addressed the role of anti-religious rhetoric and secular rituals extensively, scholarship on the Soviet Union has not devoted sufficient attention to the scientific atheism and socialist rituals.⁷ The peculiarity of Soviet ideology has produced numerous excellent studies of Bolshevik discourse and political and cultural institutions, as well as the regime’s repressive campaign against religious institutions and believers.⁸ Meanwhile, the effect of atheist education on Soviet spiritual culture

⁶ Alexis De Tocqueville, *The Old Regime and the French Revolution* (New York: Anchor Books, 1983), 13.

⁷ On the French case, see Mona Ozouf, *Festivals and the French Revolution* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1988); and Serge Bianchi, *La révolution culturelle de l’an II: élites et peuple, 1789-1799* (Paris, France: Aubier, 1982).

⁸ On Soviet discourse, see Jochen Hellbeck, *Revolution on My Mind: Writing a Diary Under Stalin* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2006); Sheila Fitzpatrick, *Tear Off the Masks!: Identity and Imposture in Twentieth Century Russia* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2005); Stephen Kotkin, *Magnetic Mountain: Stalinism as a Civilization* (Berkeley, CA: Berkeley University Press, 1997); Igal Halfin, *Terror in My Soul: Communist Autobiographies on Trial* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2003) and *Stalinist Confessions: Messianism and Terror at the Leningrad Communist University* (Pittsburgh, PA: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2009). Most of what is known about Soviet atheism comes from scholarship on the iconoclastic activities of the early Soviet period. See Mikhail Ivanovich Odintsov, *Gosudarstvo i tserkov’ Istoriia vzaimootnoshenii, 1917–1938 gg* (Moscow: Znanie, 1991); Valerii Arkadevich Alekseev, *“Shturm nebes” otmeniaetsia?: kriticheskie ocherki po istorii bor’by s religiei v SSSR* (Moscow: Rossiia molodaia, 1992); Glennys Young, *Power and the Sacred in Revolutionary Russia: Religious Activists in the Village* (University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1997); Arto Luukkanen, *The Religious Policy of the Stalinist State, A Case Study: The Central Standing Commission on Religious Questions, 1929–1938* (Helsinki: Suomen Historiallinen Seura, 1997); Daniel Peris, *Storming the Heavens: The Soviet League of the Militant Godless* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1998); William B. Husband, *“Godless Communists”: Atheism and Society in Soviet Russia, 1917–1932* (DeKalb, IL: Northern Illinois University Press, 2000); Edward E. Roslof, *Red Priests: Renovationism, Russian Orthodoxy, and Revolution, 1905–1946* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2002); Heather J. Coleman, *Russian Baptists and Spiritual Revolution, 1905–1929* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2005); Paul Froese, *The Plot to Kill God: Findings from the Soviet Experiment in Secularization* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2008). Mikhail Shkarovskii, *Russkaia Pravoslavnaia Tserkov’ pri Staline i Khrushcheve:*

and the fate of rites of passage in the Soviet project remain barely explored. Instead, scholarship has, in many ways, followed the lead of the regime itself: existing studies on Soviet atheism and socialist rituals focus predominantly on the early Soviet period, and on the role of rituals in political culture.⁹

In the historiography of religion and atheism in the Soviet Union, the consensus has been that Soviet attempts to replace religion with scientific atheism were a failure. Most often, analysis has focused on the crude, repressive, and often incompetent administrative efforts of Soviet officials, and on the reasons why atheism was not (and could not be) attractive to its intended audience. Soviet atheists, meanwhile, have been portrayed as naïve at best—and certainly ineffective, as even with the support and resources of the state, they failed to achieve their own “religious monopoly.”¹⁰ Yet despite the prominence of the analogy between Soviet ideology and religion, as well as of the centrality of the antireligious campaign in the regime’s politics, no one has examined how atheists in the late Soviet period actually envisioned and understood their project—how they assessed former and present successes and failures, the measures they took to address them, and how all of this fits into the broader cosmology of Soviet ideology. The Soviet effort to create and inculcate scientific atheism and socialist rituals provides a revealing perspective on how atheists understood the war between two opposing worldviews and how this changed over time. The extensive internal discussions within the Soviet atheist establishment reveal the ideological elite’s growing awareness of the shortcomings of scientific atheism, and the broader implications these had for Soviet ideology and the Soviet project. This

gosudarstvenno-tserkovnye otnosheniia v SSSR v 1939–1964 godakh (Moscow: Krutitskoe patriarshee podvor’e, 1999); Tatiana A. Chumachenko, *Church and State in Soviet Russia: Russian Orthodoxy from World War II to the Khrushchev Years*, trans. and ed. Edward E. Roslof (Armonk, NY: M.E. Sharpe, 2002).

⁹ On rituals and festivals in the early Soviet period see Richard Stites, *Revolutionary Dreams: Utopian Vision and Experimental Life in the Russian Revolution* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1989), James von Geldern in *Bolshevik Festivals, 1917-1920* (Berkeley, CA: Berkeley University Press, 1993), and Katerina Clark in *Petersburg, crucible of cultural revolution* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1995), and Karen Petrone, *Life has become more joyous, comrades: celebrations in the time of Stalin* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2000). Most scholarship on the late Soviet period, with the exception of Christel Lane’s *The Rites of Rulers: Ritual in Industrial Society: The Soviet Case* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1981), focus largely on the role of ritual in public life, and most often on the ceremonial of the political elite. See Christopher Binns, “The Changing Face of Power: Revolution and Accommodation in the Soviet Ceremonial System, Part I,” *Man* 14, no. 4 (December 1979): 585-606 and “The Changing Face of Power: Revolution and Accommodation in the Soviet Ceremonial System, Part II,” *Man* 15, no. 1 (March 1980): 170-187; Nina Tumarkin, *Lenin Lives: The Lenin Cult in Soviet Russia* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1983); Nina Tumarkin, *The Living and the Dead: The Rise and the Fall of the Cult of World War II in Russia* (New York: Basic Books, 1994). Catherine Merridale’s *Night of Stone: Death and Memory in Twentieth Century Russia* (New York: Viking, 2001) explores death in Russian cultural memory, but does not address the role of ritual in shaping and preserving contradictory beliefs. Recently, Malte Rolf has published an extensive study of mass festivals that spans the entire Soviet period, but emphasizes the Stalin era in particular. See Malte Rolf, *Das sowjetische Massenfest* (Hamburg: Hamburger Edition, 2006). Vladimir Glebkin’s insightful study examines the ritualization of Soviet public life. See Vladimir Glebkin, *Ritual v sovetskoii kulture* (Moscow: Ianus-K, 1998).

¹⁰ See Paul Froese, “Forced Secularization in Soviet Russia: Why an Atheistic Monopoly Failed,” *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 43, no. 1 (2004): 35-50; Paul Froese, *The Plot to Kill God*; John Anderson, *Religion, State, and Politics in the Soviet Union and Successor States* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1994); David E. Powell, *Antireligious Propaganda in the Soviet Union: A Study of Mass Persuasion* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 1975); and the works of Dimitry V. Pospelovskiy, especially *A History of Marxist-Leninist Atheism and Soviet Antireligious Policies* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1987) and *Totalitarizm i veroispovedanie* (Moscow: Bibleisko-bogoslovskii in-t sv. Apostola Andreia, 2003).

dissertation analyzes the debates that took place within the institutions in charge of managing Soviet beliefs and practices. It examines atheists' perceptions of their own failures, the measures they took to correct them, and the broader implications of the difficulties they experienced in winning the hearts, minds, and souls of Soviet citizens during the late Soviet period.

The Soviet Cosmos

The October Revolution of 1917 renounced the cosmologies of traditional religions, offering in their place Marxism-Leninism—an ideology that gave new meaning to individual, family and social life. “The worker’s state has rejected church ceremony, and informed its citizens that they have the right to be born, to marry, and to die without the mysterious gestures and exhortations of persons clad in cassocks, gowns, and other ecclesiastical vestments,” proclaimed Lev Trotskii, one of the revolution’s chief ideologists, welcoming the “liberation” of the Soviet people from the church and its rituals.¹¹ Having destroyed traditional ways of commemorating the most fundamental events in the human life-cycle—birth, marriage, and death—Soviet Communists created state bureaucracies to replace religious institutions, and set out to transform ritual practices in order to connect personal experience to Soviet ideology. Yet, as writer Kornei Chukovskii observed, the revolution’s “emancipation” of the population from religious rituals created a vacuum that threatened to empty death, and consequently life, of meaning: “Not religion, not poetry, not even basic civility [...]. The revolution confiscated former rituals and decorum and did not provide her own. All wear their hats, smoke, [and] speak about the corpses as they would of dogs.”¹²

Debates about socialist spiritual life in general, and the place of rituals in socialist society in particular, began even before the October Revolution, and positions fell across a broad spectrum. Some revolutionaries held an entirely anti-ritual view, seeking to eradicate mass holidays, family rituals, and even military oaths as primitive “survivals.” Their scientific utopian vision held up a society freed from the base craving for spectacle and entirely devoid of ritual. Others conceded the popular need for ritual as a kind of transitional measure, presenting it as an element of the old way of life out of which the proletariat would eventually mature. In the meantime, the logic went, better “our” socialist rituals than “their” religious ones. Those who saw rituals as a necessary transitional measure sought to cleanse them of mystical and supernatural elements in order to create practices fitting the kind of modernity envisioned by the Soviet enlightenment project. Finally, a third group argued against the notion that rituals were an inherently retrograde phenomenon and posited that religious rituals were only one historically-specific manifestation of a bigger phenomenon. They pointed to the existence of ritual in all historical cultures as evidence that there was nothing inherently religious about rituals. Instead, they highlighted the educational and transformative potential of the ritual experience, and proposed that it was in the regime’s best interests to provide its own answers to the ritual question.¹³

¹¹ Lev Trotskii, “The Family and Ceremony” in *Problems of Everyday Life and Other Writings on Culture and Science* (New York: Monad Press, 1973), 44. Originally published in *Pravda*, 14 July 1923.

¹² Kornei Chukovskii, *Dnevnik (1900-1929)*, (Moscow: 1991), 153. This diary entry was made in 1921.

¹³ P. P. Kampars and N. M. Zakovich, *Sovetskaia grazhdanskaia obriadnost'* (Moscow: Mysl', 1967); V. A. Rudnev, *Sovetskie obychai i obriady* (Leningrad: Lenizdat, 1974).

In the first two decades after the revolution, the Soviet leadership and atheist agitators created a litany of Marxist-Leninist political rituals that shaped the symbolic organization of public life, yet struggled to provide meaningful replacements for the symbols and rituals that ordered the *private* worlds of Soviet citizens. Indeed, in the same article where he rejoiced in the population's liberation from the church, Trotskii himself cautioned against ignoring the significance of ritual ceremony in the revolution's battle with religion: "How is marriage to be celebrated, or the birth of a child in the family? How is one to pay the tribute of affection to the beloved dead? It is on this need of marking the principal signposts along the road of life that church ritual depends."¹⁴ In answer to this need, the young Soviet state proposed "octoberings" (baptisms), and "red" weddings and funerals, yet the awkward utopianism of early Soviet rituals made them more fit for parody than for everyday life. For example, in a *Pravda* article, the popular writers Il'ia Ilf and Evgenii Petrov satirized the new "octobering" ceremony: the chairman of the local committee presented each newborn with a red satin blanket, for which he would "exact payment" by "standing above the crib of the infant, [and] read[ing] a two hour report on the international situation," while the "adults smoked dejectedly" amidst flourishes from the orchestra. Upon the conclusion of the report, "everyone, with a feeling of awkwardness, went home," where, "of course, everything went back to normal. [...] But the feeling of dissatisfaction remained for a long time."¹⁵ Il'f and Petrov brilliantly highlighted the disparity between the lofty ideological aims of the new rituals and the bizarre ways in which they were executed. Despite revolutionary dreams to transform society and human nature, therefore, the problem of transforming religious beliefs and rites into socialist convictions and rituals continued to remain unresolved. The state's sporadic early attempts to create Soviet life-cycle rituals proved unpopular, and general ambivalence about religion, private life, and the family in the revolutionary project meant that the subject remained marginal in relationship to more pressing tasks—high politics, economic modernization, and war—for several decades. After the devastating anti-religious campaign of the first Five-Year Plan's "cultural revolution," religion, atheism, and rituals largely disappeared from public discussions and from public life.

Ideological Utopianism and Religious "Survivals" in the Khrushchev Era

One of the curious developments of Soviet history is why the regime lost interest in the religious question under Stalin, and why it again became invested in the atheist enterprise under Khrushchev. Indeed, at first glance, the revival of the antireligious campaign after almost thirty years appears peculiar in the context of Khrushchev's political and cultural "thaw." Why did the Soviet state (again) come to see religion as a problem in the 1950s, and what can this tell us about the Soviet regime and about Soviet religiosity? The need to mobilize the Soviet population for the Great Patriotic War required a change of course in the state's relationship with religion, and with Russian Orthodoxy in particular.¹⁶ After Stalin's 1943 concordat with the Russian

¹⁴ Trotskii, 44.

¹⁵ Il'ia Ilf and Evgenii Petrov, *The Twelve Chairs*. John H. C. Richardson, trans. Evanston, Illinois: Northwestern University Press, 1997. Il'ia Ilf and Evgenii Petrov, "Mat" in *Sobranie Sochinenii, vol. 3* (Moscow: Gos. Izd. Khud. Lit., 1961), 382-388. Originally published in *Pravda* (1935).

¹⁶ Shkarovskii, *Russkaia Pravoslavnaia Tserkov' pri Staline i Khrushcheve*; Chumachenko, *Church and State in Soviet Russia*; Nathaniel Davis, *A Long Walk to Church: A Contemporary History of Russian Orthodoxy* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 2003); S. Merritt Miner, *Stalin's Holy War: Religion, Nationalism and Alliance Politics 1941-*

Orthodox Church, religion again became a legal, though heavily regulated and largely silent, part of Soviet life.

The communal sacrifice of wartime and, after Stalin's death in 1953, the rejection of key foundations of Stalinism, also provided the opportunity for a reinvention of Soviet ideals. The renegotiation of the relationship between the state and its citizens—what historian Vera Dunham famously labeled the “Big Deal”—became, in effect, a reconsideration of the relationship between the revolutionary past and the Communist future.¹⁷ With Nikita Khrushchev's public condemnation of Stalin's “cult of personality” at the 20th Party Congress in 1956, Soviet people were promised a new era marked by a more liberal political culture and the state's commitment to their individual welfare. To borrow a biological metaphor, the Soviet Union came of age—politics became more predictable, living space more available, consumption more conspicuous, and life finally became more joyous.

But de-Stalinization also created a chasm between the state and its people, and therefore the need to re-legitimize the Party-State and its revolutionary ideology. The Soviet leadership tried to address this need with a new Party Program full of optimistic predictions. The Third Party Program, announced at the 22nd Party Congress in 1961, was the first revision of the Communist ideological platform since 1919, and it declared that the country had entered a new historical phase: building Communism.¹⁸ Khrushchev removed Stalin's body from the Mausoleum and promised Soviet citizens that the youth would see Communism built in their lifetime. The Party's new program was the official articulation of the ideals promoted with Khrushchev's rise to power: the abandonment of coercion as a primary tool of government and material well-being. Tying together utopian and pragmatic promises, the Program heralded vast increases in consumer goods and housing, increased welfare benefits and the cultivation of leisure.

Yet what made the Program so peculiar was the central importance of morality in its promoted vision of modernity.¹⁹ To resolve the moral paradox of consumerism, the Soviet abundance promoted in the Khrushchev era hinged on personal moderation.²⁰ Thus, the

1945 (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2003).

¹⁷ Nicholas Timasheff, *The Great Retreat: The Growth and Decline of Communism in Russia* (New York: E. P. Dutton & Company, Inc., 1946); Vera Dunham, *In Stalin's Time: Middle-Class Values in Soviet Fiction* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1976); David L. Hoffmann, *Stalinist Values: The Cultural Norms of Soviet Modernity, 1917-1941*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2003.

¹⁸ *Programma Kommunisticheskoi Partii Sovetskogo Soiuza priniata XXII s'ezdom KPSS* (Moscow: Izdatel'stvo politicheskoi literatury, 1971). On the creation and content of the Third Party Program, see Alexander Titov, “The 1961 Party Program and the fate of Khrushchev's reforms,” *Soviet State and Society Under Nikita Khrushchev*, ed. Melanie Ilic and Jeremy Smith (New York: Routledge, 2009), 8-25; and William Taubman, *Khrushchev: The Man and His Era* (New York: Norton, 2003), 508-509. The preparation of the Third Party Program between 1956-1961 was, arguably, the Soviet state's most ambitious attempt thus far to, borrowing James C. Scott's term, “see” its own population. See James C. Scott, *Seeing like a State: How Certain Schemes to Improve the Human Condition Have Failed* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1998).

¹⁹ As some scholars have pointed out, in the continuing evolution of the definition of socialism, the few constants were a commitment to modernization and Soviet distinctiveness, and what made Soviet modernization distinct was its promise of a morally superior modernity. See Kotkin, *Magnetic Mountain*; and Hoffmann, *Stalinist Values*. On communist morality in the Khrushchev era, see Deborah A. Field, *Private Life and Communist Morality in Khrushchev's Russia* (New York: Peter Lang, 2007).

²⁰ Mark Sandle, “Brezhnev and Developed Socialism: The Ideology of Zastoi,” in *Brezhnev Reconsidered*, edited by Edwin Bacon and Mark Sandle (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2002), 177. Sandle points out that the Third Party

satisfaction of Soviet wants depended on transformed personal perceptions of Soviet needs. In a kind of inversion of the Protestant ethic, which made a private vice (greed) into a public virtue (work ethic), Communist morality made a public vice (scarcity) into a private virtue (asceticism). These ideals were cemented in the new era's official manifesto, the "Moral Code of the Builder of Communism," which confirmed the state's dependence on loyal, efficient and morally superior citizens. Commenting on Khrushchev-era utopianism, Petr Vail and Aleksandr Genis noted that, while it was "unlikely that anyone hoped to actualize the Program of the KPSS [...] just the process, which was named (seriously or ironically), the building of the future, continued to create a phenomenon unprecedented in world history—the Soviet person."²¹ In fact, the creation of the new Soviet person now assumed a new urgency. Without mass political coercion or consumer rewards to motivate the construction of Communism, the state depended on loyal, efficient and morally superior Soviet citizens. In the late Soviet period, the spiritual world of Soviet people—their values, emotions and worldview—became not just an ideological trope, but a central policy concern in the top echelons of the Party-State.

The revival of the campaign against religion under Khrushchev was part of the era's mission to cleanse Marxism-Leninism of corruption and fulfill the "authentic" vision promised by Lenin. By the late 1950s, religion and atheism were again regularly discussed in top Party, state, and cultural institutions, and were intimately intertwined with the regime's broader ideological concerns. Indeed, decisions about the latter often followed on the heels of changes to the former. But in addition to repressive administrative measures against religious organizations and believers, new elements began to appear in the state's atheist program. Over the course of the Khrushchev era, the ideological elite reconsidered their approach to religion and atheism, and criticized previous forms and methods of atheist work as ineffective. Atheists abandoned administrative campaigns against religion, and instead intensified attention to the lived experience of Soviet religiosity, and to the actual effect of atheist work on the ground. Increasingly, they also grew more interested in rituals, since the regime saw religious rites as the greatest obstacle to the prospects of Soviet atheism, and therefore placed high hopes on socialist rituals as the most promising solution to the religious problem. Two 1964 Central Committee decrees—one revising the approach to atheist propaganda as a whole and the other formalizing the ritual project on a union-wide scale—make evident how, in the Khrushchev era, atheist education and socialist rituals moved from the margins of Soviet ideology to the center.

In addressing Soviet religion in general, and rituals in particular, the state had to reconcile political imperatives with demographic realities, and ambitious modernizing goals with the overwhelming persistence of traditions. For this reason, atheist education and socialist rituals, like many Soviet endeavors, combined practical and ideological goals, and introducing new elements into old ideological formulas. The reform of Soviet rituals confronted long-standing concerns—religion, nationalities, private life—in new ways. The Khrushchev-era atheist campaign represented yet another assault by the Soviet state on religion, yet it consciously abandoned the crude iconoclasm that defined early Soviet propaganda. It also addressed the nationalities question by "folklorizing" national cultures and leveling differences with the new concept of *Soviet* national identity, the "Soviet people" (*Sovetskii narod*). Finally, atheist education and ritual reform sought to address the massive demographic crisis, geographic

Program "made it clear that the definition of 'needs' would be highly circumscribed. The inculcation of Communist consciousness through extensive agitprop work would result in the population itself moderating their demands."

²¹ Petr Vail and Aleksandr Genis, *60-e: mir sovetskogo cheloveka* (Moskva: NLO, 1996), 18.

dislocations, and social upheaval of postwar Soviet society by promoting a vision of a strong, moral family. The Party-State revived education theorist A. S. Makarenko's view of the family as "the smallest cell of society" that prepared citizens to enter the big, collective family of the Soviet state, and emphasized the important role atheist education and socialist rituals would play in advocating the new Family Code (1969).²² Yet Soviet aims, with regards to the family, were contradictory: theorists saw the family as a conservative repository of religious and capitalist "survivals" that, as one moralist wrote, "is hardest of all to make yield to the influence and control of society,"²³ but also recognized the family's transformative potential as an institution with "enormous moral-educational significance." As the family became the battleground in the state's struggle to form a morally superior "Soviet person," the state's interest extended beyond its economic, political, and social function, to the private world of family *culture*. The family thus became "one of the means of forming the communist personality and communist social relations."²⁴ Breaking the family's ties with the church provided the perfect opportunity to transform religious beliefs into atheist worldviews without relying on openly coercive methods. By the mid-1960s, atheist education and ritual reform were an essential component of the state's ideological program, connecting the "little" Soviet family to the state's new vision for the "big" Soviet family—the model of social relations and communal identity promoted in the late Soviet period.

By the time spiritual life and rituals were revived as topics of debate as the Khrushchev era drew to a close, the critical role of both in individual and social life was rarely contested. In part because of emerging data on the overwhelming tenacity of religion and especially of religious rites, rituals came to be seen as a critical barometer of religiosity, and, as such, a phenomenon whose meaning should be studied more closely. The debate was no longer about whether some form of ritual should exist in Soviet society, but about how new socialist rituals were to be created and inculcated, whether this process was to be spontaneous or directed from above, and what ideological function they could serve in the late Soviet period. As one contemporary of the ritual project put it, "Above all, in the consciousness of Soviet society, rituals gained the 'right to citizenship.' An opinion became confirmed that new rituals play a large role in the spiritual life (*dukhovnaia zhizn'*) of socialist society, in the communist education of laborers, and, above all, in the education of the younger generation."²⁵

This story of Soviet efforts to transform Soviet cosmologies and ritual life suggests new questions about Soviet history. While the regime had the intent to remake worldviews and practices from inception, the fact that the state did not coordinate efforts to transform Soviet spiritual life until the early 1960s, and that the purpose and methods of this project continued to be debated until the end of the Soviet period, complicate the conventional story about the Soviet project as a whole. To put it another way, while Soviet ideology has often been interpreted as having penetrated too deeply into Soviet society, the fact that spiritual life and rituals were not systematically approached until the 1960s implies that, perhaps, it did not penetrate deeply enough. The dissertation traces how, in the Khrushchev era, the Soviet regime identified a

²² Aleksandr Grankin, *Teoriia semeinogo vospitaniia A.S. Makarenko* (Piatigorsk: Piatigorskii gosudarstvennyi lingvisticheskii universitet, 2002).

²³ S. Kosolapov and O. Krutova, *Nravstvennye printsipy stroitelia kommunizma* (Moscow: Moskovskii rabochii, 1962), 63. Cited in Field, 13.

²⁴ A. G. Kharchev, *Brak i sem'ia v SSSR* (Moscow: Mysl', 1979), 7-8.

²⁵ I. I. Fursin, "O prirode i sotsial'nykh funktsiakh obriadnosti v sotsialisticheskom obshchestve," *Voprosy nauchnogo ateizma* 13 (1972): 163.

“spiritual vacuum” at the heart of Marxism-Leninism and realized that it had to provide its own answers to spiritual questions. This discovery prompted the Soviet elite to reconsider the nature of the state’s involvement in everyday life, the family, and religious beliefs and practices. The dissertation addresses the significance of the late Soviet ideological landscape and provides a context for understanding new Soviet approaches to the existential questions of life and death.

Fighting against Religion and Fighting for Spiritual Life

The Soviet leadership’s interest in the spiritual life of Soviet society, as well as the attempt to create socialist replacements for religious rites, point to a number of important insights not just about the nature of the Soviet experience, but also about the dynamics of religion in the modern world. Indeed, the assumptions driving the Soviet atheist establishment are not unique, but are in fact similar to those that informed the work of their ideological opponents in the capitalist camp, and indeed, similar to the questions that preoccupy scholars of religion, secularization, and secularism today. Though Soviet atheists framed their questions in radically different ways, they were interested in why religion and religiosity had not declined (or, in Soviet terms, “died out”) as predicted by modernization and secularization theories. They were also interested in what accounts for the survival, longevity, and adaptability of religion in contemporary conditions, as well as the significance of religion in people’s lives. They asked whether religion’s “spiritual” function could be performed by a different kind of belief system. Finally, they investigated what role rituals play in modern life and what gives them their enduring power.

While many ideologists certainly saw atheist education and Soviet rituals as an instrument in socialization, their participation in these projects was not necessarily cynical, and many of them sincerely grappled with the problems they discovered in their study of religiosity on the ground. They saw rituals not only as an instrument for the inculcation of the scientific materialist worldview, but as a phenomenon that performed an important social and spiritual function that had been inadequately addressed by the state. As Soviet atheists became more familiar with Soviet lived experience, they increasingly placed blame less on external forces such as diversionary tactics by religious organizations or the influence of foreign propaganda, and more on internal short-comings—that is, on Soviet creeds and institutions themselves for failing to fill “sacred space” with “positive” Soviet beliefs and practices.

Most importantly, the Soviet atheist establishment came to focus on the *individual* and *experiential* component of religiosity as a critical factor in accounting for the tenacity and adaptability of religion in the modern world. What Soviet ideologists gradually came to believe was that what keeps people connected to religion was not a set of intellectual beliefs to which they collectively subscribe, but the aesthetic, psychological, emotional, communal, and moral components of religious experience. As they came to these conclusions about religiosity in the modern world, the transformative experience of rituals—which they sought to connect to transcendent meanings and weave into the Soviet social fabric—became ever more central to their project of creating a scientific atheist worldview and a Soviet way of life.

This dissertation follows the story of how the confrontation of Soviet scientific atheism and religion, and the encounter of atheist cadres with the lived experience of believers, transformed the battle *against* religion into the battle *for* Soviet (and therefore atheist) spiritual

life. Chapter One, “Cosmic Enlightenment: Scientific Atheism and the Soviet Conquest of Space,” examines the connection between cosmologies and the cosmos, focusing in particular on the way that the enthusiasm generated by the Soviet space program dovetailed with the state’s anti-religious campaign. The chapter traces how the contradictory ways in which people made sense of space achievements undermined faith in the Soviet enlightenment project, and especially the belief that science was the most powerful weapon against religion. As a result, atheists reconsidered customary understandings of religion and the assumptions driving atheist theories and practices, proposing that perhaps the problem of religion was not so much epistemological as philosophical. Chapter Two, “Khrushchev’s Utopia and Girls Who Turn to Stone: Building Communism and Destroying Religious “Survivals,” continues to explore the encounter between atheism and religion in the context of the Khrushchev-era antireligious campaign. In particular, it focuses on the discovery that religious “survivals” were far more prevalent, and far more tenacious, than the ideological establishment had assumed—a discovery initially prompted by the unpredictable results of the antireligious measures used during the 1954 campaign. These discoveries led Soviet ideologists to acknowledge that “negative” approaches were ineffective—indeed, that they were often counterproductive—and that in order to “overcome” religion, Soviet atheism had to offer its own “positive” content. Chapter Three, “Making Sense of Life’s Questions: Atheism’s Appeal to the Spiritual,” looks at attempts to articulate atheism’s “positive” content, as well as at atheists’ evaluations of their own efforts. The chapter chronicles how atheists identified an ideological “vacuum” that they believed had been produced by their destruction of religious worldviews, and describes how they came to the observation that in order to battle religion, atheism had to, in effect, become one. Over the course of the Khrushchev era, atheists proposed that the reason their efforts had thus far failed was because religion was not so much a philosophical problem, as a spiritual one. Soviet ideologists proposed that religion and Marxism-Leninism offered different approaches to the meaning of life and to what it means to be a human being, and began to appeal to morality, aesthetics, emotions, and rituals in an effort to fill the “vacuum” in Soviet spiritual life.

Chapter Four, “Soviet Atheists and the Journey from Religion to Atheism,” examines the Khrushchev era as a crucible for the emergence of a new kind of ideological worker, the Soviet atheist cadre. In particular, it tells the story of three individuals who came to prominence during the atheist campaign: Evgraf Duluman, Aleksandr Osipov, and Remir Lopatkin. The chapter looks at the antireligious campaign as a formative experience for people of different backgrounds who nevertheless found common cause in atheist education. Formed by their Khrushchev-era experiences, cadres like Duluman and Lopatkin went on to prominent positions in the ideological and academic establishments, from where they influenced policies on religion and atheism over the course of the Soviet period, and even after. Chapter Five, “*Science and Religion* Reconsiders Science and Religion,” examines atheists’ efforts to rename the Soviet Union’s primary mass atheist periodical as a reflection of the broader drive to change the direction of atheist work. Situated in the first years of the Brezhnev era, the story of the crisis within *Science and Religion* is part of the bigger story of the crisis within Soviet atheism—a crisis whose contours become visible as the journal attempted to redirect focus from enlightenment to engagement with the contradictory interior, spiritual worlds of its readers. The chapter argues that the mid-1960s serve as a watershed in the history of Soviet atheism, as this is the moment when atheists begin to lose their confidence not just in their immediate prospects but in their broader cause. Chapter Six, “The Institute of Scientific Atheism and the Study of Religion in the Soviet Union,” focuses on the work of the Institute as an institution whose work is emblematic of atheist work in the late

Soviet period. The chapter examines how, in producing a “map” of Soviet religiosity, the initial purpose of which was to strengthen the ideological elite’s understanding of their religious opponent, atheist cadres ultimately began to reconsider the nature of religion and to question the nature of atheism. They also discovered “indifference” as an important, and troubling, category on the Soviet religious and ideological landscape. The chapter identifies the late 1960s as the moment when certain voices in the atheist camp began to propose that the very foundations of atheism were flawed. While such voices did not become public for almost two more decades, they were prominent within the atheist movement itself, and ultimately influential in bringing about its collapse.

Finally, the epilogue, “Questions Without Answers,” chronicles the disenchantment with scientific atheism and Marxism-Leninism, focusing in particular on the year 1971 as a critical turning-point. Over the course of the last two Soviet decades, Soviet atheists made a series of troubling and painful discoveries. Not only were the people on whom they focused their attention largely indifferent to their work, but this indifference extended to the political elite, and even to the atheist camp itself. In the early 1970s, atheists believed that the Party had abandoned their cause. By the end of the 1970s, they began to question whether their studies of religion and atheism should continue to be so closely connected with the political establishment. Over the course of the 1980s, many atheists lost the conviction that the “positive” content they offered believers in exchange for religion was, in fact, superior. As a result, they lost faith in their own mission. By the end of the Soviet period, leading atheists were questioning whether the battle against religion was worth waging to begin with, and were themselves abandoning the scientific atheist project.

On December 16, 1988, E. G. Filimonov, the deputy director of the Institute of Scientific Atheism and the head of the atheist propaganda section of the “Knowledge” Society, addressed fellow atheists with the following observation:

There is a strange situation in the country. The return to Leninist principles in relations with religion are viewed as concession to religion (*ustupka religii*). In Lithuania—atheism is buried, the “Knowledge” Society’s scientific atheist propaganda section has been liquidated. [...] We support perestroika, we support the rejection of customary stereotypes, but a question arises as a result: should atheist propaganda exist or not? Should we battle religion? What should we do about the very meaning of “scientific atheism,” should we get rid of it or replace it with something else? There are many questions, and we need to answer them.²⁶

This dissertation is the story of how Soviet atheists tried to answer these questions, at different times and in different ways. It is also the story of how, in the course of trying, they learned something new: about their opponent and the nature of religion, about themselves and the nature of atheism, and about the relationship between the two. In many ways, then, this dissertation also examines a problem that seems to have perennially haunted secularizing projects and atheists—that is, how to attract and keep followers, instill a coherent set of convictions, and build a meaningful and self-reproducing community. The discussions that took place among the Soviet ideological establishment about spiritual life in general, and atheism and socialist rituals in

²⁶ Gosudarstvennyi arkhiv Rossiiskoi Federatsii [henceforth GARF], f. A-561, op. 1, d. 3047, l. 1.

particular, shed light on a curious attempt to turn atheism into its opposite—to transform atheism into a set of positive beliefs and practices with a coherent spiritual center.

Chapter One

Cosmic Enlightenment: Scientific Atheism and the Soviet Conquest of Space

- The sky! – Ostap said. – The sky is becoming desolate. It is no longer that epoch, or that slice of time. Now, the angels want to come down to earth, where it is nice, where there are municipal services, where there is a planetarium where one can look at the stars while listening to an antireligious lecture.

- Ostap Bender, *The Golden Calf*²⁷

The Conquest of the Cosmos

If, as Oscar Wilde said, a man is half of what he is and half of what he wants to be, wrote the Russian writer Viktor Pelevin, “then the Soviet children of the Sixties and Seventies were all half-cosmonauts.”²⁸ Images of cosmonauts—on newly-erected monuments, the walls of schools, pins, postage stamps, or the mosaics that decorated metro stations—ensured that most Soviet citizens living through the Space Age had “one foot in the cosmos,” their everyday realities “a tent camp, in which people lived temporarily, until the sun city was built.”²⁹ Most Soviet people lived somewhere along the spectrum between their everyday existence and the Socialist Realist “dreamworld” promised by Marxism-Leninism.³⁰ Sometimes, as Pelevin notes, cosmonauts came alive on television, waving to the crowd before launching into the sky. As they stood, in their space suits, at the rocket entrance, one accessory, a piece of cosmonaut equipment, seemed especially interesting to the young Pelevin—the small, pot-bellied titanium suitcases that the cosmonauts carried with them. The question of their contents—star charts, codes, secret weapons?—only added to the general mystery and symbolic power that captured the imagination of Pelevin and millions of people both within and outside the Soviet Union. For Soviet citizens in particular, the achievements of the Soviet space program were proof of what had just recently

²⁷ Il’ia Il’f and Evgenii Petrov, *Dvenadtsat’ stol’ev. Zolotoi telenok* (Moscow: Eksmo, 2006), 458. All translations are by author, unless otherwise indicated.

²⁸ Viktor Pelevin, “The Code of the World” (*Kod mira*) (*Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, 2001), <http://pelevin.nov.ru/rass/pe-kod/1.html> (accessed 10 August 2009).

²⁹ Pelevin, “The Code of the World.” On the material culture of the Soviet space program, see Cathleen Lewis, “The Red Stuff: A History of the Public and Material Culture of Early Human Spaceflight in the U.S.S.R.,” (Ph.D. dissertation, George Washington University, 2008).

³⁰ I borrow the term “dreamworld” to describe utopian ideology from Susan Buck-Morss. See Susan Buck-Morss, *Dreamworld and Catastrophe: The Passing of Mass Utopia in East and West* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2002).

existed in the realm of hope and possibility. Cosmonauts were the incarnation of utopian promises, surrounded by an aura of potentiality. Set in various ideological contexts, they were used to confirm Soviet political, economic, and technological supremacy in the Cold War.³¹

But the ideological capital of cosmic exploration reached beyond the material, a fact that quickly became apparent to Soviet ideologists. The potential of man's "conquest of the cosmos" to enthral the imagination, to fill a spiritual longing, became a subject of investigation and discussion. In an extensive web of "communist education" conducted in schools, libraries, official communist youth organizations, and young cosmonaut clubs, Soviet youth were presented with hagiographies of cosmonauts, whose modeled lives were meant to have a transformative effect on the next generation of Soviet citizens.³² What made cosmonauts such an effective model for the average Soviet citizen was that they were Socialist Realist heroes come to life.³³ Much like their forefathers in the 1930s, the Soviet aviators, cosmonauts made the fantastical world of Socialist Realism more real and seemed to herald the arrival of Communism.³⁴ Indeed, Socialist Realism and socialist reality were never closer than in the age of cosmic enthusiasm, and the relationship between Soviet cosmonauts and Communist ideology was reciprocal. In April 1961, Yuri Gagarin blessed Communism by dedicating his historic spaceflight to the 22nd Party Congress. Three months later, during the Congress, Khrushchev shocked and enthralled Soviet society when he introduced the Third Party Program, and announced that, "the present generation of Soviet people would live under Communism," which he predicted would be built within two decades.³⁵

Khrushchev's confident assertions, noted above, were accompanied with alarm within the Party ranks. Despite more than forty years of Soviet power—during which the Party-State secularized the bureaucracy and the education system,³⁶ conducted several antireligious

³¹ Numerous accounts exist on the political and technological dimensions of the space race in the context of the Cold War. See Matthew Brzezinski, *Red Moon Rising: Sputnik and the Hidden Rivalries that Ignited the Space Age* (New York: Times Books, 2007); Nicholas Daniloff, *The Kremlin and the Cosmos* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1972); Walter A. McDougall, *...the Heavens and the Earth: A Political History of the Space Age* (New York: Basic Books, 1985); Asif A. Siddiqi, *Sputnik and the Soviet Space Challenge* (Gainesville, FL: University Press of Florida, 2003); and Von Hardesty and Gene Eisman, *Epic Rivalry: the inside story of the Soviet and American space race* (Washington, DC: National Geographic Society, 2007).

³² I translate the word "vospitanie" as both "education" and "development" throughout the paper in an attempt to communicate the nuanced significance of the word in each particular context.

³³ There are numerous hagiographic accounts of Soviet cosmonauts, and "insider" accounts, by engineers in the space program or cosmonauts themselves, were especially popular. Some examples include E. Petrov, *Kosmonavty* (Moscow: "Krasnaia zvezda," 1963) and Titov's hagiographic biography of Iurii Gagarin, German Stepanovich Titov, *Pervyi kosmonavt planety* (Moscow: "Znanie," 1971). Children's books were also a very popular genre. On the myth of Gagarin, see Trevor Rockwell, "The Molding of the Rising Generation: Soviet Propaganda and the Hero Myth of Iurii Gagarin," *Past Imperfect* 12 (2006): 1-34.

³⁴ Jay Bergman "Valerij Chkalov: Soviet Pilot a New Soviet Man," *Journal of Contemporary History* 33, no. 1 (January 1998), 135-152; Georgii Baidukov, *Russian Lindbergh: the life of Valery Chkalov*, trans. Peter Below; ed. Von Hardesty (Washington: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1991); Von Hardesty, *Red Phoenix: The Rise of Soviet Air Power, 1941-1945* (Washington, DC: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1982); *Russian Aviation and Air Power in the Twentieth Century*, eds. Robin Higham, John T. Greenwood, and Von Hardesty (Portland, OR: Frank Cass, 1998); Kendall E. Bailes, *Technology and Society under Lenin and Stalin: origins of the Soviet technical intelligentsia, 1917-1941* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1978).

³⁵ *Pravda*, 18 October 1961; XXII S'ezd KPSS (Moscow: Politizdat, 1962), 411.

³⁶ On December 19, 1917, the Bolshevik government transferred the legal jurisdiction over changes in civil status from the church to the newly created Department for the Registration of Acts of Civil Status. On January 23, 1918,

campaigns,³⁷ and promoted atheism as part of the broader enlightenment mission³⁸—many Soviet citizens continued to turn to religion.³⁹ As Khrushchev stressed in his Congress speech, “survivals” of the former worldview, “like a nightmare, hold sway over the minds of living creatures, long after the economic conditions which gave them birth have vanished.”⁴⁰ The Marxist schema whereby religion would die out when its social and economic roots had been eliminated needed revision. It was not enough to develop socialism’s material-technical base—the Third Party Program underscored—in order to build communism, the *spiritual world* of Soviet society had to be transformed. Among the other ideological functions of cosmic exploration, then, atheists mobilized Soviet space achievements to affirm the correctness of the “scientific materialist worldview.” The philosophical significance of man’s new ability to leave the earth—the cosmonauts’ literal “storming of the heavens”—was intended to deal the final

the Bolsheviks separated Church and state and secularized education, thereby gaining unprecedented power over the population.

³⁷ On antireligious campaigns in the early Soviet period, see Mikhail Ivanovich Odintsov, *Gosudarstvo i tserkov' Istorii vzaimootnoshenii, 1917–1938 gg* (Moscow: Znanie, 1991); Valerii Arkadevich Alekseev, “*Shturm nebes otmeniaetsia?: kriticheskie ocherki po istorii bor'by s religiei v SSSR*” (Moscow: Rossiia molodaia, 1992); Glennys Young, *Power and the Sacred in Revolutionary Russia: Religious Activists in the Village* (University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1997); Arto Luukkanen, *The Religious Policy of the Stalinist State, A Case Study: The Central Standing Commission on Religious Questions, 1929–1938* (Helsinki: Suomen Historiallinen Seura, 1997); Daniel Peris, *Storming the Heavens: The Soviet League of the Militant Godless* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1998); William B. Husband, “*Godless Communists’: Atheism and Society in Soviet Russia, 1917–1932*” (DeKalb, IL: Northern Illinois University Press, 2000); Edward E. Roslof, *Red Priests: Renovatism, Russian Orthodoxy, and Revolution, 1905–1946* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2002); Heather J. Coleman, *Russian Baptists and Spiritual Revolution, 1905–1929* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2005); Paul Froese, *The Plot to Kill God: Findings from the Soviet Experiment in Secularization* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2008).

³⁸ On pre-revolutionary and early Soviet enlightenment efforts, see Jeffrey Brooks, *When Russia Learned to Read: Literacy and Popular Literature, 1861–1917* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1985). On the early Soviet period, see James T. Andrews, *Science for the Masses: The Bolshevik State, Public Science, and the Popular Imagination in Soviet Russia, 1917–1934* (College Station, TX: Texas A&M University Press, 2003). Importantly, the Soviet enlightenment campaign extended beyond education and the inculcation of high culture to a broader “civilizing” agenda. The *kul'turnost'* campaign emphasized personal hygiene, social propriety, and correct behavior. On the history of *kul'turnost'*, see Vadim Volkov, “The Concept of *Kul'turnost'*. Notes on the Stalinist Civilizing Process,” in *Stalinism: New Directions*, ed. Sheila Fitzpatrick (New York: Routledge, 2000) and Catriona Kelly, *Refining Russia: Advice Literature, Polite Culture, and Gender from Catherine to Yeltsin* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001).

³⁹ The Soviet state’s concern with the persistence of religiosity is evident in the reactivation of the antireligious campaign in the Khrushchev era after the relative calm in church-state relations in the second half of Stalin’s reign. On the revision of policy on religion between the Stalin and Khrushchev period, see Joan Delaney Grossman, “Khrushchev’s Antireligious Policy and the Campaign of 1954,” *Europe-Asia Studies* 24, no. 3 (January 1973): 374–386; John Anderson, *Religion, State, and Politics in the Soviet Union and Successor States* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1994); Mikhail Shkarovskii, *Russkaia Pravoslavnaia Tserkov' pri Staline i Khrushcheve: gosudarstvenno-tserkovnye otnosheniia v SSSR v 1939–1964 godakh* (Moscow: Krutitskoe patriarshee podvor'e, 1999); Tatiana A. Chumachenko, *Church and State in Soviet Russia: Russian Orthodoxy from World War II to the Khrushchev Years*, trans. and ed. Edward E. Roslof (Armonk, NY: M.E. Sharpe, 2002); Nathaniel Davis, *A Long Walk to Church: A Contemporary History of Russian Orthodoxy* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 2003); and the works of Dimitry V. Pospelovsky, especially *A History of Marxist-Leninist Atheism and Soviet Antireligious Policies* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1987) and *Totalitarizm i veroispovedanie* (Moscow: Bibleisko-bogoslovskii in-t sv. Apostola Andreia, 2003).

⁴⁰ *Pravda*, 18 October 1961; 22nd *S'ezd KPSS* (Moscow: Politizdat, 1962), 411.

blow to religion, which, against Marxist predictions, continued to frame the everyday cosmologies of many Soviet citizens.

Numerous studies have applied the conceptual frameworks of religious studies to the analysis of ideological regimes, yet scholars of religion, ideologies, and secularization have generally ignored the role of atheism in Marxism-Leninism. While on the surface Marxism-Leninism outlined a clearly materialist conception of the world, the relationship in Communist ideology between the material and the spiritual, the profane and the sacred, was far from unambiguous. In rejecting the religious cosmos, Soviet ideologists were left to see if it were possible for scientific materialism—which laid bare the constitution of the natural world—to mobilize the enthusiasm and belief that had for ages been cultivated and harnessed by religions. Indeed, while Communists generally saw Marxism-Leninism as a science that repudiated metaphysics, the questions Soviet theorists inherited from religion were as much philosophical as they were scientific. Could scientific materialism be infused with a spiritual component and remain scientific and materialist? Did belief in the Communist project unequivocally demand religious unbelief (and vice versa)?

By investigating the use of space conquest and cosmonauts in the practical application of atheist education, this chapter examines Soviet attempts to create and inculcate a Communist cosmology. It also analyzes the obstacles they encountered along the way. While the overlap of the Soviet space age with the revival of the campaign against religion during the Khrushchev-era “Thaw” were no coincidence, the precise nature of the relationship between these discrete phenomena—how they influenced, reinforced, and undermined each other—has not yet been examined. When taken in concert, the proclamation of the open path that human space travel opened to the future, and the inherent admission that tradition—in the form of “survivals”—still exercised a hold over the minds of Soviet people, produced a contradictory picture.

On the one hand, according to the widely-accepted narrative of modernity, the march of progress—industrialization, bureaucratization, the development of the welfare state, and the achievements of science and technology—should have rendered religious beliefs, indeed all beliefs that addressed themselves to supernatural forces and relied on faith, both intellectually obsolete and practically unnecessary. In the Marxist vision of modernity in particular, the transformation of the economic and material base of society, which, in the Soviet case, meant the construction of socialism, should have transformed the consciousness of individual citizens, leaving no room for faith. Surely, this logic went, the triumphs of science and technology, exemplified, among other things, by Soviet space conquests, proved the boundless potential of Mankind, guided in triumph over Nature not by God or any other supernatural force, but by the power of Reason and Enlightenment.

On the other hand, the persistent fact of Soviet religiosity—a fact that became an ever more apparent part of Soviet reality as the regime began to investigate this question on the ground—was an unsightly stain on the light of a secular modernity guided by human reason and developing according to patterns revealed by the scientific study of society. Faced with this contradiction within its ideological blueprint, the Soviet elite had to make a choice. Either the narrative had to be made to fit social reality, or social reality had to be made to fit the narrative. This was a familiar crossroads, one that had shadowed the regime from its revolutionary inception, and would continue to create a tension within Soviet ideology until the regime’s revolutionary demise. Much like their counterparts elsewhere, then, Soviet political officials, sociologists and cultural workers struggled to understand and manage changing landscapes of

religious and political beliefs, and to reconcile these with prevailing ideological narratives. An examination of their approaches provides a revealing comparative perspective on the universal questions addressed by all modern societies.

“The sky is empty!”

In October of 1962—five years after the Soviet Union launched “Sputnik,” the first artificial satellite of the Earth, on October 4, 1957; a year and a half after Soviet cosmonaut No. 1, Yuri Gagarin, completed the first manned space flight on April 12, 1961, to be followed shortly after, in August, by German Titov, Cosmonaut No. 2; and two months after cosmonauts No. 3 and 4, Adrian Nikolaev and Pavel Popovich, completed the first group orbit of the Earth—the Soviet popular journal *Science and Religion* published a lengthy editorial taking stock of the ‘first Cosmic Five-Year Plan.’⁴¹ “Five Years of Storming the Heavens,” as the editorial was called, marveled at Soviet accomplishments in an area that had, until recently, only existed in the realm of fantasy: human space travel.⁴² More specifically, the editorial re-addressed the question that had been haunting the imagination of both East and West in the course of these five space years: How did it come to be that the Soviet Union managed to do what “tsarist Russia could not even dream about,” namely, “the accomplishment of such heroic feats in the fight for progress, the competition with more technologically and economically developed countries”?⁴³ Why was it that it was *Soviet* cosmonauts who managed to fulfill the long-cherished dream of Man, when he “ceased to envy the bird” and flew, “relying not on the power of his muscles, but on the power of his reason”?⁴⁴ And finally, what did it mean that the first man who ‘stormed the heavens’ was “Gagarin—steel worker, son of a steel worker, from a peasant family, Russian, Soviet, Communist, [and] ‘godless’”?⁴⁵

In the ideological opposition of two world systems that defined the Cold War, Gagarin’s alleged “godlessness,” and the godlessness of cosmonauts in general, was not insignificant. The editorial claimed that Soviet supremacy in space had a direct connection to the system’s “scientific, materialist, and therefore [...] atheist worldview,” indeed, that this was “the logic of modern history.” Man’s path to the cosmos was lined with the “fierce resistance of religion,” yet “he chased out the mythical god from the boundaries of the earth,” made Nature submit to his will, and “became a giant, victorious over the elements, directing the laws of nature and society.” Finally, when he mastered the Earth, man began his conquest of the heavens, the “holy of holies.” Material objects “created by the sinful hands of the godless” broke through to the celestial spheres, and “man, whose insignificance the clergy has reiterated for centuries, is accomplishing space flights, creating and controlling artificial planets, and conquering the cosmos.”⁴⁶ This teleological narrative left little room for interpretation or doubt—it called for believers to abandon their “dark superstitions” and it urged atheists to combat religion, which remained an obstacle in the path to the enlightened society of the Communist future. With the

⁴¹ “Piat’ let shturmu kosmosa,” *Nauka i religiia*, no. 10 (October 1962): 3-8.

⁴² Ibid.

⁴³ “Address of the Central Committee of the KPSS, the Presidium of the Supreme Soviet and the government of the Soviet Union,” *Komsomol’skaia Pravda*, 13 April 1961.

⁴⁴ “Estafeta pokolenii,” *Nauka i religiia*, no. 9 (September 1962): 4.

⁴⁵ “Piat’ let shturmu kosmosa,” *Nauka i religiia*, no. 10 (October 1962): 5.

⁴⁶ Ibid.

dawn of the Space Age, atheists were mobilized to intensify atheist education, so that “the sun of Reason” would shine upon those who lagged behind the march of human progress.⁴⁷

The secularization narrative examined in this chapter presented secularism as a force that both made the scientific and technological feats of the space program possible, and the continuation of religious beliefs impossible. This was a prominent, and, importantly, not exclusively Soviet, response to space exploration. It cast the cosmic implications of human space travel as an advancement of science and technology that marginalized divine activity from everyday life, leaving a cosmos that, in the words of sociologist Peter Berger, “became amenable to the systematic, rational penetration, both in thought and activity.”⁴⁸ Yet as Science progressively conquered the heavens and collapsed the “sacred canopy,” it also undermined the existential foundations of individual life, leaving a “sky empty of angels” that became “open to the intervention of the astronomer, and, eventually, of the astronaut.”⁴⁹ Examined within the framework of religious belief, space journeys raised questions about man’s place in the cosmos, and the function of religiosity in modern life. In the Soviet Union, these new issues gave birth to a new genre within popular scientific literature that explored the philosophical implications of human penetration into the cosmos in publications with provocative titles like *The Conquest of Space and Religion*, *Science and Religion on the Meaning of Life: Answers to Questions*, or *Space, God and the Infinity of the Universe*.⁵⁰ Within the context of the Space Age, interactions between science and religion also shed light on the rise and wane of cosmic enthusiasm, and perhaps even on the life-cycle of Soviet utopianism in general.⁵¹

Stories that conformed to the master narrative of cosmic enlightenment—that Soviet space travels destroyed the boundary between the terrestrial and celestial and transformed the primitive cosmologies of believers—were gathered and widely publicized in press, radio and television. The formula was reproduced in popular periodicals that attacked religious worldviews by giving voice to scientific experts, cosmonauts, ordinary citizens and even former clergy. Indeed, the argument was believed to be all the more convincing if it came from the mouth of a Soviet everyman, or, even better, an apostate convinced by scientific achievements to abandon religious beliefs.

Even before Gagarin became the first person in space, *Science and Religion* published a letter to the editor from one Ivan Andreevich Dovgal, a worker from Cherkassy region, who

⁴⁷ “Piat’ let shturmu kosmosa,” *Nauka i religiia*, no. 10 (October 1962): 7.

⁴⁸ Peter L. Berger, *The Sacred Canopy: Elements of a Sociological Theory of Religion* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday & Company, Inc., 1967), 112-113. For examples of the classic secularization thesis, see the works of Robert Bellah, Steve Bruce, and Brian Wilson.

⁴⁹ Ibid.

⁵⁰ P. V. Liakhotskii’s *Zavoevanie kosmosa i religiia* (Groznyi: Checheno-Ingushskoe knizhnoe izdanie, 1964), is typical of the “space conquest in the war against religion” genre that emerged at this time. See also Sergei Fedorovich Anisimov, *Nauka i religiia o smysle zhizni: Otvetny na voprosy* (Moscow: Znanie, 1964); V. N. Komarov, *Kosmos, bog i vechnost’ mira* (Moscow: Gozpolitizdat, 1963); E. T. Fadeev, *O cheloveke, kosmose i boge* (Moscow: Znanie, 1965); G. I. Naan, *Chelovek, bog i kosmos* (Moscow: Sovetskaia Rossiia, 1963); *Zavoevanie neba i vera v boga. Sbornik statei*, ed. K. K. Gabova (Moscow: Znanie, 1964); B. M. Marianov, *Otvovannoe nebo* (Moscow: Moskovskii rabochii, 1971); *Voprosy mirovozzrenia v lektsiakh po astronomii: Sbornik* (Moscow: Znanie, 1974); “Kosmos, kosmogoniia, kosmologiia (Podborka statei i interview),” *Nauka i religiia*, no. 12 (December 1968).

⁵¹ Speculation on the topic was not confined to the Soviet press, but permeated religious and secular media abroad. For a thorough and provocative discussion of the range of religious responses to human space travel, see Ryan Jeffrey McMillen, “Space Rapture: Extraterrestrial Millennialism and the Cultural Construction of Space Colonization” (Ph.D. dissertation, University of Texas at Austin, 2004).

argued that the penetration of artificial satellites into outer space was a powerful argument against religious belief. Dovgal wrote that “the persistent religious beliefs of his co-workers truly made him incredulous; he could not understand how they could continue to believe in a heaven after death in light of the fact that, Soviet satellites circling the Earth at great heights have not discovered any heaven, that the Soviet rocket, flying around the Sun, likewise did not discover heaven...”⁵² Such rhetoric became much more common after Gagarin’s flight, when humans who had traveled to space could report on what they saw (or, more accurately, did not see) in the skies. An editorial in the central state newspaper, *Izvestiia*, exclaimed: “Iurii Gagarin really has given a terrible headache to believers! He flew right through the heavenly mansions and did not run into anyone: neither the Almighty, nor Archangel Gabriel, nor the angels of heaven. It seems, then, that the sky is empty!”⁵³

Testimonies by space travelers about the contents of the cosmos on both sides of the political divide inevitably carried ideological weight, and were a crucial, if peculiar, component of Cold War politics. Soviet Communists capitalized on Soviet space firsts to promote the truth of scientific-materialism, arguing that Soviet atheism removed the hurdles to space technology that still constrained the capitalist world with its religious reverence. Such statements were intended to provoke, and indeed did get responses from both the religious and the secular communities in the West. American astronauts, politicians, and even NASA officials countered Soviet attempts to marry space exploration with religious unbelief by describing American space missions using religious rhetoric. Further, they famously emphasized the religious worldviews of American astronauts in public press conferences and publications, and explicitly cast their belief in a higher power as compatible with scientific and technological progress. As the spiritual debate between the two world systems escalated, leaders on both sides weighed in on the issue of space exploration and human cosmology. The Soviet Union had asked Gagarin and Titov to keep an eye out for heaven, Khrushchev told the American press, and the cosmonauts reported that “there was nothing there.”⁵⁴ President Kennedy, meanwhile, chose the Presidential Prayer Breakfast to tell those gathered that religion was “the basis of the issue that separates us from those that make themselves our adversary.”⁵⁵ Their differences on the matter were cast as central indicators of their opposition in worldview and way of life.⁵⁶

Pronouncements attributed to Gagarin about the cosmos being devoid of God and angels took on a life of their own and the claim that Gagarin made these statements came to be accepted as fact.⁵⁷ Meanwhile, German Titov’s actual statement, at the Seattle World’s Fair on May 6,

⁵² “1000 Pisem,” *Nauka i religiiia*, no. 2 (February 1960): 8.

⁵³ Editorial, “Survey of Letters: What is God? [Two letters from former believers who have abandoned religion since Gagarin’s space flight],” *Izvestiia*, 23 May 1961, 4. In *Current Digest of the Soviet Press*, 13, no. 21 (1961): 28.

⁵⁴ C. L. Sulzberger, “Foreign Affairs: Paradise and Old Noah Khrushchev,” *New York Times*, 9 September 1961, 18. Cited in McMillen, 121.

⁵⁵ “Presidential Prayer Breakfast,” *New York Times*, 2 March 1962, 3.

⁵⁶ For a more detailed discussion of the escalation of the space theological debate between the American and Soviet sides, see McMillen, 115-137.

⁵⁷ The widespread claims about Gagarin’s statement are never cited, and I have yet to find a direct quote from him on the subject, yet there is no doubt that this statement was widely propagated, especially within the USSR. In his autobiographical *Moscow Stories*, Loren R. Graham, one of the most prominent historians of Soviet science, mentions that a pamphlet about this supposed statement by Gagarin was sold in the anti-religious bookstore in

1962, that, during his space flight, he “look[ed] around very attentively” but did not detect any deities caused a minor sensation in the American and foreign press. Accompanied by his announcement that he did not believe in God, but “in man, his strength, his possibilities, and his reason,” Titov’s words made him into the most public atheist cosmonaut.⁵⁸

Titov seemed to accept, perhaps even to cultivate, this role. Shortly after he accomplished the second Soviet space journey, a short article was published in *Science and Religion*, titled simply, “Did I Meet God?”⁵⁹ Authored by the cosmonaut himself, the article provided a direct answer to a question that he was asked often, wrote Titov. The Universe opened up to man, Titov pointed out, not to “a ghostly inhabitant of the heavens,” and he himself hoped at least to make it to the Moon. During his flight, he told readers, he heard a radio program in Japan that was discussing “god, saints, and other sly things.” He wanted to send them a greeting, but then thought, “What’s the point? What if they think that it’s true, that God does exist?” Regardless, Titov continued, “the prayers of believers will never reach God, if only because there is no air in that place where he is supposed to exist. So whether you pray or you don’t, God will not hear you. I never met anyone in space, and of course, it is impossible that I could have.”⁶⁰

After successful Soviet space flights, letters about the effect of space achievements on religious worldviews poured into newspapers, journals, and the mailboxes of cosmonauts themselves.⁶¹ The *Science and Religion* editorial cited letters from former believers—often elderly women, but sometimes ‘sectarians’ and even priests—who described how their beliefs were called into doubt by scientific evidence received in enlightenment lectures, and, in particular, by what they learned about Soviet space travel. One letter, from E. Danilova, a seventy-three year-old woman from Kuibyshev province, fit the conversion narrative so perfectly that it was not only printed in *Izvestiia*, but then cited and reproduced in numerous later publications, lectures and even Party meetings.⁶² Written in a colloquial, even folksy, tone, Danilova’s letter described her thoughts on the day of Gagarin’s flight:

On the 12th of April, in the morning, I was sitting on a little stool and heating the oven. Suddenly I hear the call sign on the radio. My heart stopped: could something have happened? [...]

And suddenly I hear: Man is in space! My God! I stopped heating up the oven, sat next to the radio receiver, afraid to step away even for a minute. And how much I reconsidered over the course of these minutes...

Zagorsk (Sergeev Posad). Loren R. Graham, *Moscow Stories* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2006), 178.

⁵⁸ Louis Cassels, “Religion in America,” *The Chicago Defender*, 26 May 1962, 8; “Titov, Denying God, Puts Faith in People,” *New York Times*, 7 May 1962. “Gherman Titov, Soviet cosmonaut, comments at World’s Fair, Seattle, Washington, May 6, 1962,” *The Seattle Daily Times*, 7 May 1962, 2.

⁵⁹ G. Titov, “Vstrelil li ia boga?” *Nauka i religiia*, no. 1 (January 1962): 10.

⁶⁰ Ibid.

⁶¹ In his study of Russian popular culture, Richard Stites notes that Gagarin’s brother described hundreds of letters that the cosmonaut received from former believers testifying to their atheist conversions. Richard Stites, *Russian Popular Culture: Entertainment and Society since 1900* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1992), 175.

⁶² The editorial cites believers who “came to the same conclusion” as Danilova – three Orthodox women, from Moscow, Odessa, and Vinnitsa, and another three Baptist women (one Nina Velikanova and her two friends). The editorial also mentions the conversion of the priest Darmanskii, who felt his belief called into doubt during a scientific-atheist lecture on astronomy, and another priest from the Kiev region, Sokorevich. “Piat’ let shturmu kosmosa,” *Nauka i religiia*, no. 10 (October 1962): 8.

How can this be? – Man wants to be higher than God! But we were always told that God is in the heavens, so how can a man fly there and not bump into Elijah the Prophet or one of God’s angels? How can it be that God, if he is all-powerful, allow such a breach of his authority? [...] What if God punishes him for his insolence? But on the radio they say he has landed! Thank God—he’s alive and well! I couldn’t hold myself back and crossed myself.

Now I am convinced that God is Science, is Man.

Iurii Gagarin overcame all belief in heavenly powers that I had in my soul. He himself inhabits the skies, and there is no one in the sky more powerful than him. Glory to you, Soviet man, conqueror of the skies!⁶³

Nikolai Fedorovich Rusanov, a former priest who, after Gagarin’s flight, renounced religion and became an active atheist agitator, described his own path towards faith in science as a journey of liberation. In a 1962 letter to the editor of the Party journal *Kommunist*, Rusanov cast himself as a “‘prodigal son’ who has returned, after his delusions, to the unified Soviet family.”⁶⁴ Traveling around Russia as a lecturer, Rusanov was one of many former priests and seminarians who contributed to atheist education by publicly proclaiming their break with religion. Rusanov described himself in the twenty years of his previous (religious) life, as having been “removed from the world, bringing no benefit to myself, to society, or the government.” It is only after he opened his eyes to the disgraceful, scandalous lives of the clergy and the “glaring” contradictions between the Bible and science that he gradually lost his belief. “Is it even possible,” Rusanov asks, “in this century of the atom, of artificial satellites, the century of the conquest of the cosmos, of flights to the stars, to believe in [the idea] that somewhere there is a God, angels, devils, an ‘afterlife’?”⁶⁵ In light of these scientific discoveries, Rusanov writes, religious belief is impossible, and the clergy, which knows this, continues to serve the Church because of financial incentives. Rusanov’s narrative, typical of the times, depicted the Church as fundamentally tainted by corruption and hypocrisy, and religious belief as inherently deluded and anti-social.⁶⁶ As a result, atheist education gained a missionary urgency.

The people want to know the truth about religion, especially now, when it is becoming clear to many that religion is a lie and many cease to believe in God. It is in this period that it is necessary to make antireligious propaganda more aggressive, to have more individual conversations with believers, more accessible lectures that would force the believer to think about his situation, so that he understands the harm of religion, so that he knows how he is deceived by the

⁶³ Danilova’s letter is originally published in “Survey of Letters: What is God?,” *Izvestiia*, 23 May 1961, 4. Danilova is also cited in P. V. Liakhotskii’s *Zavoevanie kosmosa i religiia* (Groznyi: Checheno-Ingushskoe knizhnoe izdanie, 1964), 64-68; and V. Bazykin, “V nebesakh chelovek, a ne bog,” *Sovetskie profsoiuzy*, no. 13 (1961): 28. For other examples of “conversion” stories, see *Komsomol’skaia Pravda*, 13 August 1962; “Estafeta pokolenii” *Nauka i religiia*, no. 9, (September 1962): 5; “Piat’ let shturmu kosmosa,” *Nauka i religiia*, no. 10 (October 1962): 3-8; and *Izvestiia*, 22 May 1961.

⁶⁴ Rossiiskii gosudarstvennyi arkhiv sotsial’no-politicheskoi istorii [henceforth RGASPI], f. 599, op. 1, d. 211, ll. 116-121.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, 117-118.

⁶⁶ On Soviet atheist depictions of religious beliefs and practices as anti-social, see Sonja Christine Luehrmann, “Forms and Methods: Teaching Atheism and Religion in the Mari Republic, Russian Federation,” (Ph.D. dissertation, University of Michigan, 2009).

clergy, so that he is convinced that man's life is guided not by God but by man himself. It is man who, without the help of God, builds a new and joyous life. The believer should not wait for a heavenly paradise, because it does not and will not exist, but an earthly paradise, which will be built within the next 15-20 years here, in our godless Soviet country. The name of this paradise is Communism.⁶⁷

Conversion narratives such as Danilova's and Rusanov's are both striking and peculiar for their conflation of what are typically considered two distinct, even contradictory, modes of thought—the scientific and the magical. Danilova's rhetoric, despite her newly found faith in science, can hardly be described as secular. It is imbued with an exalted language that replaces religious faith with a millennial belief in the redemptive potential of scientific progress, and substitutes one charismatic figure in the heavens (God) with another (Gagarin). Likewise, Rusanov, with his conviction that a Communist paradise is immanent, uses an exalted, almost evangelical, language. In such conversions, one could argue, the object of devotion had been transformed, but not the pattern of thinking.

On the one hand, conversion testimonies of this nature—whether they came from ordinary people, scientists, cosmonauts or priests—were often pronounced crude and simplistic even at the time by religious, secular and even some Soviet atheist commentators.⁶⁸ On the other hand, ruminations about the metaphysical implications of human space travel fell within a long tradition that saw technological developments as a means to achieving utopian ends—extraterrestrial colonization, overcoming death, the evolution of a qualitatively new kind of human being, or any combination of the above. The relationship of the magical and the scientific is not only central to human thought about space travel, but is inseparable from the technological utopianism of the founding fathers of rocket science. This paradoxical co-existence of the religio-magical and the scientific-technological propelled space enthusiasm in the public imagination. Such metaphysical claims not only provoked strong, polarized responses, but also caused both believers and atheists to re-examine their assumptions about the relationship between science and religion and the nature of an individual's faith in either or both. And nothing had the potential to enact the drama of the individual's place in the cosmos than the stories of actual individuals who physically traveled to the frontiers of the technologically possible and the philosophically imaginable.

Soviet Pioneers of the Universe and Cosmic Horror

In November 1960, on the cusp of history's first manned spaceflight, the journal *Problems of Philosophy (Voprosy filosofii)* published an article that explored the “social and humanistic” significance of man's immanent conquest of the cosmos, titled “Man in the epoch of cosmic flights.”⁶⁹ The author, Ernst Kolman, a Czech-born Professor of Mathematics and an old Bolshevik who had once been a confidant of Lenin and a student of Einstein, put forth a set of

⁶⁷ RGASPI, f. 599, op. 1, d. 211, l. 121.

⁶⁸ In my interviews with former atheist agitators, the argument that space travel proved that heaven and deities did not exist was almost unanimously invoked as an example of the “vulgar atheism” from which the subject sought to distance him/herself. Olga Brushlinskaia (editor-in-chief of the journal *Nauka i religia*), interview, Moscow, Russia, 7 December 2008.

⁶⁹ E. Kolman, “Chelovek v epokhu kosmicheskikh poletov,” *Voprosy filosofii*, no. 11 (November 1960): 124-132.

prognoses about the future of space exploration.⁷⁰ He saw human space travel as the “first steps” toward man’s final triumph over nature and the exploration and gradual colonization of outer space.⁷¹ In a mystical tone reminiscent of Russian Cosmism, the scientific-utopian philosophy that had been popular in the early twentieth century, Kolman proposed that man, standing at the top of the evolutionary ladder, mastered technology to conquer nature, thereby making it possible to overturn the trajectory of biological development. “Why then,” Kolman asks, “would he be unable to turn the course of events, to overcome death, which like a mystical fate threatens him?”⁷²

Kolman explored the necessary moral, physical and temperamental make-up of the potential cosmonaut,⁷³ and suggested the possible physiological and psychological effects of space journeys. He took it as self-evident that space travel would produce different effects based on whether the space traveler came from a capitalist or a socialist society, and suggested that produced persons better equipped for the hardships of space exploration.⁷⁴ Naturally, Soviet “pioneers of the universe” would have a highly collective mentality and superb control over machinery, but they would also be immune to certain emotions—fear, cowardice, loneliness, or the sense of abandonment. “In their consciousness,” Kolman wrote, “there will be no room for any kind of religious survivals, and everything ‘supernatural’ will be alien to them.”⁷⁵ Most importantly, the ideal socialist cosmonaut would not be susceptible to the “atavistic, mystical feeling of ‘cosmic horror,’” but would manifest an entirely new perception of the world.

Kolman’s description of the “horror” that threatened those who confronted the cosmos brought attention to the philosophical and psychological dimensions of cosmic conquests, and after Gagarin’s flight, discussions about “cosmic horror” echoed in the semi-public world of the official Soviet intelligentsia. A “Knowledge” Society Plenum that took place on 20-21 April, 1961, shortly after Gagarin’s flight, underscored the significance of Soviet space victories for the inculcation of the “communist worldview.” Mark Borisovich Mitin, a prominent Marxist philosopher in the Soviet academic establishment, described “cosmic horror” as an affliction that was profoundly foreign to the worldview of Soviet cosmonauts.⁷⁶ The essence of “cosmic horror”—the panic that threatens to overtake the space traveler when he observes his own planet from beyond—was “characteristic of that mood which currently exists in the capitalist world.” This unearthly emotion, moreover, was itself “a bright expression of the collapse of heroism in which bourgeois philosophy finds itself,” and of the “horror [and] despair that grips those who

⁷⁰ Kolman came to Russia as a prisoner of war. He studied at the Moscow State University, worked with Khrushchev and Kaganovich in the Moscow City government over the course of the 1930s, and was head of the Moscow Mathematical Society (1930-1932) and deputy head of the Science department of the Moscow Party organs. See Arnosht (Ernst) Kolman, *My ne dolzhny byli tak zhit’* (New York: Chalidze Publications, 1982); and William Taubman, *Khrushchev: The Man and His Era* (New York: Norton, 2003), 91-93. I am grateful to Professor John Connelly for drawing my attention to Kolman’s biography.

⁷¹ Kolman proposed actual colonies as humans made their way to the Moon, Mars, and Venus, then the rest of the galaxy and finally beyond.

⁷² Kolman, 132.

⁷³ For an excellent analysis of the physical and psychological preparation of Soviet cosmonauts, see Slava Gerovitch, “‘New Soviet Man’ Inside Machine: Human Engineering, Spacecraft Design, and the Construction of Communism,” *OSIRIS* (2007): 22, 152.

⁷⁴ Kolman, 127.

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, 128.

⁷⁶ Mitin was chairman of the “Knowledge” Society (1956-1960), and the editor of *Problems of Philosophy* (1960-1968).

think about the course of events [...] that the world of capitalism is rolling towards absolute annihilation.”⁷⁷ Soviet scientific materialism, on the other hand, “inspires man with boundless perspectives, gives him faith in knowledge, gives him that conviction with which man accomplishes his heroic deeds.” This is why, Mitin puts forth, when Gagarin was asked what he saw during his trip in space, he said he saw “great beauty.”

While “cosmic horror” was presented as the dominant mood of the capitalist world, Gagarin’s wonder at the beauty of the universe was presented as the “mood of the Soviet person, who constantly opens new horizons.” The mission of ideologists, Mitin emphasized, was to harness the charisma of Soviet space achievements and of heroic cosmonauts, and to “present [the audience] with the proper appraisal of events, to show them the meaning of what has occurred, [and] to tie these events with our socialist system, for only socialism can give birth to such people, such technology, and such heroic deeds.”⁷⁸ The cosmonaut A. A. Leonov described the emotional, psychological and physiological effect produced by his own space travel, and emphasized that during his famous space walk, he did not succumb to the primitive, reflexive fear of infinite space that man inherited from his animal ancestors; and was able to “remove the psychological barrier upon existing the spaceship” as a result of his training. Instead of “cosmic horror,” Leonov likened his space walk to “swimming above an enormous colorful map.”⁷⁹ Soviet cosmonauts, as ideal products of socialism and model Soviet citizens, co-authored scientific publications,⁸⁰ published statements about their own paths to atheist conviction,⁸¹ and even weighed in on immortality and the meaning of life.⁸²

“The world is not what it seems”: The War of Science and Religion in Soviet Atheism

The Bolshevik assumption of power revolutionized the relationship between religious and secular institutions and beliefs. Administratively, Bolsheviks secularized the country’s bureaucracy and educational institutions shortly after the October 1917, while culturally, atheism was recast from a radical intellectual platform, as it had been under the Imperial order, into its opposite—a state-supported ideology promoted through the entire bureaucratic apparatus of the new regime.⁸³ In the first two decades of Soviet power, atheist propaganda approaches—most prominently coordinated by the Communist Youth Organization (Komsomol) and the League of Militant Atheists—generally fell into two categories: politically-motivated anti-religious agitation and scientific enlightenment. The first approach cast atheists as merciless crusaders whose primary objective was to unmask church dogma and the clergy in order to destroy

⁷⁷ Gosudarstvennyi arkhiv Rossiiskoi Federatsii [henceforth GARF], f. 9547, op. 1, d. 1209, l. 287.

⁷⁸ Ibid.

⁷⁹ Letchik-kosmonavt A. A. Leonov i kandidat meditsinskikh nauk Lebedev, “Proniknovenie v kosmos I otrazhenie chelovekom prostranstva na Zemle,” *Voprosy filosofii*, no. 1 (1966): 3.

⁸⁰ (Cosmonaut) Iurii Gagarin and kandidat meditsinskikh nauk Lebedev, “Osvoenie Luny chelovekom,” *Voprosy Filosofii*, no. 3 (1966): 25.

⁸¹ (Cosmonaut) Georgii Timofeevich Beregovoi, “Shagi po zemle, shagi v kosmose,” *Ia—ateist: 25 otvetov na vopros ‘Pochemu vy ateist?’* (Moscow: Izdatel’stvo politicheskoi literatury, 1980), 17-21. (Cosmonaut) Oleg Grigorievich Makarov, “Ia-veriashchii,” *Ia—ateist: 25 otvetov na vopros ‘Pochemu vy ateist?’* (Moscow: Izdatel’stvo politicheskoi literatury, 1980), 22-27.

⁸² (Cosmonaut) Konstantin Feoktistov, “Neskol’ko slov o bessmertii,” *Nauka i religiia*, no. 4 (1966).

⁸³ On the intellectual history of atheism in Imperial Russia, Victoria Sophia Frede, “The rise of unbelief among educated Russians in the late imperial period,” (Ph.D. dissertation, University of California, Berkeley, 2002).

religion's influence among the population. Religious institutions were depicted as a politically subversive, even anti-revolutionary force, and the battle against them focused on the repression and persecution of the clergy, the requisition and destruction of church property, and the undermining of belief in material manifestations of the supernatural (such as the relics of saints, holy wells or miraculous icons).⁸⁴

While the iconoclastic anti-religious campaigns of early militant atheists are generally well known,⁸⁵ the second approach—scientific enlightenment—has received less attention. The historian James T. Andrews argues that Bolsheviks “saw science enlightenment as an inherently transformative venue for shaping Russian culture.”⁸⁶ Unlike politically motivated anti-religious rhetoric, scientific enlightenment cast religious believers as victims, rather than perpetrators, and atheism as the war of light against darkness. Such popular science education had its roots in the pre-revolutionary decades and mobilized both those who propagated a utopian view of the potential of science to triumph over nature, as well as those who saw their work as a civic mission and were more committed to the practical, rather than the ideological, function of scientific. The objectives of the scientific intelligentsia—who did not necessarily see the eradication of religion as an end in itself, but rather as a means for overcoming non-scientific thinking, dovetailed with the explicitly anti-religious mission of Bolshevik atheists.⁸⁷ For Bolshevik atheists the story had clear heroes and villains: unlike science popularizers, they presented science as the untiring enemy of religion, a constant thorn in the sides religious authorities who persistently sought to circumscribe and silence scientific advancement. Religion was embedded into a narrative of man's historic attempts to manage his powerlessness in the face of the sublime forces that governed the universe, and depicted atheism as the gradual evolution of man's understanding of the cosmos. Naturally, this tale of progress concluded with the human triumph over nature.⁸⁸

What makes the early Soviet enlightenment project peculiar, though, is that the dream of scientific enlightenment was never dependent on the cult of pure reason. Alongside the efforts to disenchant the universe by laying bare its foundations, ran a related, but not overlapping, current

⁸⁴ On anti-religious propaganda and policies, see Dimitrii Pospelovskii, *A History of Marxist-Leninist Atheism and Soviet Antireligious Policies* (London: Macmillan, 1987); Dimitrii Pospelovskii, *The Orthodox Church in the history of Russia* (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1998).

⁸⁵ See Husband, “*Godless Communists*”: *Atheism and Society in Soviet Russia, 1917-1932*; Froese, *The Plot to Kill God: Findings from the Soviet Experiment in Secularization*; Young, *Power and the Sacred in Revolutionary Russia*; Valerii Arkadevich Alexeev, “*Shturm nebes*” *otmeniaetsia?: kriticheskie ocherki po istorii bor'by s religiei v SSSR* (Moscow: Rossiia molodaia, 1992); and Peris, *Storming the Heavens*.

⁸⁶ Two studies that do focus on scientific education provide insight into the broader context of atheism and enlightenment. See Brooks, *When Russia Learned to Read*; Andrews, *Science for the Masses*, 6.

⁸⁷ Jeffrey Brooks argues that for many intellectuals involved in the enlightenment project the battle was against superstition rather than religion, and points out that priests and teachers were allied with authors of popular literature in the task of enlightening the population. Superstition was “clearly not equated” with religion, “nor was atheism considered a necessary concomitant to the rational world view.” See Brooks, *When Russia Learned to Read*, 251. James Andrews demonstrates that the primary goal of science popularizers was to demystify natural occurrences and explain evolutionary phenomena from a scientific perspective Andrews, *Science for the Masses*, 104-105, 172.

⁸⁸ The first Soviet atheist works that strove to get beyond the political battle against religious institutions presented religion as a phenomenon with a pre-determined life-cycle. Since the source of religion's vitality was the ignorance of believers, the principal weapon against it was education. Emblematic of this approach are the works of Emelian Iaroslavskii, the leading Soviet atheist of the prewar period and the head of the League of Militant Atheists. Emelian Iaroslavskii, *Kak rodiatsia, zhivut i umiraiut bogi i bogini* (Moscow: Sovetskaiia Rossiia, 1959), and Emelian Iaroslavskii, *Bibliia dlia veruiushchikh i neveruiushchikh* (Leningrad: Lenizdat, 1975).

of scientific thought—a mystical, utopian understanding of Science and technology and its potential to overcome space, time and death itself.⁸⁹ Popular scientific enlightenment, Jeffrey Brooks notes, put forth Science as a modern ideal but it also represented its virtues as more akin to magic than logic.⁹⁰ The boundaries between scientific enlightenment and technological or mystical utopianism were especially permeable in the case of speculation about cosmic journeys. Russian and later Soviet scientific thought was propelled by fantastical leaps of imagination—most famously, the Cosmic philosophy of Nikolai Feodorov—that was central to Russian visions of human space travel.⁹¹ Indeed, the historian Asif Siddiqi shows, it was an enchanted cosmos that propelled the imagination of Konstantin Tsiolkovskii, the “grandfather” of Soviet space technology, and made the space program possible.⁹²

Perhaps because the border between these two traditions was so porous, the battle over the cosmos was often depicted quite literally. The stakes of the conflict hinged on the question of who ultimately had authority over the cosmos and its contents, and Soviet atheist rhetoric mobilized art, science and even military technology in the service of anti-religious agitation.⁹³ The atheist journal *Bezbozhnik*, for example, illustrated deities and angels fleeing the heavens as they are being chased and assaulted by proletarians, “godless” airplanes, and even artists. One

⁸⁹ On utopian and mystical scientific thought, see Asif A. Siddiqi, “Imagining the Cosmos: Utopians, Mystics, and the Popular Culture of Spaceflight in Revolutionary Russia,” *OSIRIS* 23 (2008): 260-288; James T. Andrews, “In Search of a Red Cosmos: Space Exploration, Public Culture and Soviet Society,” in *Societal Impact of Spaceflight*, ed. Steven J. Dick and Roger D. Launius (Washington, DC: National Aeronautics and Space Administration, History Division, 2007); Alexander C. T. Geppert, “Flights of Fancy: Outer Space and the European Imagination, 1923-1969,” in *Societal Impact of Spaceflight*, ed. Steven J. Dick and Roger D. Launius (Washington, DC: National Aeronautics and Space Administration, History Division, 2007); Igor A. Kazus, “The Idea of Cosmic Architecture and the Russian Avant-garde of the Early Twentieth Century,” *Cosmos: From Romanticism to the Avant-Garde*, ed. Jean Clair (Montreal, Quebec: Montreal Museum of Fine Arts, 1999). On Fedorovism and Russian Cosmism, see Michael Hagemester, “Russian Cosmism in the 1920s and Today,” in *The Occult in Russian and Soviet Culture*, ed. Bernice Glatzer Rosenthal, ed. (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1997), 185-202, and Olga Matich, *Erotic Utopia: The Decadent Imagination in Russia’s Fin de Siècle* (Madison, WI: University of Wisconsin Press, 2005).

⁹⁰ Brooks, 259.

⁹¹ Richard Stites sheds light on the contradictory nature of the early Soviet scientific enlightenment, arguing that the fascination with immortality and space travel “illustrate[s] vividly the relationship between the futuristic speculation and pathos of the period and the reality from which it arose: immortality yearned for in a land still groaning from a decade of holocaust; space flight, in a land where wooden plow and horse-cart were everyday sights.” Richard Stites, *Revolutionary Dreams: Utopian Vision and Experimental Life in the Russian Revolution* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1989), 169.

⁹² On the intellectual world of Tsiolkovskii, see Siddiqi, “Imagining the Cosmos”; James T. Andrews, *Red Cosmos: K. E. Tsiolkovskii: Grandfather of Soviet Rocketry* (Texas: Texas A&M University Press, 2009); and McMillen, *Space Rapture: Extraterrestrial Millennialism and the Cultural Construction of Space Colonization*, 53. McMillen describes Tsiolkovskii as “more metaphysicist than engineer.” This intertwining of mystical and technological utopianism, Svetlana Boym suggests, is “part of a history of technology in Russia, an ‘enchanted technology’ founded on charisma as much as calculus, on pre-modern myth as well as modern science.” See Svetlana Boym, “Kosmos: Remembrances of the Future,” in *Kosmos: A Portrait of the Russian Space Age* (New York: Princeton Architectural Press, 2001), 83.

⁹³ As if to underscore the thin line between the metaphorical and the literal, the Militant Atheists raised funds for the construction of a “Bezbozhnik” airplane (later followed by a “Bezbozhnik” tank and submarine). The League ceremonially presented the airplane as a gift to the Red Army in June 1929. Resources were mobilized with calls for donations in the League’s periodicals. See “SVB v bor’be za mobilizatsiiu sredstv, *Antireligioznik*, no. 6 (1935): 62. On atheist propaganda in the Soviet industrial complex, see V. N. Kuriatnikov, “Vlianie religioznoi obstanovki SSSR na stanovlenie neftianogo kompleksa Uralo-Povolzhia v 30-50ee gg. 20th veka,” *Religiovedenie: Nauchno teroeticheskii zhurnal*, no. 4 (2006).

cartoon depicted an artist who had climbed an enormous ladder beyond the clouds in order to beat emaciated angels out of the heavens with an oversized pencil.⁹⁴

Early atheist propaganda is also striking for the way it mobilized professional scientists in the mass campaign against religion. Nikolai Petrovich Kamenshchikov, a Professor of Astronomy at Leningrad University and a public atheist, published works that exploited Astronomy in the service of atheism, as did a number of other prominent scientists of the time. Such publications, usually intended for uneducated and often illiterate audiences and written in an accessible vernacular, outlined the blows astronomy dealt to religion, beginning with Copernicus' heretical heliocentric cosmos.⁹⁵ They sought to undermine religious cosmologies by attacking popular understandings of time and space.⁹⁶ Exemplary of this genre was Kamenshchikov's book *Chto videli na nebe popy, a chto videm my* (*What the Priests Saw in the Skies, and What We See*), whose purpose was to unmask such concepts as Heaven, Hell, Purgatory, and Apocalypse.⁹⁷ The cover illustration showed the night sky split in half: on one side, a distraught priest raised his hands to a heaven occupied by angels, saints and even a Buddha; on the other, the skies, empty of deities and seemingly infinite, await discoveries by the enormous telescope in the foreground. For these early atheists, the battle with religion was not just historical. Indeed, in perhaps one of the most peculiar episode of engagement of scientists in anti-religious work, Soviet astronomers, Kamenshchikov among them, critiqued the Vatican's historic relationship with scientific progress in an open, published letter addressed to Pope Pius XI.⁹⁸ By asserting the authority of astronomy over the past, future and nature of the universe,

⁹⁴ *Bezbozhnik* contained articles linking flight and religion, such as "The Church and Aviation," (*Bezbozhnik*, 1935, no. 8) and illustrations of technology colonizing the sky: an airplane with "Bezbozhnik" written across the body pursuing God and a cupid as they fly off into the distance (cover of *Bezbozhnik* no. 22, November 1928); a woman parachuting in front of a church with an airplane flying in the background, and the a zeppelin serenely floating above the city. See *Bezbozhnik*, no. 11 (1928) cover; no. 2 (1935) cover; and no. 8 (1935) cover.

⁹⁵ See the works of Kamenshchikov and Grigorii Abramovich Gurev, such as *Kopernikovskaia eres' v proshlom i nastoiashchem i istoriia vzaimootnoshenii nauki i religii* (Leningrad: GAIZ, 1933) and *Nauka i religiia o vselenoi* (Moscow: OGIA, 1934). See also Gurev's articles in the atheist journal *Antireligioznik*: G. Gurev, "Vopros o nachale i kontse vselenoi v propagande bezbozhii," *Antireligioznik*, no. 7 (July 1926): 17-26; G. Gurev, "Vopros o nachale i kontse vselenoi v propagande bezbozhii (prodolzhenie)," *Antireligioznik*, no. 9 (October 1926): 55-62; G. Gurev, "Vopros o nachale i kontse vselenoi v propagande bezbozhii (konets)," *Antireligioznik*, no. 10 (October 1926): 11-21.

⁹⁶ For instance, Kamenshchikov's *Pravda o nebe: Antireligioznye besedy s krest'ianami o mirozdanii* (*The Truth about the Sky: Antireligious Conversations with Peasants about the Origins of the World*) (Leningrad: Priboi, 1931), covered folk beliefs such as "How Kuzma forecast the weather" and "The Beginning and the End of the World." *Mir Bezbozhnika* (*The World of the Atheist*) (Leningrad: Priboi, 1931), asserted the authority of science over the cosmos with chapters like "The world is not as it seems, and is not as it is presented by the church"; "The construction and evolution of the universe"; and the past and future of the earth. Besides his prolific atheist publications, Professor Kamenshchikov also set up an astronomical exhibit of Foucault's Pendulum at the St. Isaac Cathedral in Leningrad, which briefly served as an antireligious museum. Kamenshchikov published other works that used astronomical findings in atheist propaganda, as well as prominent and widely used Astronomy textbooks. See Kamen'shchikov, N. *Astronomiia bezbozhnika* (Leningrad: Priboi, 1931); *Astronomicheskie zadachi dlia iunoshestva* (GIZ, 1923); *Nachal'naia astronomiia* (GIZ, 1924).

⁹⁷ N. Kamenshchikov, *Chto videli na nebe popy, a chto videm my* (Moscow: Ateist, 1930).

⁹⁸ The letter was published in *Izvestiia* on 27 March 1930, and reproduced in the popular science journal *Mirovedenie*, no. 3-4 (1930): 141-149. A response to an alleged comment made by the Pope about the repression of culture and science in the Soviet Union, the letter was a Soviet critique of the Vatican's historic repression of astronomers and science in general.

atheists sought to win a battle for the hearts and minds of the population, which they seemed to believe hinged on their ability to claim the heavens.

The Planetarium: Proletarian Theater of Scientific Enlightenment

At the end of the Soviet 1920s, during the height of atheist enthusiasm, the Commissariat of Enlightenment's Glavnauka branch proposed the construction of "a new type of enlightenment institution" in Moscow: a Planetarium.⁹⁹ Designed by architects M. Barshch and M. Siniavskii, the Moscow Planetarium, a brilliant example of Constructivist architecture, was conceived as a monument to technology and Scientific Materialism. Indeed, considering the material conditions of the U.S.S.R. in the 1920s, the mobilization of resources for the construction of a planetarium is evidence of the faith in the potential of scientific enlightenment to lift the veil from the cosmos.¹⁰⁰ Designed according to the most progressive principles in Soviet construction and city planning, and armed with the latest German equipment, the Planetarium concentrated the hopes of the Soviet enlightenment project and the individuals whose task it was to make it reality.¹⁰¹ The Planetarium's location, next to the Moscow Zoo, was emblematic of the didactic vision planned for the space: in one trip, a visitor, with the guidance of educational lectures, could physically and intellectually follow the path of evolution and uncover the material nature of the universe.

Underscoring the transformative potential of the Planetarium, the Constructivist artist Aleksey Gan described it as "an optical scientific theater" whose primary function was to "foster a love for science in the viewer."¹⁰² Interestingly, Gan sees the theater in general as a regressive, rather than a progressive, force—"a building in which religious services are held" and "no matter how formally these services are conducted, or which cult is the object of their devotion [...] does not change the essence of the affair." The theater, Gan writes, is nothing other than the space to satisfy a primitive instinct for spectacle, an instinct that will persist "until society grows to the level of a scientific understanding [of the world] and the instinctual need for spectacle comes up against the real phenomena of the world and technology." The Planetarium, then, while still satisfying the instinct for spectacle, "goes from servicing religion to servicing science." In this new type of theater, the workings of the universe are revealed to the masses; everything is "mechanized" and people are no longer pretending (as they would in a traditional theater), but "directing one of the world's most technologically complicated machines." As a result, the Planetarium experience enlightens the viewer; it "helps him forge within himself a scientific

⁹⁹ *Sovremennaia arkhitektura*, no. 3 (1927): 79.

¹⁰⁰ Likewise testifying to the ideological importance the Soviet regime invested in the planetarium is the fact that its construction was strongly supported by Emelian Iaroslavskii, head of the League of Militant Atheists. According to I. F. Shevliakov, a long-time planetarium lecturer, Iaroslavskii stated that "Priestly fables about the universe turn to dust in the face of scientific conclusions, which are supported by the kind of picture of the world provided by the Planetarium." See Tsentral'nyi arkhiv goroda Moskvy [henceforth TsAGM], f. 1782, op. 3, d. 183, l. 7.

¹⁰¹ Catherine Cooke points out that the Planetarium not only performed inherently modern functions, but by default relied on advanced foreign technology and required new equipment and methods of construction that progressive Soviet architects hoped would finally jump start bureaucratic inertia to promote more rational Soviet construction practices and herald a new era of progressive city planning. See Catherine Cooke, *Russian Avant-Garde: Theories of Art, Architecture, and the City* (London: Academy Editions, 1995), 133-135. Technological equipment for the first Soviet planetarium was purchased in Germany for gold.

¹⁰² Aleksey Gan, "Novomu teatru—novoe zdanie," *Sovremennaia arkhitektura*, no. 3 (1927): 80-81.

understanding of the world and rid himself of the fetishism of a savage, of priestly prejudices, and of the civilized Europeans' pseudo-scientific worldview."¹⁰³

When the first Soviet Planetarium opened its doors in Moscow, in November 1929, the confidence that the light of science would defeat the darkness of religion was paramount. In the years before the Second World War, the planetarium hosted over 18,000 lectures and eight million visitors. It organized a young astronomer's circle (*kruzhok*); a "star theater," comprised of Moscow actors, that put on plays about Galileo, Giordano Bruno and Copernicus; and a "stratospheric committee" that investigated the atmosphere and issues of reactive motion. Among its members the committee could count the mechanical engineer and "tireless space crusader" Fridrikh Tsander, as well as the "father" of the Soviet space program, Sergei Korolev.¹⁰⁴ The main question that worried atheists was not *if* their conquest of the heavens, the assault of scientific materialism on religious mentalities, would ultimately be victorious. Rather, the question was *when* and through what means victory would finally be achieved. By the time Ostap Bender, the paradigmatic Soviet conman of Ilf and Petrov's novels of the period, waged war with Catholic priests for the soul of his accomplice Kozlevich, he simply declared the nonexistence of God a "medical fact."¹⁰⁵ After winning the stunned Kozlevich away from the priests, he tried to comfort Kozlevich's fears that "he would not make it to the heavens" by confidently stating, "the heavens are becoming desolate. It's no longer that epoch [...] Angels now want to come to earth [...], [where] there are municipal services, a planetarium, where it is possible to look at the stars while listening to an anti-religious lecture."¹⁰⁶ Whether Kozlevich found these assurances comforting is another question.

Soviet Atheist Education: Death and Rebirth

Despite auspicious beginnings, Stalin's reign did not turn out to be a fortuitous time for the new theater of scientific enlightenment, and Moscow's Planetarium remained the only planetarium in the Soviet Union for nearly twenty years. The consolidation of the Stalinist regime in the mid-1930s was accompanied by the rejection of early ideological utopianism in favor of a more conservative, traditionalist position and more immediate priorities: industrialization and the inculcation of Soviet patriotism.¹⁰⁷ Stalin's need to mobilize the population for war, and later, to re-establish control in formerly occupied areas precipitated a re-evaluation of the Soviet state's relationship with the Russian Orthodox Church,¹⁰⁸ with the

¹⁰³ Gan, 81.

¹⁰⁴ B. A. Vorontsov-Veliaminov, *Astronomicheskaiia Moskva v 20e gody—Istoriko-astronomicheskie issledovaniia*, vyp. 18 (Moscow: Nauka, 1986); V. N. Komarov and K. A. Portsevskii, *Moskovskii planetarii* (Moscow: Moskovskii rabochii, 1979). On Tsander's propaganda of space travel and his role in early scientific societies see Siddiqi, "Imagining the Cosmos."

¹⁰⁵ Il'f and Petrov, *Zolotoi telenok*, 456.

¹⁰⁶ *Ibid.*, 458.

¹⁰⁷ Nicholas Timasheff's classic work explains the abandonment utopianism for more traditional values in the mid-1930s as a "great retreat." See Nicholas Timasheff, *The Great Retreat: The Growth and Decline of Communism in Russia* (New York: E. P. Dutton & Company, 1946).

¹⁰⁸ On the reversal of Soviet church-state relations during the Second World War, see M. V. Shkarovskii, *Russkaia pravoslavnaia tserkov' i sovetskoe gosudarstvo v 1943-1964 godakh: ot 'premiriia' k novoi voine* (St. Petersburg: DEAN + ADIA-M, 1995); S. Merritt Miner, *Stalin's Holy War: Religion, Nationalism and Alliance Politics 1941-1945* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2003); and Davis, *The Long Walk to Church*.

expected ramifications for atheist propaganda. As a result, Soviet atheism, despite protestations of service to the Communist project, was marginalized over the course of the 1930s and 1940s. After the destructive anti-religious campaigns of Stalin's "cultural revolution" during the First Five-Year Plan, atheist agitation largely ceased, as did ethnographic studies of religion and sociological investigation in general.¹⁰⁹

While Stalinist propaganda maintained the commitment to enlightenment by advocating literacy, hygiene, and education in the natural sciences, the specifically atheist conclusions to be drawn from scientific propaganda were, for the most part, cast aside. The successor of the League, the "Society for the Dissemination of Scientific and Political Knowledge," was formed in 1947 as a voluntary association of Soviet intelligentsia committed to mass enlightenment through lectures on foreign and domestic politics and the natural sciences.¹¹⁰ Prominent scientists, like the astronomer B. A. Vorontsov-Veliaminov, continued to give periodic lectures and publish rare pamphlets on science and religion, but explicitly debunking religious conceptions of the natural world was no longer their primary task.¹¹¹ Throughout the 1940s and early 1950s, the low priority of scientific atheism was tacitly understood by the people whose mission it was to enlighten the population.¹¹²

Two new developments converged to bring atheism back into the spotlight of Soviet public culture: the ideological destabilization initiated by Stalin's death in 1953, and Khrushchev's initiation of de-Stalinization shortly thereafter; and the growing awareness that while religion showed no sign of 'dying out,' the state's methods of atheist education and enlightenment were outdated and ineffective. In the new historical context of postwar reconstruction and ideological transformation, Soviet ideology in general, and atheist theory and practice in particular, were in desperate need of revision and reform. The revival of the campaign against religion under Khrushchev, after a nearly thirty year hiatus during the Stalin era, might appear peculiar in the context of the political and cultural "thaw," but it was intimately connected with the moral mission to cleanse Marxist-Leninist ideology of corruption and fulfill the authentic vision of Leninism. As the private, spiritual world of Soviet persons—their values, emotions, and worldviews—became a central policy concern in the top echelons of the Party, the campaign against religion became one of the primary instruments to revitalize Soviet ideology.

The problem was that, according to reports provided by the Council on the Affairs of the Russian Orthodox Church (CAROC) and the Council on the Affairs of Religious Cults (CARC)—which included statistics on the incomes of religious institutions and clergy, pilgrimages to "holy sites" and the observance of rituals—religiosity persisted among a significant percentage of the Soviet population. Indeed, by many measures, religion showed

¹⁰⁹ Emblematic of this ideological turn away from anti-religious rhetoric was the disbanding of the League of Militant Atheists and the shutting down of most Soviet atheist periodical publications in 1941.

¹¹⁰ For an overview of the history of the "Knowledge" Society, see James T. Andrews, "All-Union Society for the Dissemination of Political and Scientific Knowledge," *Modern Encyclopedia of Russia and the Soviet Union*, 1990.

¹¹¹ Lectures of the period: V. A. Shishakov, *Nebo i nebesnye iavleniia* (Moscow: Izdatel'stvo Moskovskogo planetariia, 1940); M. I. Shakhnovich, *Sueverie i nauchnoe predvidenie* (Leningrad: Lenizdat, 1945); B. A. Vorontsov-Veliaminov, *Vselennaia* (Moscow: Gostekhizdat, 1947); M. V. Emdin, *Nauka i religiia: stenografiia publichnoi lektsii, pročitannoi v 1948 g v Leningrade* (Leningrad: Obshchestvo po rasprostraneniuiu politicheskikh i nauchnykh znani, 1948); and V. A. Shishakov, *Nauka i religiia o stroenii vselenoi: nauchno-populiarnaia lektsiia s metodicheskimi ukazaniiami* (Moscow: Pravda, 1950).

¹¹² Shkarovskii notes that atheism was barely mentioned as late as the 19th Party Congress in 1952. Shkarovskii, *Russkaia pravoslavnaia tserkov' i sovetskoe gosudarstvo v 1943-1964 godakh*, 46.

signs of revitalization during the postwar period, for which the Party blamed “insufficiencies” in atheist education, and called for a serious improvement in the intellectual, theoretical and practical quality of “scientific atheism.” The Party’s famous 1954 decrees on religion and atheism—the first on 7 July 1954 and the second on 10 November 1954 —certainly announced a reversal of fortune for religious institutions and believers within Soviet borders.¹¹³ Yet they hardly pointed to a new direction in policy. The Party again brought attention to the problem of religion and atheism in the July decree “On Great Insufficiencies in the Propagating of Scientific Atheism and on Measures for its Improvement,” and then scrambled to correct the fallout of its own directives in November with “On Errors in Scientific-Atheist Propaganda among the People.” By the mid-1950s, Soviet ideologists began to suspect that if the final revolution was to take place within the realm of worldviews, which were to become scientific-materialist through a targeted and comprehensive antireligious campaign, then they had to work to uncover and understand the reasons behind the widespread existence of “survivals.” And yet, among the “survivals” held responsible for the population’s passivity towards building Communism, religion was perhaps the most scrutinized and the least understood.

From Negative to Positive Atheism

When atheist education was revived in the mid-1950s, Soviet atheists were working with two conceptions about the nature of religion, both of which they had inherited from the early Soviet period. The first held that religion was a product of poverty, misery, and the fear engendered by life’s unpredictability. In this context, the solace provided by religion served as an “opiate” for people afflicted by war, acts of nature, or personal trauma, and the proposed antidote was the continued economic growth and construction of the material-technical base promised by Communism. As people’s lives improved, this theory held, they would experience less need for the solace provided by religion. The second theory presented religion as a product of darkness and superstition. According to this model, religiosity was the result of ignorance about the mysterious forces that govern nature and the universe and was to be fought with scientific enlightenment. These understandings of religion and atheism in general, and the role of Science in the greater enlightenment project in particular, were so deeply rooted in Soviet atheist thought that they never stopped guiding the approach to atheist education.

This is not to say that atheist education did not evolve. On the contrary, the Khrushchev era is marked by a growing awareness of the ways in which atheist education fell short, as well as concerted efforts to address these shortcomings. Increased scrutiny of enlightenment work in light of the new political responsibilities of ideological organizations resulted in a new level of attention to the theory and practice of atheist education. Broadly, the Party relied on two kinds of

¹¹³ On 7 July 1954, the Party issued a decree titled “On Great Insufficiencies in the Propagating of Scientific Atheism and on Measures for its Improvement,” critiquing the low level of attention that anti-religious propaganda and atheist education had received in previous decades. Yet the direction of the Party line was so ambiguous that interpretations of the decree fell on both sides of the spectrum—from excessive permissiveness to excessive force against believers and the Church. Reports from local organs about believers protesting state measures against them called for a second decree in order to provide cadres with a more clear direction. “On Errors in Scientific-Atheist Propaganda among the People,” issued on 10 November 1954, criticized the “administrative methods” employed to harass the clergy believers. On the developments and reception of the 1954 atheist decrees by Party, state, and church, see Chumachenko, *Church and State in Soviet Russia*, 129-134, and chapter Two of this dissertation.

measures to combat religion and religiosity over the course of the 1950s. These measures might be classified as “negative” and “positive,” respectively, but were by no means allotted equal importance in the first stages of the second atheist campaign. In practice, considerably more emphasis was placed on negative measures: administrative and legal regulation of religious organizations and individual believers. The Council on the Orthodox Church and the Council on Religious Cults (later united into the Council on Religious Affairs) and their local representatives directed the closing down of churches and the registration of religious communities, kept statistics on church attendance and ritual observance and generally controlled the increasingly strict legal and semi-legal measures propagated against the church.¹¹⁴ Positive measures, which grew in importance by the late 1950s, entailed a campaign of mass enlightenment. In practice, this meant a calling to arms of the “Knowledge” Society (*Obshchestvo “Znanie”*), the primary Soviet institution charged with the development of the new communist citizen on the ground, and, until 1964, the largest institution involved in the theoretical development and practical application of atheist education.¹¹⁵

Party cadres and intelligentsia enthusiasts were urged to form local-level organizations (atheist clubs, Houses of Atheism, atheist departments in educational institutions, and atheist sections in local Party organs, among others). These new institutions held atheist film screenings, hosted debates, and question-and-answer sessions that brought together believers and atheists, and staged atheist holidays to compete with their religious equivalents, and—in what was the most frequently employed form of atheist education—organized lectures by members of the “Knowledge” Society.¹¹⁶ With the intensification of atheist propaganda over the course of the 1950s, the “Knowledge” Society received a new journal, titled *Science and Religion (Nauka i religiia)*, which, after several years of discussion and preparation, began publication in 1959. The journal was aimed at both the mass reader and the propaganda worker, and covered the history of religion, the Party’s evolving position on religion and atheism, and, of course, the popularization of scientific achievements and the scientific-materialist worldview. It also explicitly addressed the philosophical and religious issues raised by space exploration in periodic articles on the subject that fell under the rubric, “Man: Master of Nature.”¹¹⁷ The inside cover of the first issue proudly displayed the blueprint for the monument to Soviet space exploration planned for construction at Moscow’s Exhibition of National Economic Achievements (VDNKh).¹¹⁸ At the

¹¹⁴ See David E. Powell, *Antireligious Propaganda in the Soviet Union: A Study of Mass Persuasion* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 1975).

¹¹⁵ The Society had an expansive institutional structure organized around the All-Union Knowledge Society and extending down through the republic, regional, and local level. Corresponding local branches of the Party exercised control over each local branch of the Society. GARF, f. 9547, op. 1, d. 1048, l. 5.

¹¹⁶ The Party’s renewed interest in atheist education was also made evident by the re-introduction of “Foundations of Scientific Atheism” (*Osnovy nauchnogo ateizma*) in higher education. See Michael Froggatt, “Renouncing dogma, teaching utopia: Science in schools under Khrushchev,” in *The Dilemmas of De-Stalinization: Negotiating cultural and social change in the Khrushchev era*, ed. Polly Jones (New York: Routledge), 250-267.

¹¹⁷ See Estonian astronomer G. Naan’s article “Chelovek, bog i kosmos” in *Nauka i religiia*, no. 2 (1961): 5-10; “Veril li Tsiolkovskii v boga?” *Nauka i religiia*, no. 3 (1962), 25; the Ukrainian astronomer S. Vsekhsviatskii’s “Tainy nebesnykh stranits,” *Nauka i religiia*, no. 1 (1963), 8-13; and “Mogli li kosmonavty videt’ boga?” *Nauka i religiia* No. 1 (1963). A number of articles authored by cosmonauts themselves were also published, such as Iu. Gagarin, “Na poroge griadushchikh shturmov,” *Nauka i religiia* No. 4 (1964), 10 and K. Feoktistov’s “Neskol’ko slov o bessmertii,” *Nauka i religiia*, no. 4 (1966). The journal also dedicated an entire issue to space exploration and cosmology, see “Kosmos, kosmogoniia, kosmologiiia (Podborka statei i interview),” *Nauka i religiia*, no. 12 (1968).

¹¹⁸ See inside cover of *Nauka i religiia*, no. 1 (1959).

turn of the decade, the Society was given the brand new Moscow House of Scientific Atheism, as well as the administration of the Moscow Planetarium, which became a critical site of atheistic activity—a catalyst for linking cosmic enlightenment with anti-religious thought.¹¹⁹

A Planetarium for Believers and Bibles for Cosmonauts

In the post-Stalinist Soviet Union, the Planetarium was widely considered to be one of the most effective spaces in which to conduct atheist work, admired for its aesthetically pleasing and intellectually engaging methodology that emphasized the experiential component of education. The leadership's faith in the atheist potential of the planetarium was made evident by the state's significant investment of resources into the construction of planetaria, despite the fact that as late as 1959, even the most central Soviet planetarium—the Moscow Planetarium—continued to operate at a loss.¹²⁰ With the revival of the antireligious campaign in the mid-1950s, the number of planetaria was expanded, as was the scope of their atheist work. The thirteen planetaria that existed in the USSR in the early 1950s were considered insufficient, and atheists called for a planetarium in every major Soviet city.¹²¹ By 1973, the Soviet Union had more than seventy planetaria, the majority of which were constructed over the course of the Khrushchev-era.¹²²

The state's investment in the planetarium's atheist function was likewise evident in the fact that, in the spring of 1959, the Soviet Council of Ministers transferred the Moscow Planetarium from the cultural organs of the Moscow city administration (*Mosgorispolkom*) to the All-Union “Knowledge” Society with the purpose of making it a more effective tool in the “propaganda of natural scientific knowledge on the structure of the universe (*stroenie vselennoi*).”¹²³ Indeed, the state hoped that the transfer would help bring order to the Society's atheist work, and to atheist education in general, and that the Moscow Planetarium would become the coordinating center for Soviet atheism. As the All-Union “Knowledge” Society leadership stated, “This government decision gives the Society the ability to use the planetarium as a base for a considerable expansion and improvement of natural-scientific and scientific-atheist propaganda.”¹²⁴

While the Moscow Planetarium was constructed from the ground up according to avant-garde principles of Constructivist architectural design, it was, in this respect, almost unique. A significant number of the planetaria constructed after the war—in Gorky (Nizhnyi Novgorod), Kiev, Riga, Barnaul, and others—occupied former church spaces, a fact that had both practical and ideological significance.¹²⁵ Planetaria hosted enlightenment lectures, film screenings,

¹¹⁹ On the transfer of the Moscow Planetarium, see GARF, f. 9547, op. 1, d. 1429 and TsAGM, f. 709, op. 1, d. 177.

¹²⁰ TsAGM, f. 709, op. 1, d. 177, l. 75. In 1959, the Moscow planetarium had an income of 1,906,000 rubles, while its expenditures constituted 2,071,000 rubles—that is, it had a 165,000 ruble deficit.

¹²¹ GARF, f. A-561, op. 1, d. 492.

¹²² In 1974, planetaria across the USSR hosted 3,586,000 lectures on science in general, and 897,000 lectures on atheism in particular. This includes lectures conducted beyond planetarium buildings by “mobile” planetaria. See Iu. K. Fishevskii, “Obshchestvo ‘Znanie’ i propaganda nauchnogo mirovozzrenia,” *Voprosy nauchnogo ateizma* 19 (1974): 76.

¹²³ TsAGM, f. 709, op. 1, d. 177, l. 75. Decision of the Council of Ministers (17 April 1959) and the *Mosgorispolkom* (29 June 1959).

¹²⁴ *Ibid.*

¹²⁵ Some prominent examples include the The Gorky/Nizhnyi Novgorod Planetarium opened in 1948 in the space of the Alekseevskaiia Church of the Blagoveshchenskii Monastery; the Barnaul Planetarium, constructed in the space of the Krestovozdvizhenskaia Church and opened in 1950; and the Kiev Planetarium, the oldest in Ukraine, which was

question and answer sessions and debates, youth astronomy clubs, and, most prominently, enlightenment lectures on topics such as: “Why I broke with religion,” “Sects and their reactionary essence,” “Man, the cosmos, and god,” “Science and Religion on the Universe,” “How religion accommodates itself to science,” “The atheist significance of space flights,” “Space flights and religion,” and “The Sky and Religious Holidays.”¹²⁶ These lectures were conducted by permanent employees of the Moscow Planetarium, such as Viktor Noevich Komarov, who wrote prolifically on how astronomy and the planetarium could be used in atheist education. Planetaria also provided a captivating forum for visiting lecturers like Aleksei Borisovich Chertkov, a former priest, and one of the most active atheist agitators in the Khrushchev period.¹²⁷ Most of all, the planetarium was the perfect place to mobilize the enthusiasm generated by the Soviet space program and the most popular lecturers were, of course, Soviet cosmonauts. Audiences were drawn in with technologically advanced equipment and, most of all, with the opportunity to hear about what cosmonauts encountered in their celestial journeys.¹²⁸

Planetaria were also attractive because they not only invited believers to attend lectures, but also brought the planetarium to believers. The so-called “mobile planetarium” could organize lectures and exhibits beyond the confines of its central location, on “agitation-bus” trips to Houses of Culture, pioneer camps, pensioners homes, military complexes, student dorms, schools, libraries, red corners, parks of leisure and culture, factories, and even local housing administration offices. Using mobile planetaria, planetarium lecturers made expeditions to collective farms in a mass populist drive to educate the rural population that began in the late 1950s. There they would attract an audience by combining the chance to use a telescope and learn about the most recent achievements of Soviet cosmonauts, as well as by giving workers the opportunity to take a break from farm work. After listening to a lecture, audiences could relax in the field, listen to festive music coming from the loudspeakers provided by the visiting planetarium, and even conclude the night with a dance party.¹²⁹

By 1963, the Moscow Planetarium was selling almost 280,000 tickets annually to its lectures, question and answer meetings, and visits to the observatory, and its field trips outside of the main Planetarium space increased attendance rates to 278,000 listeners for mass lectures, and 517,083 for educational lectures.¹³⁰ Over the course of the year, the Moscow Planetarium dedicated fifty-three evenings to atheism specifically, which made up 18.8 per cent of all planetarium lectures, an increase from 14.4 percent in 1962. The Moscow Planetarium reported to the Council of the “Knowledge” Society that atheist agitation conducted at the Planetarium left an effect on visitors: responses stated that “in the planetarium one truly understands the absurdity and inadequacy of religious fairy tales,” “having visited the planetarium, one can successfully conduct an argument with believers,” “it is necessary to attract more and more

opened in 1952 in the former Aleksandrov Catholic Cathedral.

¹²⁶ GARF, f. 9547, op. 1, d. 1324, ll. 53-54.

¹²⁷ Komarov and Chertkov even co-authored atheist literature. See V. N. Komarov and A. B. Chertkov, *Besedy o religii i ateizme* (Moscow: Prosveshchenie, 1975).

¹²⁸ In 1963, the cosmonauts A. G. Nikolaev and G. S. Titov lectured at the Moscow Planetarium. GARF f. 9547, op. 1, d. 1324, l. 9.

¹²⁹ For an excellent description of day-to-day enlightenment work conducted through the planetarium, see the memoirs of Kharkiv Planetarium lecturer Natal'ia Konstantinovna Bershova, “Esli zvezdy zazhigaiut... (Zapiski lektora Khar'kovskogo Planetariia,” <http://kharkov.vbelous.net/planetar/index.htm> (accessed 23 August 2010).

¹³⁰ GARF, f. 9547, op. 1, d. 1324, ll. 28-31.

believers to the planetarium, it is a truly great school for dethroning god” and that “the planetarium had an enormous effect on our consciousness and helped us make sense of many unclear issues; the knowledge we received in the planetarium have definitively convinced us that god did not, does not, and cannot exist.”¹³¹

Yet the work of the Planetarium in general, and its atheist focus in particular, was not without problems. Atheist education in the planetarium was criticized for relying almost exclusively on the natural sciences, lacking “militancy” and avoiding “worldview” issues.¹³² It was not enough to read lectures on Chemistry and Physics, the argument went, without explicitly addressing their atheist significance by tying them to religion and idealism. In 1955, B. L. Laptev brought attention to the importance of making clear the *atheist* significance of lectures on the natural sciences, pointing out that without this, scientific enlightenment could not be used effectively in the battle against religion. “We conducted [scientific enlightenment] lectures for years,” Laptev said, “and it still took a Central Committee decree to reveal to us that we do not conduct scientific-atheist propaganda.”¹³³ Such criticism was especially directed at cadres, as not all planetarium lecturers seemed to understand the importance of explicitly connecting atheism to, for example, lectures on Astronomy or Physics. This was a common complaint about scientists, who, in offering their knowledge in the service of enlightening the masses were, more often than not, unwilling to exploit the opportunity to agitate explicitly against religion.¹³⁴ To illustrate the repercussions of avoiding direct battle against religion, Laptev described a planetarium lecture on the creation of the galaxy that he read on a collective farm. When he was done, he asked his audience whether they liked the lecture, which was accompanied by audio and visual materials. The audience answered that they did, but when asked what exactly they liked about it, his listeners informed him that, “We liked how gloriously God constructed the universe.”¹³⁵

This was not the first time that Soviet atheists encountered the idea that scientific enlightenment did not necessarily constitute atheist propaganda, but, given the long hiatus in atheist work in the Stalin period, as well as the acknowledged shortcomings of atheist education during the Khrushchev-era antireligious campaign, it was a point that seemed to need re-iterating. To show cadres the proper way to exploit the planetarium, the Moscow House of Scientific Atheism (*Dom nauchnogo ateizma*) hosted a discussion of veteran planetarium worker I. F. Shevliakov’s lectures: “Science and Religion on the Universe” and “The Atheist Significance of Discoveries in Astronomy and Cosmonautics.”¹³⁶ After working at the Moscow Planetarium for over forty years, Shevliakov observed that, in the “battle between idealism and religion,” both the target of enlightenment measures, as well as the adversary, had evolved. On the one hand, audiences had become both much more educated in the sciences, and much less knowledgeable about religion.

If in the first years after the revolution we had to prove that the Earth is round and other elementary things; if we had an auditorium that was informed about the

¹³¹ GARF, f. 9547, op. 1, d. 1324, l. 16.

¹³² GARF, f. 9547, op. 1, d. 1048, l. 14.

¹³³ Ibid.

¹³⁴ GARF, f. 9547, op. 1, d. 1324, ll. 26-27. Based on my archival research, this unwillingness on the part of scientists, and the intelligentsia in general, to agitate against religion was evidently widespread.

¹³⁵ GARF, f. 9547, op. 1, d. 1048, l. 15.

¹³⁶ TsAGM, f. 1782, op. 3, d. 183.

Bible, the Gospels, the Old and New Testaments, the commandments, the Apostles' Creed (*simvol very*), and so forth, then at the present time even the clergy say that the audience knows almost nothing [about religion], and we propagandists are reaping the fruits (*pozhdinaem plody*) of this revolution in the consciousness of the growing generation, which began life after the October revolution, after the separation of church and state, and [of] church and education.¹³⁷

On the other hand, the church was no longer the same kind of opponent since it no longer had a hostile attitude towards science—something that atheists could see for themselves, Shevliakov pointed out, if they leafed through the pages of the journal of the Moscow Patriarchate.

In fact, Shevliakov observed, religion had long sought to accommodate science. Even in his gymnasium days in pre-revolutionary Russia, “no one defended Bible stories in the literal sense that they are put forward.” He recalled how, having learned that the earth was six billion years old in science class, he wondered how this could be reconciled with the Bible’s teaching that the world was created in six days. In religion class, Shevliakov asked the priest whether this was “a contradiction between science and religion,” to which the priest answered, “There is no contradiction—what for God is one day, is a million years for man.”¹³⁸ Then the priest told him to sit back down. “And this is not today, but in 1916,” Shevliakov reminded the audience. The need to explicitly draw atheist conclusions during planetarium lectures was also pointed out by Nadezhda Konstantinovna Krupskaja—Lenin’s widow and a central figure in the Soviet education and enlightenment campaign—during an early visit to the Moscow Planetarium. Krupskaja attended a lecture on the structure of the universe, read by an “inexperienced” lecturer to a mass audience. Afterwards, Krupskaja observed that after an astronomy lecture that did not draw out atheist conclusions, “every believer will leave, cross himself, and in his soul say that God’s world is great and beautiful.”¹³⁹ Astronomy alone, Shevliakov concluded, was not enough to “demolish the religious worldview.”¹⁴⁰

Over the course of the antireligious campaign, atheist lecturers across the Soviet Union encountered obstacles in their crusade to obliterate religious belief. A lecturer from the Tambov region reported that while their mobile planetarium attracted visitors of all ages during trips to the countryside, he still had reservations about proclaiming success, since the atheist message of planetarium visits often did not come across. He described a ninety-five year-old man in one village who “could not be removed from the apparatus for thirty minutes” because, as the old man explained, “I’m going to die soon, and I refuse to go to the other world until I see what’s there.”¹⁴¹ Another lecturer reported that their mobile planetarium was very popular with collective farm workers, and especially with those of them who belonged to sects. Yet during planetarium visits, sectarians would ask many questions and try to “corner the lecturer,” in which case, “If they [got] the last word, they consider[ed] it a victory.”¹⁴² The reactions of planetarium visitors brought to light a phenomenon that Soviet atheists should perhaps not have found so surprising—namely, that the cosmological connection between space exploration and atheism

¹³⁷ TsAGM, f. 1782, op. 3, d. 183, l. 4.

¹³⁸ Ibid., 6.

¹³⁹ Ibid., 7.

¹⁴⁰ Ibid.

¹⁴¹ GARF, A-561, op. 1, d. 492, ll. 25-28.

¹⁴² Ibid., 36-39.

was neither necessary nor entirely obvious. The history of science provided numerous examples where the elegant construction of the universe was indeed taken to prove the existence of an all-powerful creator, rather than his absence.

The unexpected results of atheist education at the outset of the Khrushchev-era atheist campaign brought to light the degree to which agitators were missing a clear sense of their audience. Indeed, one of the most frequent criticisms of atheist propaganda was that too much energy and too many resources were spent preaching to the choir of unbelievers who constituted the vast majority of listeners at scientific enlightenment lectures.¹⁴³ Therefore, as Soviet atheists began to work out new programs, they became aware that they needed to acquire quantitative and qualitative knowledge about the religiosity of Soviet citizens. At a Central Committee conference, Aleksandr Osipov—a former Professor of Theology at Leningrad Theological Academy who had publicly broken with religion and became one of the most famous atheists of the early Khrushchev era¹⁴⁴—highlighted that the difficulty of atheist work was finding the appropriate tone for an audience spread across a broad spectrum of education: “It befalls every propagandist to encounter both [types of] persons. [...] Three days ago in Kiev, [I] simultaneously [received] two notes [from the audience]: ‘What do you think about Feuerbach’s theory of atheism?’ And next to it [another note], ‘So tell me, former little father, do witches exist in the world?’” Laughter could be heard in the hall. “So that,” Osipov pointed out, “is our range.”¹⁴⁵

Speaking at the same Party conference, the cosmonaut German Titov concurred that, on the whole, atheist agitators were unprepared to conduct effective propaganda. Even cosmonauts, Titov admitted, had not done everything to ensure that the results of their flights were productive for ideological purposes. When, after returning from a flight, cosmonauts were asked whether they had encountered god, he realized that their assertion that they had not remained unconvincing, especially to believers. Yet, Titov pointed out, cosmonauts did not have the tools to give their assertion more force, because of their fundamental ignorance about religion.

... I do not know even one prayer and have never even heard one, because I, like all of my cosmonaut friends, grew up in our socialist reality and studied in our Soviet schools. Later, when I was getting higher education, and now at the Academy, no one ever spoke to me about this religion—and it seems to me that the situation is similar in all educational institutions.

And if by chance I came across some books, then, with rare exception [...] these books were so boring that, unless there was a real necessity, one doesn't really want to read them. (Laughter in the hall, applause).

We consulted with our boys, the cosmonauts, [...] and we realized we had to petition the Ideological department to help us acquire bibles. (Laughter). Now we have received them, and I have a bible in my library, because when I speak in public, especially abroad, we find ourselves in difficult situations. This is why we

¹⁴³ GARF, f. 9547, op. 1, d. 1048, l. 22.

¹⁴⁴ Osipov’s biography and atheist career is taken up in chapter Four of this dissertation.

¹⁴⁵ RGANI, f. 71, op. 1, d. 15, l. 171.

discussed whether cosmonauts, in the course of their studies and training, should somehow be informed a little about all this god and religion business.¹⁴⁶

In a brilliant inversion, Titov's request for Bibles for cosmonauts underscored the basic fact that atheist education could not be conducted without a fundamental familiarity with religious history and dogma, as well as with the transformations taking place in religion under modern conditions.

Educating Atheist Educators

Because an accurate understanding of their audience was vital to the success of their work, atheists believed it imperative to learn about the quantity and quality of the population's religiosity. For these purposes, statistics and episodic reports provided by local Komsomol and Party organs, as well as "Knowledge" Society lecturers and CAROC and CARC representatives, only told part of the story. Beginning in the late 1950s, a massive effort was coordinated to educate atheist educators. Publications on religion and atheism increased exponentially. The journal *Science and Religion* concentrated its efforts on providing the material on the history of religion and atheism, as well as methodological recommendations for effective propaganda. Regular workshops, conferences and seminars for training atheist cadres began to be held in both central and local level enlightenment organizations and party organs. Finally, cultural enlightenment workers, folklorists, ethnographers, and sociologists "went to the people" on expeditions whose primary purpose was to study the role of religion in everyday life.¹⁴⁷

The Party's ideological interest in the religiosity of Soviet citizens precipitated a "reanimation" of the sociology of religion—a field that had been practically dormant since the mid-1930s.¹⁴⁸ The need to gather accurate information in the practical absence of a generation of sociologists specializing in religion required both a new cohort of trained cadres and a revived discussion of sociological methodology. Councils, sectors and groups for the study of religion and atheism were formed in the Institute of History, the Institute of Philosophy, and the Institute of Ethnography of the Academy of Sciences and their republic-level equivalents. Sociological research of religion and atheism was given priority on the agenda of the Academy of Social Sciences of the Central Committee of the Communist Party (AON), the Party's top institution for training ideological cadres, which eventually formed a separate Institute of Scientific Atheism in 1964.

Ethnographic and sociological expeditions lasted anywhere from several days to several weeks, and usually consisted of researchers being placed with families that had been identified as believers in order to observe their everyday lives and interview individual members. Several fundamental questions occupied researchers: What was the worldview of believers, their

¹⁴⁶ Ibid., 151-153.

¹⁴⁷ The first expeditions to study religiosity were conducted in the late 1950s by the Institute of History of the Soviet Academy of Sciences (under the guidance of the historian Aleksandr Il'ich Klivanov), and the Department of Atheism at Moscow State University.

¹⁴⁸ For a succinct discussion of the development of the sociology of religion in the post-Stalin period, see Mikhail Smirnov, "Sovremennaia rossiiskaia sotsiologiia religii: ot kuda i zache?" *Religiovedenie. Nauchno-teoreticheskii zhurnal*, no. 2 (Moscow, 2007), and M. M. Shakhnovich, "Otechestvennoe religiovedenie 20-80kh godov XX veka: Ot kakogo nasledstva my otkazyvaemsia," in *Ocherki po istorii religiovedeniia*, ed. M. M. Shakhnovich (SPb, 2006).

understandings of the origins of nature, the social world, and man's role in it? What were the worldviews of former believers and what brought about their break with religion? What kept believers tied to religion despite the mounting scientific evidence against religious conceptions of the world, of which space exploration constituted such an essential part?

Cosmic Contradictions

Beyond widely disseminated atheist conversion narratives of believers who broke with religion as a result of space conquests, researchers discovered on the ground that the effect of Soviet space achievements on everyday cosmologies of ordinary people was considerably less linear and logical than they had imagined and expected. Indeed, many reports described their frustration at the stubborn superstition they encountered on the ground. One local Party worker relayed a conversation he had with a sectarian woman in Irkutsk, who, when told that a rocket was being launched to the moon, replied, "This never happened and will never happen. God will not allow a foreign body to come to the moon." When asked whether she would abandon her belief if a rocket actually went to the moon, she only replied, "This never happened and will never happen, because it is impossible."¹⁴⁹

Materials from sociological research on the cosmologies of believers, conducted in the village Tretie Levye Lamki in the Tambov region, revealed that, in those rather rare instances where believers considered the opposition of science and religion at all, most of them saw no contradiction between their belief in Soviet space achievements and religion. A typical example was Anna Ivanovna Dobrysheva, fifty-two years old, whose answer to most of the researcher's questions was "Who knows?" and who did not understand, even after repeated explanations by the researcher, the contradiction between the religious and the scientific worldview. As the researcher described in his report, Dobrysheva "Believes in space flights, but cannot seem to understand why [atheists] don't believe in God and why they oppose science and religion."¹⁵⁰ In her view, "If we [believers] believe you [atheists], then you need to believe us as well."¹⁵¹

One of the more "unbelieving" interview subjects, Petr Alekseevich Meshukov, was described as "not belonging to a religion although he keeps icons [in his home]," and in his understanding of the natural sciences is said to "Fully support Darwin's theories about the origins of man, which, when he is in an unsober state, provokes him to call people who offend him 'a degenerate product of simian genealogy'"¹⁵² With regards to various processes in the natural world, he "has some vague notion, although is certain that 'god has as much connection to them as the tale of a crocodile does to a person'."¹⁵³ Overall, the position of the villagers interviewed was best summed up in the words of one Matrena Petrovna Arkhipova who stated that, "Communists are good in every way, except that they don't believe in God, [and] that is bad."¹⁵⁴ In what became a perennial thorn in the side of Soviet atheists, believers, even when they believed in the achievements of the Soviet space program, still managed to reconcile it with their religious worldviews.

¹⁴⁹ RGASPI, f. 606, op. 4, d. 37, l. 31.

¹⁵⁰ RGASPI, f. 606, op. 4, d. 156, l. 29.

¹⁵¹ Ibid.

¹⁵² Ibid., 47.

¹⁵³ Ibid., 48.

¹⁵⁴ Ibid., 139.

Cosmonaut German Titov encountered a similar situation during the numerous occasions where he was expected to clarify the contents of the cosmos to waiting audiences.

The fact that ordinary inhabitants of earth have been to the skies, the holy of holies of all religions, the space of God, has an enormous effect on believers, does not leave any one of them indifferent, and forces them to deeply think about their views and convictions. And many believers are struck by the fact that god did not manifest in response to the fact that ordinary mortals intruded into his estate.

I would also like to cite one letter which a 67-year-old inhabitant of Kazan wrote to us. He sent it simply to the address “Cosmonaut.” He writes this: “I am already 67 years old, I am illiterate, and yet I would nonetheless would like to be taken on a cosmic flight. I understand that I can contribute nothing from the point of view of science, so to speak. But yet, it is said, that there is no God. I believe that there is no God, but all the same, as the years wear on, I would like to make certain that God doesn't exist.”

(Animation and laughter in the hall.)

Ilyichev: Trust, but verify.¹⁵⁵

No one could argue, Titov concluded, that the scientific achievements of Soviet space flights had been amply and correctly highlighted in Soviet enlightenment work, but the atheist significance of space exploration had yet to be fully explained. It seemed, then, that even when believers were enthralled with the technological achievements of Soviet space exploration, they continued to miss the correct philosophical conclusions.

Problematically, from the point of view of atheist agitators, neither did the Church. Congresses gathered to discuss the evolving relationship between science and religion emphasized the danger of the Church's “accommodation” of scientific and technological advances and the attempts of religious organizations in general to “adapt” to the modern world. At a conference convened in Moscow in May 1957, shortly before the U.S.S.R. launched “Sputnik,” M. B. Mitin, the chairman of the “Knowledge” Society, stressed that the battle with religion had transformed and was no longer (primarily) political, but ideological. In light of these developments, Mitin warned agitators to be vigilant to the evolving tactics of religious organizations that “prefer not to openly speak out against science, [and] to present themselves as ‘friends’ of science, striving to ‘prove’ the connections between science and religion, the possibility of unifying the two, based on mutual respect and ‘non-interference’, [...] and seek to prove that science and religion are not opposed to each other, but on the contrary, need one another.”¹⁵⁶ In response, atheist agitators were urged to clarify for audiences the irreconcilability of science and religion, to stress that while the religious worldview proclaimed the finite nature

¹⁵⁵ RGANI, f. 72, op. 1, d. 15, ll. 151-153.

¹⁵⁶ M. B. Mitin, “O soderzhanii i zadachakh nauchno-ateisticheskoi propagandy v sovremennykh usloviakh,” in *Nauka i religiia: Sbornik stenogramm lektsii, pročitannykh na Vsesoiuznom soveshchanii-seminare po nauchno-ateisticheskim voprosam* (Moscow: Znanie, 1958), 17.

of the universe, scientific materialism revealed its infinity in both space and time. In lectures that critiqued religious conceptions of the beginning and end of the world, popular among propaganda workers at the time, agitators were encouraged to critique the religious notion of the primacy of the spiritual over the material.¹⁵⁷ Once it was taken as fact that the cosmos followed the same laws as the earth and were composed of the same materials, the Estonian astronomer G. Naan put forth, “nothing heavenly really remained in the ‘heavens.’”¹⁵⁸

Yet sociological studies suggested that the transformations that took place within the mind of a believer did not necessarily follow this same logic. Indeed, research on sermons in the Vladimir province described religious functionaries who either dismissed the relevance of space achievements for religion, or, worse yet, presented Soviet space achievements in a religious context. A report of the Council for the Affairs of Religious Cults, for example, described a Belorussian Catholic priest who refuted the notion that space achievements provided proof of God’s non-existence: “Nature has not yet been fully studied by man, [and man] is not yet able to control it. Then there exists some sort of power that controls nature. Sending satellites and people to space does not mean that there is no God. God exists, but he is invisible and not in man’s likeness.”¹⁵⁹ Archbishop Onisim of Vladimir-Suzdal diocese, on the other hand, underscored the need of propagandizing the great achievements of Soviet space flights, especially to the rural population, and Archpriest L. A. Taranovskii was purported to proclaim that,

Flights to space are new proof of God's great power, and the idea that cosmonauts did not notice God, well, it is not as if he sits in one place. One cannot see God, he is a spirit. And if life on other planets is discovered, then their existence also involved the participation of God, he is all-powerful. Even if God walked on the shores of the river Kliazma, people still would not believe that this is God.¹⁶⁰

Many agitators complained that the Church was more difficult to combat when it attempted to coexist peacefully with science, because then religion managed to co-opt technological progress and paint it as a manifestation of God's will. According to this position, God performed his work through unbelievers, and “The unbelieving Gagarin flew to space because it was advantageous to our God.”¹⁶¹

Yet what worried Soviet atheists even more was when religious organizations responded to scientific progress by making the boundary between the material and the spiritual more defined, and in effect, claiming for religion a “monopoly” over the spiritual world.¹⁶² These unexpected and contradictory reactions of both ordinary believers and the Church to scientific achievements forced atheists to question their understandings of religion and their predictions about its future in modern society. It also forced them to reconsider their belief that science was the most powerful weapon in atheist work, and turn their hopes to the transformative potential of philosophy to cultivate the communist worldview of the future.

¹⁵⁷ G. Naan, “Chelovek, bog i kosmos” in *Nauka i religiia*, no. 2 (1961), 6.

¹⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 7.

¹⁵⁹ RGANI, f. 5, op. 55, d. 72, l. 53.

¹⁶⁰ RGASPI, f. 606, op. 4, d. 126, ll. 33-34.

¹⁶¹ RGASPI, f. 606, op. 4, d. 37, l. 85.

¹⁶² V. N. Komarov and V. V. Kaziutinskii, eds. *Voprosy mirovozzreniia v lektsiakh po astronomii: Sbornik* (Moscow: Znanie, 1974), 4.

The Dystopian Cosmos: Religion and Atheism Transformed

While the leadership sought to present Soviet space achievements as material proof of the great strides the country was making towards Communist modernity, their new attention to the persistence of “survivals” in the consciousness of Soviet citizens, as well as the efforts to exorcize these with more and better atheist education, cast a (not entirely intentional) light on the distance that separated the new Soviet person paraded on the world stage from the ordinary Soviet people in the audience. Indeed, reconciling the ambitions of Khrushchev-era utopianism with the unsettling fact that the “human material” that was supposed to actualize these ambitions was still profoundly riddled with “survivals” required an audacious leap of faith. For this reason, the optimism of the Party’s ideological pronouncements tended to be tempered by attention to the obstacles to be overcome along the way. The Communist project, as outlined in Soviet ideology of the early 1960s, required nothing less than a spiritual transformation within each individual separately, and all individuals collectively—a reformation of social behavior and relations, morals and values, without which the collective utopia remained unattainable. The Soviet space program manifested almost miraculously to provide a platform from which such a leap could be made. Immediately, popular ideological discourse represented Soviet supremacy in the exploration of the cosmos as an almost millenarian inevitability. The series of Soviet space “firsts”—the first artificial satellite, the first human in space, the first woman in space—were credited not just to the superiority of Soviet science and technology, but to the very spiritual fabric of Soviet socialist society.¹⁶³

Soviet atheism sought to offer its own epistemological and moral positions, and, over the course of the Khrushchev decade, saw the real and symbolic force of Soviet space achievements as the most powerful weapon in anti-religious propaganda and atheist education. In the utopian universe of Marxism-Leninism, cosmonauts—perhaps uniquely—bridged the distance between the scientific and the philosophical, the real and the ideal. Their fearlessness and positive, life-affirming attitude made them icons of the limitless human potential that Marxism-Leninism promised to all Soviet citizens. Their voyages, both in life and to space, were put forth as a counter-example and an antidote to the fear and weakness that atheists claimed were cultivated by religion. This fact not only makes Soviet cosmic enthusiasm an important prism through which to study the process of ideological socialization; it reveals important insights into how atheists understood the nature of religion and the social function of religiosity.

The story of space enthusiasm in Soviet atheism highlights transformations in how religion was understood and approached over the course of the Khrushchev era, and suggests the implications these transformations had on the future of Soviet atheist education and the fate of Marxism-Leninism. The Khrushchev-era atheist campaign produced two distinct, yet related, results. On the one hand, the trials and errors of atheist agitators initiated a re-consideration of Marxist-Leninist positions on the nature and future of religion. The failure of religion to “wither away”—even under the seemingly conclusive blow dealt to religious cosmologies by scientific progress in general and Soviet space exploration in particular—needed, on the one hand, a better explanation and, on the other hand, more effective methodological approaches. While the beginning of the Khrushchev-era atheist campaign was driven by a view of religion as a set of

¹⁶³ Slava Gerovitch, “‘New Soviet Man’ Inside Machine: Human Engineering, Spacecraft Design, and the Construction of Communism,” *OSIRIS* (2007): 22, 152.

unenlightened beliefs and primitive practices that continued as a result of a kind of historical inertia, Soviet atheists soon realized that the very essence and dynamics of religious belief had transformed. Indeed, they came to suspect that it was their own theories and methods that were primitive, and that needed to be modernized to keep pace.

When Soviet atheists attempted to fight faith with fact, they encountered a population that often seemed untroubled by the contradictions they so ardently tried to unmask, and instead reconciled scientific and religious cosmologies in unexpected ways. The worldviews Soviet atheists found on the ground ranged from unsystematic, to eclectic, to what today would probably be called secular—that is, worldviews that relied on science for explanations of the material world and religion for explanations of the spiritual realm. Indicative in this respect are the responses of Ul'iana Andreevna Lukina of Ivanovo region to a sociological survey on the “Contemporary believer’s perception of God” (*Predstavleniia sovremennogo veruiushchego o boge*) conducted by the Institute of Scientific Atheism in 1964-1965. When asked how she combines, in her mind, the idea of God with the laws of the universe, Lukina replied that “she never occupies herself with speculations about the universe” (*o Vselennoi rassuzhdeniiami ne zanimaetsia*). When asked what she thought about the fact that spaceships had flown to space, Lukina’s answer was: “So they flew, so what? There was a time when I barely made it from here to Ufa, and now it is possible to go twice a week. God has nothing to do with it. God, after all, is within us.” When asked for her thoughts on the subject in general, Kukina concluded, “What is the point of thinking about this? It’s just somehow more peaceful with God.”¹⁶⁴

New attempts to address and reconcile the paradox of modern belief continued to occupy Soviet ideologists until the end of the Soviet period as various hypotheses for the persistence of religion in the modern world were tried and disproved, and atheist methods tested without producing desired results. Moreover, over the course of the 1960s, new theories about the nature of religion led to new methods in atheist propaganda, so that the main weapon in the arsenal of atheist education was increasingly seen to be Philosophy rather than Science. This shift in atheist theories and practices significantly transformed the landscape of Soviet belief, both religious and atheist. Finally, it also made Soviet atheists aware of the philosophical, or perhaps more accurately spiritual, vacuum that opened up when religious cosmologies were contested by atheist propaganda, although few, at this point, articulated the implications that this vacuum, if taken to its logical conclusion, might have for Marxism-Leninism. Nevertheless, having reached a zenith in the early 1960s, cosmic enthusiasm began to wane. One important reason for the decline in enthusiasm, this chapter argues, is that the narratives of Soviet space achievements and of Soviet atheism, until this point fellow travelers, experienced a parting of ways.

The story of the conquest of the cosmos in Soviet atheism also lays bare the paradox of the attempt to invest scientific materialism with a spiritual center. Not only did Soviet space achievements fail to produce mass religious disbelief, they also revealed the ideological pitfalls of the utopia promised by Marxism-Leninism. Cosmonauts occupied the space between utopia and reality, and became a vehicle for the management of the desire, longing and faith generated by religious, ideological, and cosmological utopias. In the broader project of scientific enlightenment, cosmonauts became the consecrated objects of popular devotion. Through their charisma, the average Soviet person could access the ideological enthusiasm that was habitually required in Soviet citizens, and in effect be transformed, even converted, by the experience. Yet,

¹⁶⁴ RGASPI, f. 606, op. 4, d. 133.

as ideological models, cosmonauts remained removed from the Soviet masses by an impenetrable curtain. The path to the heavens was available to the few, not to the many, and ultimately the vast majority of Soviet citizens remained, at best, only “half-cosmonauts.”

As time passed, the distance between Soviet reality and Marxist-Leninist ideals grew so great that the iconography of cosmonauts and space exploration began to get primarily *ironic* treatments, indicating that Soviet space enthusiasm was coming to the end of its life-cycle. The writer Vladimir Voinovich, in his collective dystopia *Moscow 2042* (1982), depicts Communism as having finally been realized in the future, except that it is concentrated in one post-apocalyptic city-state, Moscow. The city’s Communist leader, while revered on Earth, is essentially exiled to a space ship in order to keep his sacred aura intact, and is, in effect, a permanent, if unwilling, cosmonaut.¹¹⁸ When he is ultimately brought back to Earth and imprisoned, while his revolutionary state implodes, he reveals that the failure of the communist utopia is written into the enterprise, an inherent part of the ideological blueprint: “It was I who built Communism, and it was I who buried it. Think about how many people fought this doctrine. The created circles (*kruzhki*), parties, threw around leaflets, died in jails and camps. And what did they achieve? ... But no one understood the simple point that in order to collapse Communism, it is necessary only to build it.”¹⁶⁵

Meanwhile, the Moscow Conceptualist Il’ia Kabakov approached the shoddy architecture of the communist utopia from a different perspective. In his installation, “The Man Who Flew To Space From His Apartment” (1981-1988), he constructed an individual dystopia by depicting a homespun contraption for space travel created by an impatient Soviet citizen, a person the critic Boris Groys aptly refers to as an “illegitimate cosmonaut.”¹⁶⁶ Finally, returning to Pelevin’s personal childhood utopia, the contents of the mysterious suitcase that the cosmonauts carried with them on their journeys are finally revealed to the curious Pelevin to be ... excrement—a revelation that transforms cosmic enthusiasm into a parable of dystopia. “The fact that some system for waste disposal was necessary was impossible to deny. But a cosmonaut with a little suitcase full of shit seemed to me so unthinkable, that in that moment, my clean star world got a clear crack,” writes Pelevin. “From that moment on, whenever a new cosmonaut walked towards his new rocket, I could not take my eyes off that suitcase. Perhaps this was a result of the fact that I grew up and had long ago noticed that it was not just cosmonauts who carried such suitcases with them, but every Soviet person.”¹⁶⁷

¹¹⁸ Vladimir Voinovich, “Moskva 2042,” in *Utopia i Antiutopia XX veka* (Moskva: Progress, 1990), 387-716.

¹⁶⁵ Ibid., 698.

¹⁶⁶ Boris Groys, “Nelegitimnyi kosmonavt,” *Khudozhestvennyi zhurnal/Moscow Art Magazine* 65/66 (June 2007). <http://xz.gif.ru/numbers/65-66/kosmonavt/> (accessed on August 22, 2010).

¹⁶⁷ Pelevin, “The Code of the World.”

Chapter Two

Khrushchev's Utopia and Girls Who Turn to Stone:

Building Communism and Destroying Religious "Survivals"

In the winter of 1956, shortly before the opening of the 20th Congress of the Soviet Communist Party, the Party's Agitation and Propaganda Department was notified about a curious incident that occurred in the city of Kuibyshev (now Samara): a young woman, Zoia Karnaukhova, had reportedly been turned to stone, "punished by God for sacrilege."¹⁶⁸

The events took place in January 1956 on Chkalov Street No. 84. Youngsters had gathered in the home of Klavdia Petrovna Balonkina, a middle-aged woman whose son had organized the party.¹⁶⁹ As the young people enjoyed their evening, Zoia awaited the arrival of a certain Nikolai, a recent acquaintance for whom she had romantic hopes. While her friends danced around the apartment, Zoia, distressed by the absence of her expected companion, declared that—since her Nikolai had not come—she would dance with Nikolai the Miracle Worker, referring to the icon that Balonkina kept in the 'red corner' of her small home. Zoia pulled up a chair and grabbed the icon of Nikolai the Miracle Worker off the wall, while her friends, a bit uneasy, protested timidly. To this, Zoia, circling the room with the icon in hand, reportedly replied, "If there is a God, then let him punish me!" Suddenly, "thunder thundered, lightning flashed, and smoke surrounded the young woman. When the smoke lifted, "the young woman had been turned into a pillar of stone, [grasping] the icon in her hands."¹⁷⁰ According to legend, she remained standing in this position for 128 days, inspiring the faithful (and the simply curious) to gather nearby in an effort to witness the "miracle." As the Khrushchev regime tried to propel every sphere of Soviet life into socialist modernity, local authorities had to make sense of "Stone Zoia," and to manage the ideologically inconvenient public response.

The Ugly Grimace of the Old Way of Life

News of the miracle—or, in the words of the Party Central Committee report, the "preposterous fable" (*nelepaia skazka*)—quickly spread through Kuibyshev. Crowds of people

¹⁶⁸ Rossiiskii gosudarstvennyi arkhiv noveishei istorii [henceforth RGANI], f. 5, op. 16, d. 753, l. 19.

¹⁶⁹ For a recent account of the 1956 events in Kuibyshev, and the legends that surround them, see Dimitrii Sokolov-Mitrich, "Kamennaia Zoia," *Russkii Reporter* No. 30 (30), 27 December 2007, http://www.rusrep.ru/2007/30/zoino_stoyanie/ (accessed March 19, 2010).

¹⁷⁰ RGANI, f. 5, op. 16, d. 753, l. 19.

began to gather outside of No. 84 Chkalov Street to get a glimpse of the girl who had been turned to stone for blasphemy. V. Moskovskii and S. Novikov, members of the Central Committee's Agitprop Department, reported that over the course of January 19, 20, and 21, "the crowd had reached several hundred people."¹⁷¹ Local police posted a guard at the home to control the spontaneous gathering, but soon had to "intensify the post" and place a detachment of militia on horseback.¹⁷²

Kuibyshev area party and government organs, Moskovskii and Novikov lamented, "intervened in the affair too late," waiting until January 24th to publish an official denunciation—a satirical piece titled, "A Bizarre Incident" (*Dikii sluchai*), that appeared in the local newspaper, *Volzhskaia kommuna*.¹⁷³ The article decried the Chkalov Street events as "savagely and embarrassing," and engaged in the expected amount of self-criticism with regards to whom to hold accountable for an event so incongruous with socialist reality: "It serves as a reprimand to the propaganda workers of the city and district Party organs. Let the ugly grimace of the old way of life (*byt*), which many of us witnessed in those days, become for them a lesson and a warning (*predosterezheniem*)."¹⁷⁴

Local Party organs heard the warning and soon organized meetings to discuss how to best handle the situation. They "designed measures to intensify natural scientific propaganda,"¹⁷⁵ but these seemed to produce little effect. Before long, the tale of "Stone Zoia" extended beyond Kuibyshev, turning Chkalov Street into a popular destination for Orthodox pilgrims, as well as those seeking to witness curiosities for themselves. According to Orthodox clergy, many people were affected by the miracle on Chkalov Street: in the short term, people in Kuibyshev reportedly stayed away from popular entertainment during Lent (movie theaters, for example, were said to be empty in the Holy Week before Easter that year), while, in the long term, the Church claimed that the miracle brought many people back to Orthodoxy.¹⁷⁶

"Stone Zoia" was certainly a sensational phenomenon, but it was not a unique one. On the contrary, it seemed that whenever the Soviet state directed attention to religion, reports containing similarly "bizarre" incidents made their way to the center. Indeed, in the fervor to eradicate superstition that marked the antireligious campaigns of the Khrushchev era—the Hundred Days Campaign that lasted from July to November of 1954, as well as the more extensive campaign of the late Khrushchev era (1958-1964)—central authorities were confronted with the persistence of religious "survivals" across the Soviet Union. In Ukraine, for instance, local organs complained about "superstitious" occurrences on a regular basis, describing

¹⁷¹ Ibid.

¹⁷² Ibid. According to a neighbor, bus stops nearby the house on Chkalov Street were "liquidated" in the time of "Zoia's disturbance" (*Zoinoi smuty*). Dimitrii Sokolov-Mitrich, "Kamennaia Zoia."

¹⁷³ RGANI f. 5, op. 16, d. 753, l. 19.

¹⁷⁴ "Dikii sluchai," *Volzhskaia kommuna*, 24 January 1956. The article is mentioned in the Central Committee report, and cited in Sokolov-Mitrich, "Kamennaia Zoia."

¹⁷⁵ RGANI, f. 5, op. 16, d. 753, l. 19.

¹⁷⁶ Because of the profound impact that the legend had on the local religious community, the Russian Orthodox Church conducted its own investigation into "The Standing of Zoia" and published a pamphlet by the same name (print run 25,000 copies). Sokolov-Mitrich also interviewed father Igor Soloviev of the local Church of St. Georgii, who describes the impact of the event on the local community, and discusses a contemporary Orthodox icon at a church in Samara that depicts the events by the artist Tatiana Ruchka. The legend that surrounds the events continues to evolve into the present day, inspiring not only local folklore and religious art, but also national blockbusters starring Konstantin Khabenskii, one of Russia's most popular actors. See *Chudo* (Miracle), 2009.

incidents that varied from the ideologically unpalatable (as when an image of the Mother of God reportedly appeared in the window of an apartment, drawing hundreds of visitors),¹⁷⁷ to the outright criminal (as when a woman in a Ukrainian village was killed by her neighbors on the suspicion that she was a witch who had put a hex on their family).¹⁷⁸

Yet even more problematic than such sensational incidents were the more banal, and much more common, manifestations of religiosity both within and beyond the borders of traditional religions. The state organs charged with managing religious affairs in the Soviet Union—the Council on the Affairs of the Russian Orthodox Church (CAROC) and the Council for the Affairs of Religious Cults (CARC)¹⁷⁹—gathered evidence of popular religiosity, such as group baptisms, pilgrimages to holy sites, veneration of miraculous icons, and recourse to the services of faith healers, as well as statistics about increases in church income, regular and holiday church attendance, and religious ritual observance. Their findings profoundly unsettled central authorities. The overall picture showed a Soviet reality still riddled with religion, or, as the Party characterized these practices, “survivals” of the old way of life.

This chapter examines the Party-State’s changing understandings of religion over the course of the 1954 antireligious campaign and its aftermath (1954-1957). It looks at the antireligious efforts of the campaign and their mixed results, and analyzes how these informed, and transformed, the way that the Soviet elite approached religion and religiosity. Moreover, it seeks to place the state’s revived interest in the problem of religion in the context of the “Thaw”—the political and cultural liberalization associated with the Khrushchev era. Why did the Party-State again begin to care about religion in the Khrushchev era? How do we make sense of the regime’s antireligious fervor in light of the thaw taking place in other spheres of Soviet life? In part, the story of the antireligious campaign is part of the bigger story about efforts to redefine the course of Soviet socialism after Stalin. As the decade progressed and the Party sought to assume the reigns of Soviet ideological developments, formerly marginal concerns, such as religion and atheism, moved to the center of the regime’s priorities. This chapter analyzes the ways in which the Soviet enlightenment project interacted with, and often came in conflict with, the Party’s anti-religious agenda and the atheist campaign, and suggests that changes in Soviet understandings of religion transformed broader understandings about the

¹⁷⁷ Tsentral’nyi Derzhavnyi Arkhiv Gromads’kikh Ob’ednan’ Ukraini [henceforth TsDAGO], f. 1, op. 70, d. 2577, ll. 79-81. The “Libokhorskoe” miracle took place on 20 July 1963 in the L’viv oblast of Ukraine. As the “sun was setting and multi-colored rainbows were sparkling on the glass,” someone exclaimed that they saw an image of the Mother of God on the window of a church. News of the sighting quickly spread, and soon more than 300 people were praying in front of the church on their knees. Before long, the local CAROC representative reported that visions of the Virgin began to occur in other locations around L’viv oblast.

¹⁷⁸ TsDAGO, f. 1, op. 31, d. 1235, ll. 46-47. The woman in question was accused of putting spells on a family using specific objects. The family burned these objects, killed the woman, and then hung her in the barn in an effort to pass it off as a suicide.

¹⁷⁹ The Councils, created by decision of the Presidium of the USSR Supreme Soviet in 1943 and 1944 respectively, were charged with managing the relationship between religious organizations and the Soviet state. In particular, their focus was on managing the legal side of religious life in the USSR, a function that later became less pronounced as the Party assumed greater supervision over religious affairs and the Councils’ work became increasingly influenced by ideological considerations. While CAROC dealt exclusively with the Russian Orthodox Church, CARC was charged with supervising the affairs of all non-Orthodox confessions, including Islam, Judaism, Catholicism, and Lutheranism, as well as the activities of so-called “sectarians,” a broad term that encompassed groups without traditional bureaucracies, such as evangelical confessions and Old Believers. In December 1965, the two Councils were joined into one administrative body, the Council on Religious Affairs, headed by Vladimir Alekseevich Kuroedov, the former chairman of CAROC.

function and future of Marxist-Leninist ideology. While chapter 1 examined the loss of faith of the Soviet elite in the redemptive power of Science, this chapter looks at what undermined the belief that it was possible to resolve the state's conflict with religion administratively. The understandings and approaches to the problem of religion produced by the 1954 campaign set the stage for the future of the Soviet secularization project—the efforts to manage religion and to produce an atheist society.

Manifestations of popular religiosity were not new to the Khrushchev era. Incidents like those described above had, of course, taken place before 1917, and continued throughout the decades of Soviet power.¹⁸⁰ Yet the relative calm on the religious front of the postwar Stalin era meant that religious affairs largely stayed out of public life. Khrushchev's regime, on the other hand, initiated a search for such ideological heresies.¹⁸¹ Once it began a search for manifestations of the old way of life, the regime found much evidence of "survivals."

The existence of both religious institutions and religious beliefs among Soviet citizens had always been profoundly problematic for the world's first socialist country, but, in the context of the Khrushchev era's utopian ambitions—not only to effectively compete with great powers abroad and provide for the material well-being of citizens at home, but to build Communism within decades—they became intolerable. While Soviet public life was filled with optimistic proclamations about progress and modernization, the regime, and Soviet society in general, were constantly made aware of the contradictions and short-comings of socialist reality.¹⁸² As a woman from a village in the Rostov region pointed out in her letter to the Party's Central Committee in the early 1960s, it was hard to believe that while mankind was conquering space, her native village still did not have a radio hub (*radio uzel*), and some of her fellow villagers had never seen a movie.¹⁸³ Indeed, many of the ideological pronouncements made by the Communist

¹⁸⁰ On Orthodox life before 1917, see Vera Shevzov, *Russian Orthodoxy on the Eve of Revolution* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004); on Orthodox religiosity in the early Soviet, especially in rural areas, see Glennys Young, *Power and the Sacred in Revolutionary Russia: Religious Activists in the Village* (University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1997).

¹⁸¹ On church-state relations during the Second World War and in the postwar Soviet period, see *Russkaia Pravoslavnaia Tserkov' i Velikaia Otechestvennaia voina. Sb. tserkovnykh dokumentov* (Moscow: Moskovskaia Patriarkhia, 1943); Ol'ga Vasilieva, *Russkaia Pravoslavnaia Tserkov' v politike sovetского gosudarstva v 1943-1948 gg* (Moscow, 1999); *Russkaia pravoslavnaia Tserkov' v sovetskoe vremia (1917-1991). (Materialy i dokumenty po istorii otnoshenii mezhdu gosudarstvom i Tserkov'iu)*, 2 vols. (Moscow, 1995); Tatiana A. Chumachenko, *Church and State in Soviet Russia: Russian Orthodoxy from World War II to the Khrushchev Years*, edit. and trans. Edward E. Roslof (Armonk, NY: M.E. Sharpe, 2002) and Nathaniel Davis, *A Long Walk to Church: A Contemporary History of Russian Orthodoxy* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 2003).

¹⁸² On the co-existence of optimistic pronouncements alongside material hardships in the Khrushchev era, see Iurii Aksiutin, *Khrushchevskaia "ottepel'" i obshchestvennye nastroyeniia v SSSR v 1953-1964 gg.* (Moscow: ROSSPEN, 2004); Iurii Aksiutin and A. V. Pyzhikov, *Poststalinskoe obshchestvo: problema liderstva i transformatsiia vlasti* (Moscow: Nauchnaia kniga, 1999); Rudolf Germanovich Pikhoia, *Moskva, Kreml', vlast'. Sorok let posle voiny: 1945-1985* (Moscow: Astrel', 2007); Petr Vail' and Aleksandr Genis, *60-e: mir sovetskogo cheloveka* (Moscow, Novoe literaturnoe obozrenie, 2001); Elena Zubkova, *Obshchestvo i reformy, 1945-1964* (Moscow: "Rossiia molodaia," 1993); Elena Zubkova, *Russia After the War: Hopes, Illusions, and Disappointments, 1945-1957* (Armonk, NY: M. E. Sharpe, 1998); Elena Zubkova, *Poslevoennoe sovetskoe obshchestvo: politika i povsednevnost': 1945-1953* (Moscow: Rosspen, 2000); and Marina Balina and Evgeny Dobrenko, eds. *Petrified Utopia: Happiness Soviet Style* (New York: Anthem Press, 2009).

¹⁸³ Rossiiskii gosudarstvennyi arkhiv sotsial'no-politicheskoi istorii [henceforth RGASPI], f. 556, op. 25, d. 191. This example was used by Leonid Fedorovich Il'ichev, Head of the Central Committee's Ideological Commission, to criticize the state of enlightenment work in the country in his speech at the June 1963 Party Plenum. See *Plenum*

Party, such as Khrushchev's declaration at the 22nd Party Congress (1961) that the present generation of Soviet youth would live under Communism, required no less of a leap of faith than the belief in a transcendent force that had the power to turn a blasphemous girl into a pillar of stone.¹⁸⁴

To be sure, the Party-State had always existed in the space between its proclaimed ideals and promises of a bright future, and the everyday struggles that still defined most people's experience of being Soviet. Nevertheless, what makes this moment in Soviet history unique is that the regime at last began to officially acknowledge the gap between ideological pronouncements and concrete reality. This meant that the Party-State devoted new attention and resources to *both* the material and spiritual welfare of the ordinary Soviet person, and that the regime's efforts to bridge this gap now relied more on persuasion and mass mobilization than on coercion.¹⁸⁵ The leadership's concern with the material conditions of the country's citizens manifested itself in numerous policies aimed to improve the Soviet standard of living—from a massive housing campaign to a drive to make Soviet agriculture more productive and efficient. Soviet cultural and spiritual life, on the other hand, was addressed through the regime's move to liberalize public life, as well as a new attempt to imbue Soviet ideology with "sincerity."¹⁸⁶ In a way, the Khrushchev era tried to combine the revolutionary fervor of the early Soviet decades with the postwar promise of material abundance. The effort to revitalize Communist ideology was all the more essential in the atmosphere of disorientation that reigned in the aftermath of Khrushchev's denunciation of Stalin and Stalinism. As Soviet citizens struggled to keep their faith in Soviet socialism despite the betrayal of this faith by the crimes of the recently deceased leader, the Communist Party struggled to contain the fallout and redeem the public's belief in the Soviet project.¹⁸⁷ In order to accomplish this, the Party relied more and more on the tool it knew best: Marxist-Leninist ideology.¹⁸⁸ In short, the Khrushchev regime sought to make Marxism-

Tsentral'nogo Komiteta Kommunisticheskoi Partii Sovetskogo Soiuz, 18-21 June 1963: Stenograficheskii otchet (Moscow: Izdatel'stvo Politicheskoi Literatury, 1964). The speech was also published in *Pravda*, 19 June 1963.

¹⁸⁴ *Materialy XXII S'ezda KPSS* (Moscow: 1961), 428.

¹⁸⁵ On the shift from coercion to persuasion as the primary mode of mobilization during the Khrushchev era, see Polly Jones, ed. *The Dilemmas of De-Stalinization: Negotiating Cultural and Social Change in the Khrushchev Era* (New York: Routledge, 2006) and Thomas C. Wolfe, *Governing Soviet Journalism: The Press and the Socialist Person after Stalin* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2005).

¹⁸⁶ On the cultural meaning of the Thaw, see Nancy Condee, "Cultural Codes of the Thaw," in *Nikita Khrushchev*, eds. William Taubman, Sergei Khrushchev, and Abbott Gleason (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2000), 169-76.

¹⁸⁷ On Soviet citizens' efforts to maintain faith in the Communist project, see Iurii Aksiutin, *Khrushchevskaiia "ottepel'" i obshchestvennye nastroyeniia v SSSR v 1953-1964 gg.*, and Melanie Ilic and Jeremy Smith, eds. *Soviet State and Society under Nikita Khrushchev* (New York: Routledge, 2009). For a close analysis on the attitudes of the intelligentsia, see Ludmilla Alexeyeva and Paul Goldberg, *The Thaw Generation: Coming of Age in the Post-Stalin Era* (Pittsburgh, PA: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1993); Masha Gessen, *Dead Again: The Russian Intelligentsia After Communism* (New York: Verso, 1997); Vladimir Shlapentokh, *Soviet Intellectuals and Political Power: The Post-Stalin Era* (New York: I. B. Tauris, 1990); Vail and Genis, *60-e: mir sovetskogo cheloveka*; Vladislav Zubok, *Zhivago's Children: The Last Russian Intelligentsia* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2009).

¹⁸⁸ Certainly the Soviet Union had always been concerned with ideology, and for this reason has been characterized by numerous scholars as a "totalitarian" regime or, to borrow Peter Kenez' term, a "propaganda state." See Peter Kenez, *The Birth of the Propaganda State: Soviet Methods of Mass Mobilization, 1917-1929* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1985). Yet the Khrushchev era presented a new vision for the role of ideology in popular culture and social life, most evident in the prominence of discussions about "communist morality." See Deborah A. Field, *Private Life and Communist Morality in Khrushchev's Russia* (New York: Peter Lang, 2007).

Leninism relevant to the conditions of socialist life as experienced by Soviet citizens, and thereby raise its effectiveness in transforming these same citizens into the “new Soviet persons” of the future.

Yet, as chapter One argued, Khrushchev-era enlightenment campaigns—despite the powerful arsenal of Soviet achievements in science, technology, and the space program—failed to instill in all Soviet citizens a scientific-atheist worldview. While many did, in fact, embrace reason, science, and cosmic conquests, they did not necessarily renounce religious faith, folk beliefs, and other, from the Soviet perspective, dark and irrational “survivals.” Over the course of the Khrushchev decade, the Soviet ideological elite was confronted with new revelations about the scale and nature of Soviet religiosity, and had to face the disturbing fact that religion, rather than “dying out” as a result of modernization, seemed to have been transformed into a qualitatively new kind of opponent. By the end of the 1950s, Soviet atheists acknowledged that they knew very little about this new “modernized” religion, and that what they did know, they understood poorly. As a result, the Party began to adopt new directions in atheist work. Some atheists called for more attention to the philosophical dimension of religious belief, and indeed came to the conclusion that philosophy was as important in the war against religion as science—and perhaps even more so.

As a result of these initial experiments in transforming the worldviews of Soviet citizens, the regime created two narratives about the confrontation between science and religion, as well as the place of religion in modern society in general, and in Soviet life in particular. On the one hand, the first narrative, intended for mass consumption, trumpeted the inevitable triumph of science and reason over religious superstition and darkness, harnessing as evidence conversion stories of individuals who had broken with their faith as a result of Soviet scientific achievements. The second narrative, on the other hand, was far more troubled about the reality that the regime encountered on the ground, and far less confident about the prospects of the Soviet atheist mission. Intended for more limited consumption (by party, enlightenment, and cultural workers), this counter-narrative drew attention to the obstacles that socialism encountered on its historical path, and highlighted the unexpected ability of many Soviet citizens to combine their loyalty to the Soviet Union and communism and their pride in Soviet scientific achievements with their religious faith, without being troubled by contradictions.

New Times, Old Methods: The 1954 Antireligious Campaign

The death of the USSR’s leader, Iosif Stalin, on 5 March 1953, struck at the foundations of every sphere of Soviet life. With the rapid ideological transformations that followed Stalin’s death, the historian Stephen Bittner writes, “A universe of meaning was thrown into disarray, a process that was akin to the ‘cosmic reorganization’ that followed the collapse of communism. The thaw could be dangerous, uncomfortable, and disorienting.”¹⁸⁹ The regime’s new concern with the revitalization of ideology in Soviet policy was evident in the increased attention devoted to the subject in the country’s top Party organs. In the aftermath of the 20th Party Congress that initiated the process of de-Stalinization, Khrushchev undertook the creation of a new Party

¹⁸⁹ Stephen V. Bittner, *The Many Lives of Khrushchev’s Thaw: Experience and Memory in Moscow’s Arbat* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2008), 12.

Program, the first revision of the Communist ideological platform since 1919.¹⁹⁰ This process lasted almost five years, and mobilized enormous energy and resources: the Party not only gathered together top ideological theorists, but also made new efforts to ascertain the views of average Soviet citizens, as exemplified by the revival of sociology and an unprecedented attention to the study of public opinion.¹⁹¹ The central youth newspaper, *Komsomol'skaia Pravda*, formed an Institute of Public Opinion under its sociological department; Leningrad State University founded a Laboratory of Sociological Research; and, more broadly, sociology as a discipline was revived during the Khrushchev era, with groups to conduct sociological research organized at numerous academic and research institutions.¹⁹² Soviet people, meanwhile, responded enthusiastically to the state's apparent interest in their views about the direction of Soviet socialism, which led to an unprecedented flood of correspondence between ordinary citizens and state, party, and cultural institutions.¹⁹³

¹⁹⁰ While there had been earlier attempts to create a new Party program, in the mid-1930s, 1939, and in 1947, none of these had come to fruition. A new commission was formed for the task in 1952, at the 19th Party Congress, but Stalin's death and the subsequent struggle for leadership again left the project without a clear director or direction. After the 20th Party Congress, the question was again raised, and a commission formed to undertake the project began work in 1958. On the creation and content of the Third Party Program, see Alexander Titov, "The 1961 Party Program and the fate of Khrushchev's reforms," *Soviet State and Society Under Nikita Khrushchev*, ed. Melanie Ilic and Jeremy Smith (New York: Routledge, 2009), 8-25. Among the experts gathered to create the Third Party Program were the editors of *Pravda* and *Izvestiia*, P. A. Satiukov and A. A. Adzhubei, as well as Leonid Fedorovich Il'ichev, a former editor of both *Izvestiia* (1944-1948) and *Pravda* (1951-1952) and a top Party official on ideology.

¹⁹¹ On the role of public opinion in the formation of party policy under Khrushchev, and the Third Party Program in particular, see William Taubman, *Khrushchev: The Man and His Era* (New York: Norton, 2003), 508-509. On the revival of sociological studies of public opinion in the Khrushchev era, see Vladimir Shlapentokh, *The Politics of Sociology in the Soviet Union* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1987); B. M. Firsov, *Istoriia sovetskoi sotsiologii 1950—1980-x godov* (St. Petersburg: Evropeiskii universitet v Sankt Peterburge, 2001); Vladimir Shlapentokh, *Soviet Public Opinion and Ideology: Mythology and Pragmatism in Interaction* (New York: Praeger, 1986); and G. S. Batygin, C. F. Yarmoliuk, eds., *Rossiskaia sotsiologiia shestidesiatykh godov v vospominaniakh i dokumentakh* (St. Petersburg: Russkii Khristianskii Gumanitarnyi Institut, 1999). On the role of the intelligentsia in studies of public opinion see Zubok, *Zhivago's Children*, 145-148. For an early analysis of Soviet sociological studies of public responses to religion and atheism see Dimitrii Pospelovskii, *Soviet Studies on the Church and the Believer's Response to Atheism* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1988).

¹⁹² One of the first organizations to study public opinion in the Khrushchev era was the Institute of public opinion (*Institut obshchestvennogo mnenia*) under the sociological department of the newspaper *Komsomol'skaia Pravda*. The Institute was headed by B. A. Grushin, who recently published an in-depth analysis of its efforts. See B. A. Grushin *Chetyre zhizni Rossii v zerkale oprosov obshchestvennogo mnenia: ocherki massovogo soznaniia rossiian vremen Khrushcheva, Brezhneva, Gorbacheva, i El'tsina: Zhizn' pervaiia. Epokha Khrushcheva* (Moscow: Progress-Traditsiia, 2001). The city of Leningrad was a forerunner in the Soviet revival of sociology. See A. O. Boronoev, ed., *Sotsiologiia v Leningrade—Sankt-Peterburg vo vtoroi polovine 20 veka* (St. Petersburg: Izdatel'stvo SPbGU, 2007) and A. O. Boronoev, "Sociological Research in Leningrad-St. Petersburg (1960s-1990s)," *Sociological Research* 48, no. 5 (September–October 2009): 45–54. Sociological studies of religiosity were also conducted by the Museum of the History of Religion and Atheism in Leningrad. See N. P. Krasnikov, "Predvaritel'nye rezul'taty izucheniia religioznykh verovaniia i obriadnosti," in *Konkretnye issledovaniia sovremennykh religioznykh verovaniia (metodika, organizatsiia, rezul'taty)* (Moscow: "Mysl'," 1967), 129-137. On public opinion studies in film and television, see Joshua First, "From Spectator to "Differentiated" Consumer: Film Audience Research in the Era of Developed Socialism (1965–80)," *Kritika: Explorations in Russian and Eurasian History* 9, no. 2 (Spring 2008): 317-344; Kristin Joy Roth-Ey, "Mass Media and the Remaking of Soviet Culture, 1950s-1960s," (Ph.D. Dissertation, Princeton University, 2003) and Christine Evans, "From *Truth* to *Time*: Soviet Central Television, 1957-1985" (Ph.D. Dissertation, University of California, Berkeley, 2010).

¹⁹³ RGANI, f. 5, op. 30, d. 409, ll. 112-123. The Central Committee's Ideological Commission reported record numbers of letters on ideological questions in the wake of the 22nd Party Congress, citing 5,950 letters between

The Party also issued resolutions on ideology in a qualitatively different register, emphasizing the importance of attention to “educational work” (*vospitanie*) in new historical conditions, and the need for party, state, enlightenment, and cultural workers to reform outdated and ineffective propaganda methods. The 9 January 1960 resolution, “On the tasks of party propaganda in contemporary conditions,” criticized propaganda work for its “separation from life, from the practice of building communism.”¹⁹⁴ The Party’s new interest in ideology was also institutionalized with the formation of a separate Ideological Commission within the Party’s Central Committee in 1962.¹⁹⁵ Headed by Leonid Fedorovich Il’ichev (1906-1990)—whose authority on ideological questions in the Khrushchev era was second perhaps only to the Party’s “*eminence grise*” Mikhail Suslov¹⁹⁶—the Ideological Commission concentrated on questions propaganda and agitation, science and culture, literature and art, mass media (the press, radio, and television), and education.¹⁹⁷ The Commission’s work peaked with the June 1963 Plenum of

January and June of 1962. There are numerous excellent studies on the participation of the Soviet public in the project of redefining socialism during the Thaw, and as some of them make clear, the public did not always necessarily push for liberalization, and indeed oftentimes focused on defining and policing deviance. For studies most relevant to the contradictory trends of the Thaw, such as the redefinition of the place of religion in socialist society, see George W. Breslauer, “Khrushchev Reconsidered”, in eds. Stephen F. Cohen, Alexander Rabinowitch, Robert Sharlet, *The Soviet Union Since Stalin* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, Bloomington, 1980); Sheila Fitzpatrick, “Social Parasites: How Tramps, Idle Youth, and Busy Entrepreneurs Impeded the Soviet March to Communism,” *Cahiers du Monde russe et soviétique* 47, 1-2 (2006): 1-32; Polly Jones, “From the Secret Speech to the burial of Stalin: real and ideal responses to de-Stalinization,” in ed. Polly Jones, *The Dilemmas of De-Stalinization: Negotiating Cultural and Social Change in the Khrushchev Era* (New York: Routledge, 2006), 41-63; Susanne Schattenberg, “‘Democracy’ or ‘despotism’? How the Secret Speech was translated into everyday life,” in ed. Polly Jones, *The Dilemmas of De-Stalinization: Negotiating Cultural and Social Change in the Khrushchev Era* (New York: Routledge, 2006), 64-79; Denis Kozlov, “Naming the social evil: the readers of *Novyi mir* and Vladimir Dudintsev’s *Not by Bread Alone*, 1956-1959 and beyond,” ed. Polly Jones, *The Dilemmas of De-Stalinization: Negotiating Cultural and Social Change in the Khrushchev Era* (New York: Routledge, 2006), 80-98; Brian LaPierre, “Dealing with Social Disorders that Should Not Exist: The Khrushchev-Era Soft Line on Petty Crime and the Struggle against Hooliganism in Soviet Russia during the Thaw,” *Russian History* 36, no. 2 (2009): 183-200; Brian LaPierre, “Private Matters or Public Crimes: The Emergence of Domestic Hooliganism in the Soviet Union, 1939-1966,” in Lewis H. Siegelbaum, ed., *Borders of Socialism: Private Spheres of Soviet Russia* (New York: Pallgrave Macmillan, 2006), 191-207; Gleb Tshipursky, “Citizenship, Deviance, and Identity,” *Cahiers du monde russe* 49, no. 4 (2009): 629-650; Juliane Fürst, “The Arrival of Spring? Changes and Continuities in Soviet Youth Culture and Policy between Stalin and Khrushchev,” in Polly Jones, ed., *The Dilemmas of De-Stalinization: Negotiating Cultural and Social Change in the Khrushchev Era* (New York: Routledge, 2006), 135-153; Oleg Kharkhordin, *The Collective and the Individual in Russia: A Study of Practices* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999), 279-302.

¹⁹⁴ “*O zadachakh partiinoi propagandy v sovremennykh usloviakh.*” *Postanovlenie Tsentral’nogo Komiteta KPSS* (Moskva: Gospolitizdat, 1960). “*O zadachakh partiinoi propagandy v sovremennykh usloviakh,*” *Kommunist*, no. 1 (1960): 12.

¹⁹⁵ The Ideological Commission was formed by decree of the Presidium of the Central Committee of the Communist Party on 23 November 1962, and existed until its dissolution on 4 May 1966.

¹⁹⁶ For an in-depth political biography of Mikhail Suslov, see Roi Medvedev and Dimitrii Ermakov, “*Seryi kardinal*”: *M.A. Suslov, Politicheskii portret* (Moscow: Respublika, 1992); and Serge Petroff, *The Red Eminence: A Biography of Mikhail A. Suslov* (Clifton, NJ: Kingston Press, 1988).

¹⁹⁷ Before chairing the Ideological Commission, Il’ichev was the head of the Central Committee’s Propaganda and Agitation Department (1958-1961). He headed the Ideological Commission of the Central Committee until 1965, and was secretary of the Central Committee (1961-1965). After the fall of Khrushchev, he was removed from top Party posts, and was the Deputy Minister of Foreign Affairs from 1965 until 1989. On Il’ichev’s work in top Party organs, see A. A. Fursenko, ed., *Prezidium TsK KPSS 1954-1964: chernovyye protokoly nye zapisi zasedanii, stenogrammy, postanovleniia*, vol. 1 (Moscow: Rosspen, 2004), 1225. On Il’ichev’s professional biography—and

the Party's Central Committee, the first in the history of the Party devoted entirely to questions of ideology.¹⁹⁸

The Party's preoccupation with ideological work over the course of the Khrushchev decade also inaugurated a new era in Soviet concerns with questions of religion and atheism. Beginning in 1954, shortly after Stalin's death, the Party initiated an intensive, though ultimately brief, antireligious campaign that signaled the end of a period of relative calm in Soviet church-state relations.¹⁹⁹ While the Hundred Days antireligious campaign, as it came to be known, turned out to be haphazard, ineffective, and immensely unpopular—a brief episode that was initiated by one Central Committee decree on 7 July 1954, and brought to a halt by another just months later, on 10 November 1954²⁰⁰—it went on to have a long and interesting afterlife.²⁰¹ As it turned out, the 1954 antireligious campaign was only a prelude to the more directed, thorough, and intensified atheist campaign that began in 1958.

Stalin's death profoundly destabilized the precarious calm in Soviet church-state relations that had characterized the last years of his reign. Indeed, the historian Tatiana Chumachenko goes so far as to argue that the relative tranquility in religious life largely depended on Stalin personally, since his seeming disapproval of aggressive policies towards the church kept the situation stable as long as he was alive.²⁰² Chumachenko observes that the last attempt to attack the church in the Stalin era, which took place in 1948-1949 and peaked with the so-called "Saratov Affair," was derailed because of a personal intervention by Stalin.²⁰³ But the Saratov

especially his rise and fall within Party organs—see Mikalai Zian'kovich, *Samye zakrytye liudi: entsiklopedia biografii* (Moscow: OLMA-Press, 2002), 205-209.

¹⁹⁸ The Plenum took place on June 18-21, 1963, and revolved around the issues brought up in Il'ichev's plenary report, to be discussed in chapter 3. See *Plenum Tsentral'nogo Komiteta Kommunisticheskoi Partii Sovetskogo Soiuza, 18-21 June 1963: Stenograficheskii otchet* (Moscow: Izdatel'stvo Politicheskoi Literatury, 1964).

¹⁹⁹ In the early 1950s, religion and atheism disappeared from top Party discussions. As Tatiana Chumachenko points out, "the party had not adopted a single resolution on antireligious propaganda since the 1930s," and the Communist Party Charter adopted at the 19th Party Congress "did not list the struggle against religion as one of the obligations of party members." Chumachenko, 121-122. While this certainly does not mean that antireligious work was not conducted locally, it does indicate that in this period, this work was not directed from above and did not enjoy the explicit support of the top party and state authorities. By 1954, the Party had made an unmistakable, and for many unexpected, reversal in position on religious institutions and beliefs.

²⁰⁰ Central Committee resolution of 10 November 1954, "Ob oshibkakh v provedenii nauchno-ateisticheskoi propagandy sredi naseleniia." The decree was published at the time in central press: *Pravda*, 11 November 1954, 2, as well as in *Komsomol'skaia Pravda* and *Trud*. For 7 July 1954 and 10 November 1954 resolutions, see *Zakonodatel'stvo o religioznykh kul'takh. Sbornik materialov i dokumentov* (Moscow, 1971), 34, 40-45. The first resolution, on the intensification of atheist propaganda, was not made public, while the second was published in the press.

²⁰¹ On the 1954 antireligious campaign, see Joan Delaney Grossman, "Khrushchev's antireligious policy and the campaign of 1954," *Europe-Asia Studies* 24, no. 3 (January 1973): 374-386; Pospelovskii, *A History of Marxist-Leninist Atheism and Soviet Antireligious Policies*; Pospelovskii, *Totalitarizm i veroispovedanie*; Pospelovskii, *Soviet Antireligious Campaigns and Persecutions*; and Pospelovskii, *The Russian Church Under the Soviet Regime, 1917-1982*.

²⁰² Chumachenko, 125.

²⁰³ My account of the "Saratov Affair" comes from Chumachenko, 96-100. Chumachenko's research is based on the materials of CAROC located in Gosudarstvennyi arkhiv Rossiiskoi Federatsii [henceforth GARF], f. 6991, op. 1, d. 451, ll. 162-167, and RGASPI, f. 17, op. 132, d. 10, l. 26. Chumachenko reports that the first page of the packet of archival materials related to the Saratov Affair includes an explicit instruction to abandon previous tactics: "Do not adopt these decisions. Comrade Malenkov reported the matter to Comrade Stalin personally."

Affair was not only the last incident of Soviet antireligious fervor under Stalin; it was also an important precedent for the intensive revival of antireligious rhetoric and tactics in the post-Stalin period. For this reason, it is worth examining in greater detail.

The Saratov Affair began with a religious ceremony on January 19, 1949—a procession on the Orthodox holiday of the Baptism of the Lord (Epiphany) that culminated with blessing the water of the Volga River. The Bishop of Saratov, Boris Vik, had observed all necessary legal restrictions on church activity. He had received permission from the city authorities, and in turn the authorities oversaw the event, including preparations by city lifeguards that involved cutting holes in the ice and setting up fences. The ceremony itself took place without incident, yet after the conclusion, as most people returned to the city, a group of several hundred people stayed behind and began to plunge into the icy, -10 degree, water. Hearing about the incident, the Council on Russian Orthodox Church Affairs dispatched the vice chairman, S. K. Belyshev, to check on the situation on the ground, yet in his report Belyshev emphasized that no laws had been broken and that there had been no disturbances of public order. As far as the Council was concerned, then, there was no “affair.”

Party organs, on the other hand, did not seem to agree, and on 19 February 1949, *Pravda* published an article exposing the events, titled “The Saratov *Font*,” that decried the “wild rite” marked by “the idiocy of the old life,” and explicitly named some participants and local officials to be held responsible.²⁰⁴ This article, which was later published as an independent pamphlet, precipitated a series of militant antireligious articles, and initiated an active campaign against Saratov clergy, laity, and government officials.²⁰⁵ As the campaign gained momentum, it increasingly troubled the Russian Orthodox Church hierarchy, and soon after, at a meeting of the Holy Synod called to discuss the Saratov incident, the Patriarch distanced the church and its traditions from the “spontaneous” events. He stressed that while “‘Bathing by a few hundred people [...] did not amount to a church rite,’” it had the unwelcome effect of producing an article “‘that accused the church of ‘obscurantism’ and ‘paganism.’”²⁰⁶ The Church seemed to be ambivalent about defending unregulated religious behavior. Meanwhile, the continuing campaign seemed to bode ill for both the Russian Orthodox Church and the Soviet institution in charge of regulating religion, the Council on Russian Orthodox Church Affairs. Radical measures were proposed against both parties, and would likely have been put into effect, if not for the aforementioned intervention by Stalin that effectively derailed the crusade.

While this particular episode did not come to fruition, it contained all of the ingredients that would later surface in the Khrushchev-era antireligious campaign: the attempts of clergy to function within the legal framework of the Soviet state; the difficulty that spontaneous, popular religiosity presented both to the Soviet regime and to the church establishment; the aggressive and incendiary antireligious propaganda of party organs that often began with virulent press campaigns; and the precarious position of the Council on Russian Orthodox Church Affairs as it tried to navigate the treacherous landscape of state and party power.²⁰⁷

²⁰⁴ Chumachenko, 97, clarifies that “font” is an ecclesiastical term for a vessel or body of water used for baptisms.

²⁰⁵ GARF, f. 6991, op. 2, d. 73a, l. 14. Quoted in Chumachenko, 98.

²⁰⁶ Ibid.

²⁰⁷ Ibid., 102-103. Chumachenko argues that the events of 1948-1949 were formative for the direction of the Council as a whole, which moved out of the control of governing organs, and further into the sphere of ideology, and the Party’s Agitprop department in particular. The Council, Chumachenko shows, went from being primarily an organ of the state, to an organ of the Party. Consequently, its relations with the church on both the central and local levels began to be dictated less by constitutional law and more by ideology.

In effect, Stalin's death seemed to remove the final barrier to the ambitions of atheist enthusiasts in central Party organs. It also created an institutional and ideological confusion with regards to the status of religion in the Soviet Union—a confusion that also had profound implications for religion's future prospects. Over the course of 1953-1954, the Councils responsible for church-state affairs repeatedly sent inquiries and petitions to both state and party organs, seeking to gain clarity for their future work, yet their questions went unanswered.²⁰⁸ Even when petitions addressed Malenkov and Khrushchev personally, as leaders of the state and the party respectively, they produced no results. The work of CAROC, which cautiously refused to act without guidance and direct approval from above (customary throughout the Council's existence), came to a halt.

This situation was complicated by the fact that, around this time, the Russian Orthodox Church seemed to have entered a period of religious revival. While the Council's activities (or, more precisely, inactivity) after Stalin's death, allowed this revival to develop unhindered, the work of the clergy seemed to promote it directly. Chumachenko notes that the number of believers' petitions increased sharply, church services were held more regularly, and the Russian Orthodox Church hierarchy addressed the severe shortage of clergy by actively recruiting young men into theological education. The Patriarchy also took steps to strengthen its educational system both financially and academically, and authorized a common curriculum for theological seminaries and a general standardization of training. The number of applicants to theological seminaries increased with every year, going from 269 in 1950 to 560 in 1953.²⁰⁹

It is no wonder, then, that when the Party released the 7 July 1954 decree on atheism, both the Councils and religious organizations were caught unawares.²¹⁰ Recalling the militant rhetoric of early Soviet atheist campaigns, the decree criticized passivity in church-state relations and called for the revival of antireligious propaganda. The new Party line proceeded from the assumption that the continued existence of religion in socialist conditions was the result of intensified activity on the part of religious organizations, and of individual shortcomings on the part of believers. Metropolitan Nikolai decried the scope implied by the new Party line, telling the Council for Russian Orthodox Church Affairs, "If antireligious propaganda was previously part of the party's work, in this new era it has taken on a governmental character since the state demands that students depart from schools as atheists, that army officers force their soldiers to reject religious belief, and so forth. One concludes that all believers are lumped together with people who oppose state policy."²¹¹ Indeed, the new decree represented religious organizations as politically unreliable, and religious individuals as a breed apart from "normal" Soviet society.

Defining Religion

The 1954 antireligious campaign borrowed heavily from early Soviet atheist rhetoric and furnished several explanations for the continued existence of religion in socialist conditions, all

²⁰⁸ Ibid., 125-126.

²⁰⁹ Ibid., 127.

²¹⁰ Ibid., 128. Chumachenko notes that for the Church authorities and clergy, the revival of antireligious propaganda was "completely unexpected."

²¹¹ GARF, f. 6991, op. 1, d. 1118, l. 153. Quoted in Chumachenko, 129.

of which relied on particular understandings of religion itself. Broadly, three distinct, though related, narratives guided the ways in which the Soviet ideological elite understood religion. Broadly, these can be described as political, socio-economic, and cultural—although all three were informed, in varying degrees, by Marxist-Leninist ideology, the historical relationship of church and state, and broad assumptions about the course of modernization and the place of religion in socialist modernity.

The political narrative characterized religion as a subversive phenomenon and religious believers as politically unreliable citizens whose allegiances were dangerously split between God and Caesar. Marxist ideology and the history of church-state relations in the Russian empire directed ideologists to see religion as concentrated in specific institutions and bureaucracies, and led them to attribute religiosity to the influence of religious organizations and the activity of religious officials.²¹² This bureaucratic understanding, in turn, inspired them to deal with the problem of religion administratively—that is, to pursue the aim of lowering religiosity by closing religious spaces and increasing restrictions on the activities of religious institutions and the clergy. The socio-economic understanding of religion that lay at the foundation the Marxist-Leninist modernization model, on the other hand, led Soviet ideologists to assume a negative correlation between material well-being and religious affiliation. It consisted of a familiar formula whereby modernizing processes like industrialization, urbanization, bureaucratization, as well as the spread of education and social services, would inevitably disenchant the material world and lead people to abandon supernatural beliefs founded on ignorance. This assumption, it should be noted, was generally shared across the political and geographic divide by proponents of traditional secularization theory in both the East and the West.

Unlike the political narrative, the socio-economic narrative was inherently more confident about the ultimate demise of traditional religions. Since modernization processes were, of their own accord, supposed to produce atheist (or, at the very least, indifferent) citizens, the role of the regime was to modernize—that is, to improve the material conditions of the population. It was possible, as a proponent of the socio-economic view, to avoid direct encounters with religion—and, since many Soviet cadres did exactly that, the new antireligious campaign explicitly criticized such “passivity” on the part of the Party and the Komsomol. A feature on religion in Gorky region in *Komsomol'skaia Pravda*, for example, criticized Komsomol youth for their lack of engagement with atheist issues. The story described a war waged for the hearts and minds of local residents that was easily being won by church figures on the ground. As the author noted, “The Old Believer priest calls on parents to hang crosses around their children’s necks and to teach them psalms and prayers. Young Communist League propagandists remain silent.”²¹³ When local Komsomol leadership argued that there was no reason to conduct atheist propaganda lectures in the area since Komsomol youth were all

²¹² On tsarist policy on religion, see Robert D. Crews, *For Prophet and Tsar: Islam and Empire in Russia and Central Asia* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2006); Paul Bushkovitch, *Religion and Society in Russia: The Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992); Paul Werth, *At the Margins of Orthodoxy: Mission, Governance, and Confessional Politics in Russia's Volga-Kama Region, 1827-1905* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2002); Paul Werth, "Schism Once Removed: Sects, State Authority, and the Meanings of Religious Toleration in Imperial Russia," in Alexei Miller and Alfred Rieber, eds., *Imperial Rule* (New York: Central European University Press, 2004), 85-108; and Paul Werth, "In the State's Embrace? Civil Acts in an Imperial Order," *Kritika: Explorations in Russian and Eurasian History* 7, no. 3 (2006): 433-458.

²¹³ I. Shatunovskii, "The Evil Eye," *Komsomol'skaia Pravda*, 18 December 1954, 2. In *The Current Digest of the Post-Soviet Press* 5, no. 49 (January 20, 1954), 11-54.

naturally atheists, the author pointed out that the Komsomol was “obligated to protect all youth from the influence of church and sect members and to carry on antireligious propaganda among the entire public.” Religious figures, he warned, “do not act in heavenly space, but on earth, among the public.” They successfully spread ‘opium’ among local villagers, while the village ‘aktiv’—whose task is to “bring light and education”—“come off very poorly.”

Criticism of the passivity produced by the socio-economic understanding of religion underpinned the cultural narrative that informed understandings of religion as a “backward” phenomenon with no right to citizenship in the socialist modernity under construction during the Khrushchev era. The narrative of cultural modernity called for a more active ideological engagement with religion on the ground through both administrative and enlightenment measures, and saw the struggle with religion as part of the broader agenda to “civilize” the Soviet population, encompassed by the ever-present Soviet effort to inculcate not only “culture” but “culturedness” (*kul'turnost'*).²¹⁴ According to this vision of cultural modernity, Soviet people—in both urban and rural areas—were to engage in “cultured” leisure activities. They should pursue a course of self-improvement by attending lectures, enrolling in evening courses, and regularly visiting the reading room of their local club or library. Their relaxation should consist of attending films and dances in the House of Culture (*Dom kul'tury*), or taking part in amateur arts groups (*khudozhestvennaia samodeiatel'nost'*) that ranged from photography clubs to theater troupes and folk dance ensembles. In this context, the notion that Soviet citizens, and Soviet youth in particular, would attend religious services, participate in religious rituals, or, worse yet, go on a pilgrimage to a holy site or engage the services of a healer, was considered not only ideologically incorrect, but “unseemly,” a source of shame.

Naturally, such views meant that the majority of Soviet citizens who held religious beliefs and/or participated in religious activities to keep their views and practices hidden from the public eye. Because religion was insistently presented as a phenomenon that occurred on the margins of society, hiding one's religiosity was all the more vital as one got closer to urban centers, and higher along the social and labor ladder. These behaviors and modes of thinking created a set of enduring assumptions about religion held by most Soviet citizens, and even many among the Soviet elite, all of whom remained largely uninformed about the beliefs and practices of their neighbors. Indeed, most central authorities assumed that religiosity, if it existed, was a peripheral phenomenon both socially and geographically—that is, that it was largely the purview of uncultured grandmothers, lost souls who had suffered misfortune, and unenlightened folk in rural areas and in the country's remote regions. The fact that much of what was published about religion in the early part of the Khrushchev era focused on marginal sectarian communities, or marginal elements within the country's traditional religions, generally helped uphold such stereotypes. A paradoxical situation emerged wherein most Soviet people assumed that, even if they themselves subscribed to certain “unenlightened” views and took part in “superstitious” practices, they lived in an atheist country whose citizens were, on the whole, unbelievers. Indeed, many considered themselves, despite occasional recourses to religious beliefs and practices, to be

²¹⁴ On the history of *kul'turnost'*, see Vadim Volkov, “The Concept of *Kul'turnost'*. Notes on the Stalinist Civilizing Process,” in *Stalinism. New Directions*, ed. Sheila Fitzpatrick (New York: Routledge, 2000); and Sheila Fitzpatrick, *The Cultural Front. Power and Culture in Revolutionary Russia*. (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1992). For a long durée history of the civilizing process in Russia, see Catriona Kelly, *Refining Russia: Advice Literature, Polite Culture, and Gender from Catherine to Yeltsin* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001).

among the unbelieving masses. In part, this explains the shock of atheist cadres at the religiosity they discovered when they “went to the people” as part of the enlightenment campaign.

Understanding Religiosity

Soviet understandings of religion are especially evident in the way that party and state authorities measured religiosity. In order to gauge the health of the Russian Orthodox Church, the Council regularly reported on church and clergy income; the number of functioning churches and clergy (used to estimate regular religious observance); church attendance on big religious holidays (such as Christmas and Easter); manifestations of popular religion (such as pilgrimages and commemorations of local feast days); and private ritual observance, especially of life-cycle rites such as baptisms, marriages, and funerals. Statistics on life-cycle rites in particular were used as the clearest indicator of individual religiosity and were also considered to be a major source of church income.

The categories used by Soviet officials to monitor religion, as well as the tactics employed in the 1954 antireligious campaign, also reveal broader assumptions about the sources and nature of religiosity in this period. To begin with, the amount of attention that the regime devoted to pilgrimages, the existence of holy sites, and the commemoration of local feast days (especially in the countryside, where the practice was almost ubiquitous), indicates that, in some crucial ways, the regime collapsed differences between organized and popular religion. Indeed, Council reports regularly decried the existence of holy sites—of which, the Council reported in 1954, there were officially thirty with pilgrims that numbered in the thousands—and saw the church as the impetus behind such manifestations of religiosity.²¹⁵

Yet for the Church the distinction between organized and spontaneous religious activities were not irrelevant. Indeed, popular religious practices—as the 1949 events in Saratov make clear—often took place without the direct participation of religious institutions and authorities. Indeed, in the case of Russian Orthodoxy, the USSR’s most prominent confession, such popular practices were often a point of contention from which religious authorities sought to distance themselves. Indeed, historically, popular devotion had presented a problem for the Russian Orthodox Church as well as secular authorities.²¹⁶ Seeing some forms of popular religiosity as manifestations of pagan belief and a problem of religious discipline, the Russian Orthodox

²¹⁵ RGANI, f. 5, op. 16, d. 650, l. 20.

²¹⁶ For a history of church and state attempts to discipline the population in imperial Russia, see Viktor Zhivov, “Distiplinarnaia revoliutsiia i bor’ba s sueveriem v Rossii XVIII veka: ‘provaly’ i ikh posledstviia,” *Antropologičeskaia revoliutsiia: Sbornik statei po materialam XVI Bannykh chtennii zhurnala “Novoe literaturnoe obozrenie,”* eds. I. Prokhorova, A. Dmitriev, I. Kikulin, and M. Maiofis (Moscow: NLO, 2009), 327-361. The problem of religious discipline is not unique to Orthodoxy, and indeed the study of religious discipline was pioneered by scholarship on early modern Europe. See Philip S. Gorski, *The Disciplinary Revolution: Calvinism and the Rise of the State in Early Modern Europe* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003); Heinz Schilling, “The Confessionalization of Church, State, and Society: The Shapes, Successes, Weaknesses, and Prospects of a Historiographical Paradigm,” in *Die katholische Konfessionalisierung. Akten eines von Corpus Catholicorum und Verein für Reformationsgeschichte veranstalteten Symposions*, eds. Wolfgang Reinhard and Heinz Schilling (Augsburg, 1993), 11-49; Wolfgang Reinhard, “Reformation, Counter-Reformation, and the Early Modern State: A Reassessment,” *Catholic Historical Review* 75 (1989): 383-404.

Church had a shared interest in the “liquidation of holy places.”²¹⁷ From the perspective of Soviet atheists, though, the Church’s position was counterintuitive, since their understanding of religion made no distinction between organized and popular religion. Practices that the church constituted as “superstitious” were considered by Soviet atheists to be “religious,” since Soviet atheists considered all religion to be a form of superstition.

Nevertheless, some confessions were considered more ‘fanatical’ than others, and some religious beliefs and practices more ‘backward’ and ‘superstitious’ than others. Perhaps not surprisingly, Soviet cadres whose task was to manage and make sense of religion were much more comfortable with familiar confessions and forms of religiosity. Largely, it seems that they were inherently more calm when coming in contact with beliefs and practices of ordinary Orthodox believers, especially when those beliefs and practices were ones that had been tacitly acknowledged to be widespread—such as icons in the home, or the observance of life-cycle rites. A local party cadre might find it exasperating, but not surprising, that the majority of villagers in his area had icons in their homes, or even that local youth would marry or baptize their child according to religious tradition. Indeed, many local leaders began to be criticized for turning a blind eye to exactly such practices, and reports suggest that some even participated in them themselves.

In short, for the vast majority of Soviet atheists, there was no such thing as “normal” religiosity. Historically, they were profoundly suspicious of the sincerity of religious conceptions of charity, faith, and brotherly love and, from the outset, presented the church as a parasite on the ignorance of the poor—a parasitism that was not only philosophical and spiritual, but economic. Atheists presumed the clergy to be hypocrites who performed religious services under the incentive for profit, and charity to be a clever tactic that tied neophyte believers to religious organizations. All religious believers were presumed to be either “fanatics” or hypocrites—if their belief seemed fervent, it was considered a form of extremism, whereas if they showed no external signs of fervor, they were assumed to be hypocrites who cynically disguised their unbelief in order to take advantage of the innocent. In short, religious belief was considered an indicator of backwardness at best, and criminality and deviance at worst.

The association of religion with criminality and moral deviance was common in popular propaganda during the early Soviet period, and indeed extended beyond the revolutionary divide of 1917.²¹⁸ Moreover, it was not just confined to devious religious officials and politically unreliable groups, but was also extended to ordinary believers. By the Khrushchev era, official rhetoric characterized religious believers as socially marginal elements whose religiosity was both the cause and the effect of deviant behavior. Indeed, in a reversal of traditional religious

²¹⁷ A number of recent studies that analyze Soviet antireligious policy and the attitudes behind them make a similar point about the convergence of official Soviet interests with those of the Russian Orthodox Church with regards to popular religiosity. See Chumachenko, *Church and State in Soviet Russia*; Andrew B. Stone, “‘Overcoming Peasant Backwardness’: The Khrushchev Antireligious Campaign and the Rural Soviet Union,” *Russian Review* 67, no. 2 (2008), 296-320; Sergei Shtyrkov, “Oblichitel’naia etnografiia epokhi Khrushcheva: bol’shaia ideologiia i narodnyi obychai (na primere Severo-Osetinskoi ASSR),” *Neprikosnovennyi zapas (NZ)* 63, no. 1 (2009), <http://magazines.russ.ru/nz/2009/1/sh12.html> (accessed on August 12, 2010).

²¹⁸ On anticlerical attitudes throughout Russian history, see Gregory L. Freeze, *The Russian Levites: Parish Clergy in the Eighteenth Century* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1977); Gregory L. Freeze, *The Parish Clergy in Nineteenth-Century Russia: Crisis, Reform, Counter-Reform* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1983); And Laurie Manchester, *Holy Fathers, Secular Sons: Clergy, Intelligentsia, and the Modern Self in Revolutionary Russia* (DeKalb: Northern Illinois University Press, 2008). On the late imperial period and the early Soviet period, see Young, *Power and the Sacred in Revolutionary Russia*.

views on atheism, Soviet rhetoric oftentimes tied religiosity to other manifestations of personal degradation, such as crime, hooliganism, and drunkenness. With the revitalization of the antireligious campaign in mid-1954, Russian Orthodox clergy were routinely attacked in the press for drunkenness and misconduct,²¹⁹ and manifestations of popular religiosity—especially local feast days—were painted as an occasion that inevitably led to debauchery, the disruption of labor discipline, and physical violence. As the 7 July 1954 Central Committee decree stated:

As a result of the activization of the church, the number of citizens who observe religious holidays and rituals has increased [and] pilgrimages to so-called “holy places” are reviving. [...] Celebrations of religious holidays (which are often accompanied by drunkenness that lasts many days and mass killings of livestock) damage the national economy, distract thousands of people from work, [and] undermine labor discipline.”²²⁰

Regional Council commissioners reported on massive days of labor lost when collective farm workers took off work to celebrate major religious holidays, and lamented that these celebrations, which usually involved drinking bouts, were often done with the tacit or explicit approval of local state and party organs, and sometimes even with their participation.²²¹

Local feast days were considered to be even more problematic, largely because they involved the entire community in a carnivalesque celebration that often lasted several days. An extensive report on the “Soviet” collective farm in the Kostroma region outlined the damage done by local feast days, and emphasized, with great alarm, the economic and moral repercussions of their continued observance.

Until very recent times, every locale celebrated many religious holidays, among them one, and sometimes two, local feast days (*prestol'nykh prazdnikov*). All in all, 39 [holidays] were commemorated in the villages. Party organs and the directors of the collective farm decided to take stock of how much all of these holidays are costing the association (*artel'*). It was established that each religious holiday was celebrated by an average of 500 people, and the celebrations lasted 3-4 days. Because of this, the collective farm lost around 80,000 workdays every year. Therefore, just from collective farmers not showing up to work, the enterprise under-produced by 3 million rubles (according to the old system). But there were also casualties that do not easily lend themselves to being counted—and these are moral casualties. [...] mass drunkenness could be observed, accompanied by hooliganism, debauchery, and fights with serious consequences.”²²²

²¹⁹ Publications on clergy misconduct, and drunkenness in particular, became common in this period; so much so, that the patriarch appealed to the clergy to preach against drunkenness in their sermons. See Chumachenko, 131.

²²⁰ *Zakonodatel'stvo o religioznykh kul'takh. Sbornik materialov i dokumentov* (Moscow: 1971), 34.

²²¹ RGANI, f. 5, op. 16, d. 705, l. 40-48. One report noted that the collective farm itself provided transportation for believers who wished to celebrate Christmas.

²²² RGANI, f. 5, op. 34, d. 112, l. 105. The effort to replace local feast days with Soviet labor holidays on this same collective farm is also discussed in RGASPI, f. 556, op. 15, d. 96: “...ob opyte raboty po preodoleniu traditsii religioznykh prazdnestv v kolkhoze ‘Sovet’ Kostromskoi oblasti.”

While communal celebrations involving drinking and merry-making that included fights and pranks had been traditional forms of leisure in the Russian countryside, in the context of the regime's enlightenment campaign they became categorized as "deviance." Such deviant behavior was generally considered a sign of "backwardness," and concerned the regime as an obstacle to its official goal of bridging the material and cultural differences between urban and rural areas, an objective that began to be articulated at this time.

Collective religious practices also troubled the regime as evidence of political unreliability, especially in areas where the religion was intimately connected to nationality—such as the Western borderlands (especially Ukraine and the Baltic states), as well as the Caucasus and Central Asia.²²³ Council reports provided ample evidence for concern, both statistical and episodic. Gatherings of 40,000 people were reported in Osh, Kirghizia, in connection with the 1953 celebration of the Muslim holiday "Kurban Bayram,"²²⁴ while the Western border republics—Ukraine, Moldova, and the Baltics—were cited for consistently high levels of church attendance.²²⁵ Ukraine, in particular, presented a special problem for the Soviet state. Political scientist Sabrina Ramet notes that:

During the years 1946-1989, Ukraine enjoyed the distinction of being the Soviet republic with the largest proportion of its inhabitants denied access to the religious denomination of their choices. The Ukrainian Autocephalous Orthodox Church had been suppressed since 1930, the Ukrainian Greek-Rite Catholic Church was suppressed in 1946, the Pokutnyky (Penitents) movement (which arose in 1954) was never legal; [fn 1] even counting only the Greek-Rite Catholics and the Pokutnyky, at least 4-6 million Ukrainians were deprived of associating with the religious community of their choice.²²⁶

In part, this was because of the incorporation of western regions into the Soviet Union after the Second World War. Not only was western Ukraine ethnically and confessionally distinct, since many believers were members of the Catholic Church or Catholics of the Eastern Rite (Ukrainian Catholic or Uniate), its late incorporation meant that the area had not been subjected to the antireligious campaign of the 1930s, which had been responsible for the majority of church closures on Soviet territory and had set the tone for the Soviet attitude to religion. As a result, of the 10,797 churches and 2,625 prayer houses in the entire USSR (as of 1 January 1954), 7,710

²²³ On Islam, see Adeeb Khalid, *Islam After Communism: Religion and Politics in Central Asia* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2007); Shoshana Keller, *To Moscow, not Mecca: The Soviet Campaign against Islam in Central Asia, 1917-1941* (Westport, CT: Praeger, 2001); and Eren Murat Tasar, *Soviet and Muslim: the Institutionalization of Islam in Central Asia, 1943-1991* (Ph.D. dissertation, Harvard University, 2010). On unrest in the western border regions, see Amir Weiner, "Déjà Vu All Over Again: Prague Spring, Romanian Summer, and Soviet Autumn on Russia's Western Frontier," *Journal of Contemporary European History* 15, no. 2 (June 2006). On confessional politics in the western republics (Belarus, Ukraine, and the Baltics) in the late Soviet period, see Nadezhda Alekseevna Beliakova, "Evoliutsiia otnoshenii vlasti i khristianskikh denominatsii v Belorusii, Ukraine, i respublikakh Pribaltiki v poslednei chetverti XX—nachala XXI vv" (Dissertatsiia na soiskanie uchenoii stepeni kandidata istoricheskikh nauk, Moskovskii gosudarstvennyi universitet imeni Lomonosova, 2009).

²²⁴ RGANI, f. 5, op. 16, d. 650.

²²⁵ RGANI, f. 5, op. 34, d. 54, ll. 3-4.

²²⁶ Sabrina P. Ramet, *Nihil obstat: Religion, Politics, and Social Change in East-Central Europe* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1998), 246.

churches, or 63.2 per cent, were in Ukraine.²²⁷ To give a better sense of the significance of Ukraine to the religious situation in the Soviet Union, it is worth quoting Nathaniel Davis's study of church closures during the Khrushchev campaign: "Despite the huge losses of churches and priests in the Ukraine during the Khrushchev drive, the Russian Orthodox church remained a mostly Ukrainian church. Of the 7,500 registered church societies after the drive, 4,540, or 60.5 per cent, were in the Ukraine. The equivalent figure before the drive was 63.4 per cent. The equivalent figure in the 1980s has also been close to two-thirds."²²⁸

To aggravate an already grievous situation, Ukraine was also considered a stronghold of "sectarian" activity—that is, the activities of confessions like Evangelical Baptists, Seventh Day Adventists, and Jehovah's Witnesses.²²⁹ In the Ukrainian case, the concern was intensified by the fact that the republic's most prominent "sects" were not indigenous to Russia but had foreign origins. They were thus considered a security risk and a source of potential penetration of foreign interests along Soviet borders. From the point of view of the Soviet state, "sectarians" were especially dangerous because of their particular religious fervor and their extensive missionary activity.²³⁰ Indeed, while "fanaticism" was applied as a descriptive term to *some* members of all confessions, it was applied to *all* members of "sects." Every sectarian was considered to be, inherently, a fanatic. Georgii Grigor'evich Karpov, the chairman of CAROC, articulated the Soviet position by emphasizing that "sectarianism" is more politically dangerous than Orthodoxy because, unlike Orthodoxy, which privileged the ritual side of religion, evangelical confessions privileged belief. As Karpov put it, "With sectarianism, pride of place is given to doctrine, prophecy, and preaching (*verouchenie, prorochestvo, propovednichestvo*) about brotherhood, equality, and love."²³¹ Furthermore, unlike Orthodoxy, whose activities could be restricted to specific spaces and regulated by the state, "sectarian" communities were often unregistered, and their work was not conducted "within the confines of a church."²³²

²²⁷ RGANI, f. 5, op. 33, d. 53, l. 14. In his detailed archival study of church closures during the Khrushchev antireligious campaign, Nathaniel Davis examines the difficulty of arriving at precise figures with regards to the state's administrative measures against the church: "Between January 1949 and December 1952 the *Zhurnal moskovskoi patriarkhii* reported no new church consecrations. The director of the Institute of Scientific Atheism, Viktor Garadzha, calculated 13,800 churches for 1950. The archive gives 13,867 for 1 January 1951, a number quite close to Garadzha's figures. In 1989, Iurii Khristoradnov, the new head of the Council on Religious Affairs, stated that there were 12,000 Orthodox churches in 1956 and 7,000 by 1965. The archive and other official sources have 13,417 and approximately 7,500 for the years in question. Khristoradnov may have been using figures for churches that were functioning, even if irregularly, while the other statistics may have been for registered Orthodox religious societies, including inactive parishes still on the council's rolls. The two ways of counting show consistent differences." Nathaniel Davis, "The Number of Orthodox Churches before and after the Khrushchev Antireligious Drive," *Slavic Review* 50, no. 3 (Autumn 1991): 614.

²²⁸ Davis, 619.

²²⁹ On the Soviet state's policies on the country's various confessions, including "sects," see Daniel Peris, *Storming the Heavens: the Soviet League of the Militant Godless* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1998); Paul Werth, "From 'Pagan' Muslims to 'Baptized' Communists: Religious Conversion and Ethnic Particularity in Russia's Eastern Provinces," *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 42, no. 3 (2000): 497-52; and Heather J. Coleman, *Russian Baptists and Spiritual Revolution, 1905-1929* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2005).

²³⁰ On the history of sectarianism, see Sergei I. Zhuk, *Russia's Lost Reformation: Peasants, Millennialism, and Radical Sects in Southern Russia and Ukraine, 1830-1917* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2004). For a concise history of Old Belief in Russia, see Oleg L. Shakhnazarov, "People of the Schism (1667-2007)," in *Religion and Politics in Russia: A Reader*, ed. Marjorie Mandelstam Balzer (New York: M. E. Sharpe, 2010), 31-53.

²³¹ RGANI, f. 5, op. 33, d. 53, l. 19.

²³² *Ibid.*

Evidence of this was found in the demographic growth of evangelical confessions across the Soviet Union (by the early 1950s, for instance, Baptist communities were reported to have grown ten times since the tsarist period),²³³ as well as in the political behavior of members, who often refused to participate in Soviet institutions (such as the army, or Communist organizations), and forbade their children from doing so. Instead, from the perspective of the Soviet regime, “sectarians” committed the cardinal sin of educating their children in religion, and thereby “reproduced” religiosity in the youth. Indeed, on the whole, in the beginning of the revived antireligious campaign, Soviet officials paid particular attention to sectarians. Perhaps because of this, sectarians were a frequent target of antireligious publications and the subjects of the first sociological studies of religion in the Soviet Union.²³⁴

Campaigning Against Religion

The 1954 antireligious campaign relied on an arsenal of old and new tactics in order to achieve its goal of eradicating religion within Soviet borders and cultivating citizens with a scientific-atheist worldview. To begin with, the signal issued from the Party to produce results on the antireligious front was interpreted by many local officials as a call to put administrative pressure on local clergy and believers. As a result, measures ranging from church closures to restrictions and prohibitions on religious practices became quite common. Furthermore, the campaign initiated by the July 1954 decree mobilized all Soviet institutions to devote more attention to scientific atheist propaganda, criticizing cadres for passivity in the sphere of atheist education. The directive implied that party organs were to assume the lead in the campaign, and were responsible for producing and training more and better atheist cadres, as well as setting a personal example of atheist conviction. This emphasis on Party vigilance and responsibility in atheist work fell in line with the broader reassertion of Party authority in Soviet politics and social life in the Khrushchev era.²³⁵

The call for more attention to questions of religion and atheism and an improvement in the quality of atheist propaganda and scholarship extended beyond the party, to the Ministries of Culture, Education, and the “Knowledge” Society, which were directed to produce concrete plans for atheist work in contemporary conditions. More often than not, this meant a heavy emphasis on lecture propaganda, which began to grow exponentially beginning in the mid-1950s. The decree also called for an increase in both scientific and popular publications on religion and

²³³ Ibid., 16-18.

²³⁴ Aleksandr Il'ich Klibanov, whose work focused on the history of sects on Russian territory, was the most active and prominent sociologist of religion. When interest in religion was revived in the Khrushchev era, Klibanov was the first to conduct sociological studies, and his scholarship became the conceptual source and methodological model for younger scholars. See Aleksandr Il'ich Klibanov, *Reformatsionnye dvizheniia v Rossii* (Moscow: 1960); *Istoriia religioznogo sektantstva v Rossii* (Moscow: 1965); *Konkretnye issledovaniia sovremennykh religioznykh verovaniĭ* (Moscow: 1967); *Religioznoe sektantstvo i sovremennost': sotsiologicheskie i istoricheskie ocherki* (Moscow: “Nauka,” 1969); *Religioznoe sektantstvo v proshlom i nastoiashchem* (Moscow, “Nauka,” 1973). For a bibliographical overview of Klibanov's scholarship, see A. Iu. Borodikhin, E. Iu. Borodikhina, and T. L. Sedletskaiia eds., *Biblioteka professora Aleksandra Il'icha Klibanova: katalog* (Novosibirsk: Rossiiskaia akademiia nauk, 1996). For an English translation of Klibanov's work with an extensive overview of his career and scholarship, see A. I. Klibanov, *History of Religious Sectarianism in Russia (1860s-1917)*, trans. Ethel Dunn, ed. Stephen Dunn (New York: Pergamon Press, 1982).

²³⁵ Grossman, 375-376.

atheism, and proposed the founding of a monthly popular journal, *Science and Religion (Nauka i religiia)*, which was intended to centralize discussion on religion and scientific atheist theory and practice. Finally, party directives addressed the problem of youth specifically by calling on Ministries of Education and Higher Education to strengthen atheist education in schools, and on the Komsomol to increase and improve atheist propaganda targeting youth.

Much as in the past, the media was assigned pride of place in the battle against religion and the propagation of atheism.²³⁶ Top party organs criticized publishers and journalists for neglecting atheism in the postwar years. Journals such as *Kommunist*, *Vorposy filosofii*, *Novyi mir*, and *Oktiabr'*, were cited as not having published even one article on atheism between 1945 and 1954. Newspapers did little better, with *Komsomol'skaia Pravda* publishing five articles on the topic, and *Pravda*, *Literaturnaia gazeta*, *Uchitel'skaia gazeta*, and *Krasnaia zvezda* only putting out one article each in almost a decade.²³⁷ Publishing houses were called on to republish classics of atheist thought and literature (by authors ranging from Maksim Gorkii, Aleksandr Serafimovich, Vladimir Maiakovskii, and Anton Chekhov, to Anatole France, Voltaire, and Boccaccio).²³⁸ More importantly, publishers and the media were also instructed to produce new works that discussed issues relevant to contemporary conditions, and to reach broader audiences through television and radio. Radio was cited as a particularly effective means of reaching rural areas, and programming reflected how the authorities imagined rural audiences. Atheist programs on the radio included poems, stories, and folk tales, as well as “conversations on antireligious themes” on topics like, “What is religion?,” “Religion is the enemy of science and progress,” “The origins and class essence of religious holidays and rituals, and their harm,” “The incompatibility of religious views and prejudices with the principles of Communist morality,” and “Marxism-Leninism on religion and ways to overcome it.”²³⁹ Publications and programming placed a heavy emphasis on scientific enlightenment, with many programs on “unusual natural phenomena” and, of course, space.²⁴⁰

The antireligious campaign in the press saw many predictable articles that reproduced the party line on religion.²⁴¹ *Komsomol'skaia Pravda*, for example, reported on eruptions of superstition in the Ulyanovsk region: in several villages, rumors of a large “ghost woman” who “brazenly” wandered around town spread among the inhabitants, deserting the streets and killing the sound of the accordion at the village club.²⁴² Shortly after the ghost woman was exposed as a prank, an icon in the church of the same village was reported to have “renewed” in the home of a local woman, and soon visitors came to see the icon for themselves, filling “half a bucket of coppers and silver pieces in one day alone.” Meanwhile the local Komsomol branch, the author reported, ignored atheist education, which was problematic in a region that had a “holy” mountain and three “holy” springs to which believers “throng” in the summer to do penance by

²³⁶ On antireligious propaganda in the Soviet mass media, see David E. Powell, *Antireligious Propaganda in the Soviet Union* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1975).

²³⁷ RGANI, f. 5, op. 16, d. 650, ll. 21-22.

²³⁸ RGANI, f. 5, op. 16, d. 664, ll. 41-63.

²³⁹ *Ibid.*, 58-59.

²⁴⁰ *Ibid.*.

²⁴¹ “Shire razvernut' nauchno-ateisticheskuiu propagandu,” *Pravda*, 24 July 1954, 2; “Svet protiv t'my,” *Pravda*, 4 August 1954.

²⁴² R. Saakov, “Miracles in the Village of Ivanovka,” *Komsomol'skaia Pravda*, 20 February 1954, 3. In *Current Digest of the Post-Soviet Press* 6, no. 7 (March 31, 1954), 15.

climbing the mountain and to take curative baths, all “under the noses of district leaders.”²⁴³ Another article decried a similar state of affairs in Kursk province, where “even young people can be seen among those who go to ‘holy places’ for ‘cures’ and religious festivals,” while the provincial Komsomol committee “remains a dispassionate observer of what is going on.”²⁴⁴

In response, Party leadership insisted on a more engaged and active role for the Komsomol in the antireligious campaign, clarifying the new line on religion and atheism—the obligation to combat the first and promote the second, as well as the “irreconcilability” of religion and science, broadly understood as encompassing both the natural and social sciences—in ever more frequent press publications.²⁴⁵ Over the course of 1954, Soviet readers were treated to feature stories on pilgrimages and the state of atheist propaganda in Tadzhikistan; to the cautionary tale of Natasha Shichalina who had the misfortune of falling for the “dreamy, always silent” Gavril, a young man who turned out to be a mentally-unstable Baptist that ultimately murdered Natasha for her efforts to resist the “demands of his sect.”²⁴⁶ Readers were also told the story of young Gera Borodin, who went temporarily blind playing with homespun rockets. Gera’s simple mother and grandmother, rather than put their faith in modern Soviet medicine, took him to a nearby village to see St. Panteleimon the Healer, promising to the Healer that Gera would often visit the church if his vision were restored. This decision, *Komsomol’skaia Pravda* concluded, “was the first step to Gera’s ruin,” isolating him from his peers and ultimately leading him to commit suicide.²⁴⁷

As the campaign unfolded over the summer and autumn of 1954, a curious trend began to emerge. The press, especially on the local level, added a new component to the attack by paying particular attention to popular religion, and by denouncing the participation of ordinary Soviet citizens and local representatives of state and party organs in “folk” (*narodnye*) religious practices. In his study of the 1954 antireligious campaign in the autonomous region of North Ossetia, the Russian scholar Sergei Shtyrkov describes such press publications as a form of “accusatory” or “repressive” ethnography (*oblichitel’naia etnografiia*)—that is, ethnography whose intent was to unmask and denounce.²⁴⁸

For instance, in the newspaper “Socialist Ossetia,” one local journalist, M. Snegirev, published an expose that revealed the superstitious goings-on in an Ossetian town. To begin with, during the celebration of the local feast day, which lasted three days, prominent Communists joined the rest of the town in not showing up to work. Indeed, instead of “battling this evil,” several village Communists were *themselves* “imprisoned by the obsolete (*otzhivshii*) traditions”: the tractor driver Kanatov “drank heavily and without a break” (*bezprobudno pianstvoval*) the entire week, and communists Aldatov and Belikov did not show up to their posts for three days. In another village, 30 kilometers from the regional center in Beslan, “three or four old people” organized a procession to the cemetery in order to make a ritual sacrifice and “call forth rain.” The problem was that these few elderly people managed to “stupefy” (*durmanit’ golovy*) the entire town, including impressionable youngsters, while communists, the collective farm

²⁴³ Ibid.

²⁴⁴ *Komsomol’skaia Pravda*, 13 June 1954, 1. In *Current Digest of the Post-Soviet Press* 6, no. 25, 4 August 1954.

²⁴⁵ “Science and Religion are Irreconcilable,” *Komsomol’skaia Pravda*, 1 July 1954, 2-3. See also A. Skrypnik, “The Cost of a Pilgrimage,” *Komsomol’skaia Pravda*, 21 August 1954, 2.

²⁴⁶ V. Knyp, *Trud*, 22 August 1954, 22.

²⁴⁷ Sergei Krushinskii, “Light Against Darkness: About an Important and Neglected Part of Educational Work,” *Pravda*, 4 August 1954, 2-3.

²⁴⁸ Shtyrkov, “Oblichitel’naia etnografiia epokhi Khrushcheva.”

leadership, and teachers stood by idly. And to underscore the gravity of the situation in the region, Snegirev concluded with an exposé of one “deadbeat opportunist” (*avantiurist*), Zakaria Khasonov, who organized a “talisman factory” in his home. According to Snegirev, these talisman contained “some sort of mysterious signs,” that, written on scraps of paper, “are incomprehensible to Khasonov himself.” Yet he convinced his clientele that they would bring good fortune, protect from illness, insure the affections of a loved one, and “definitely bring forth the birth of a son in the family.” Meanwhile, his courtyard filled up with various household items that he accepted as payment, as well as “a river of laborers’ rubles.” Among the “simpletons” who fell for Khasonov’s machinations, Snegirev informs his readers, was the brigadier of the collective farm, Khezbechir Geboev.²⁴⁹

The implication of such shaming campaigns—which often explicitly named guilty parties—was that at this historical stage, when socialist conditions have been achieved, Soviet citizens, and Soviet officials and party members in particular, should know better. Top officials in charge of ideology criticized party workers on all levels who “blindly follow the clergy” (*idut na povodu u tserkovnikov*) and even cited incidents where local officials went to the Church for financial assistance, or, conversely, used Soviet resources to assist the church (such as when one party official lent the local monastery ten collective farm workers for three days.)²⁵⁰ Attacks on local officials for their passivity with regards to religious affairs, and their cooperation with religious authorities, became a prominent feature of the antireligious campaign for years to come, and allowed Soviet atheists to unite local cadres with local clergy in blame for the persistence of religion in socialist conditions.

“Two ideologies exist among us”: Reaction, Reassessment, Revisions

Church authorities reacted to the Soviet regime’s new level of antireligious activity, notable both for the increase in scale and the aggressive quality, with an understandable level of concern. Clergy from around the country complained about administrative measures against clerics and believers, noting in particular the frequent recourse to slander about the political unreliability of religious citizens and the immorality of priests. In a conversation with his local Council commissioner, reported by CAROC to the Party’s Central Committee, Archpriest (*protoeirei*) Medvedevskii of Leningrad objected that the Church did not have the opportunity to respond to atheist attacks in Soviet media. In particular, Medvedevskii insisted that the Church was not responsible for drunkenness and hooliganism that took place in villages and on collective farms during local feast days, and that, on the contrary, it calls on believers to “pass the holidays in a worthy manner.”²⁵¹ Instead, in a grievance that became common, Medvedevskii asserted that the Church was being scapegoated for failures in Soviet agriculture. Local organs who fail to fulfill their plans blame the church, “so that [authorities] will look the other way and they can cover up the true reasons for their lagging behind.”²⁵² Yet not all religious officials saw the antireligious campaign as a true threat to religion, and some did not worry that the regime’s campaign would influence the laity’s attitudes towards religion. Indeed, alongside the grievances

²⁴⁹ Shtyrkov, “Oblichitel’naia etnografiia epokhi Khrushcheva.”

²⁵⁰ RGANI, f. 5, op. 16, d. 650, l. 22.

²⁵¹ RGANI, f. 5, op. 16, d. 669, l. 149.

²⁵² Ibid.

described above, secret reports furnished by the KGB to the Councils also noted the clergy's dismissal of the danger of Soviet atheist efforts. In Latvia, Orthodox clergy were reported to have remarked that the quality of Soviet atheism was so low that they had little to worry about: "They talk a lot and say there is no God. But if there is no God, then there is no reason to agitate about it so much, and to try to break through an open door. This kind of propaganda does not leave an impression on believers."²⁵³

While the Latvian clergy's estimation of Soviet atheism pointed to serious problems in the approaches and methods of propagandists and officials, the claim that it did not "leave an impression" does not seem to be entirely accurate, based on the reactions of the clergy, the Councils, and ordinary believers. Soviet antireligious propaganda did indeed make an impression, but often it was not the one intended. In September 1954, an internal CAROC report noted that the intensification of antireligious propaganda in the press actually produced a sudden and sharp *increase* in demand for religious rituals, especially baptisms. This unanticipated rise in demand for religious rites was driven by fear that the new wave of antireligious attacks portended an imminent closure of churches. As a result, instead of following the direction indicated by new Party policy, people hurried to baptize their children while the opportunity still existed.²⁵⁴ Complaints from ordinary believers alarmed that the new direction was the prelude to mass church closures and arrests poured in from around the country, and the Councils brought them to the attention of the Party's top ideological organs.

The Councils, meanwhile, drew conclusions from reports that relayed particularly unsavory incidents—both of religious behavior that moved beyond the confines of Soviet control, and of local officials who had aggravated believers in their region through repressive administrative measures. In October 1954, both Councils sought to intervene with the Party Central Committee through a joint letter that pointed to the counter-productive nature of antireligious propaganda, especially as it was conducted in the Soviet press. As Karpov and Polianskii wrote, "These mistakes and distortions have angered not thousands but millions of Soviet citizens who draw inflammatory conclusions from these mistakes. Individual church leaders from Eastern Europe also draw such conclusions. Leading national religious representatives in the USSR, who daily receive almost all foreign delegations that arrive in our country, and church officials who travel abroad, are placed in a difficult position."²⁵⁵ The leadership of the Russian Orthodox Church likewise emphasized the damage that the antireligious campaign was doing to the image of the Soviet Union abroad. On the whole, those whose task was to manage the "religion problem" acknowledged that the administrative measures and militant atheist propaganda efforts initiated by the July 1954 decree were acknowledged were counterproductive. This conclusion influenced the need for a revision of the Party line on religion and atheism.

The 10 November 1954 resolution "On Errors in the Conduct of Scientific-Atheist Propaganda among the Population," issued only three months after the 7 July 1954 resolution, was intended to correct the general approaches and local practices initiated by the first decree.²⁵⁶

²⁵³ Ibid., 162-163.

²⁵⁴ RGANI, f. 5, op. 33, d. 53, l. 151. Chumachenko also notes the rush to purchase religious items alongside the hurry to perform religious rituals. See Chumachenko, 131.

²⁵⁵ GARF f. 6991, op. 1, d. 1116, l. 7. Quoted in Chumachenko, 133.

²⁵⁶ Unlike the July resolution, which was intended for internal use, the November resolution was made known to the public, and published in *Pravda*, 11 November 1954.

This time, the Party took into account expert opinion (by including members of both Councils in the drafting of the new resolution).²⁵⁷ It was also informed by the state's own recent experiences with antireligious work on the ground. The November 1954 resolution promoted a new position on the place of religion in socialist society by recasting the majority of Soviet believers as loyal citizens rather than politically suspect reactionary forces. It also emphasized the need for party agitators and local officials to respect Soviet laws on freedom of conscience, and to avoid insulting the feelings of religious believers. Nevertheless, the new resolution was not a withdrawal of the Party's commitment to the cultivation of an atheist society and alongside criticism of administrative forms and methods, the decree criticized the present level of atheist work and called for the improvement of atheist education.

The Councils, the Party, and religious authorities, all invested considerable effort into quickly communicating the new position on religion and atheism across the Soviet Union. The November resolution was widely disseminated by the clergy in local parishes, and among students at the theological academies and seminaries, and local organs reported that the new direction was welcomed by clergy and believers. CAROC spread the new party line among local cadres, organizing conferences for local commissioners in Moscow, Leningrad, Minsk, and Kiev.²⁵⁸ The Central Committee, meanwhile, gauged the reactions of local cadres and ordinary citizens through reports about meetings held shortly after the announcement of the Party resolution to discuss errors in antireligious work and the practical implications of new party position on religion and atheism.²⁵⁹

On the ground, responses of "diverse layers of the population" to the more liberal attitudes toward religion and atheism were reported to be positive, but some local Party officials seemed to "understand the decree incorrectly."²⁶⁰ Comrade Marenkov, a collective farm worker in the Lipetsk region and a Party member since 1918, bristled at the thought of having to respect the clergy's freedom to conduct their work:

Why do we fuss over the priests? We should gather them together and get control over them. And if we cannot do this, we can at least give directives to the Patriarch, so that he would issue a command to all the priests so that they would cease their work. Because otherwise it turns out that two ideologies exist among us simultaneously.²⁶¹

While Marenkov's position was specifically cited for its intransigence, some Communists were faulted for falling into the other extreme, and "understand[ing] the decree as the freedom of practicing various religious beliefs by Party members."²⁶² Believers, meanwhile, were reported to express "satisfaction" that the Central Committee "warned everyone that no one can violate the constitutional rights of Soviet citizens."²⁶³ One local worker expressed this sentiment specifically in terms of the right to participate in religious rituals: "Recently, there has been a lot of writing in newspapers that judges those who have been godparents (*poshel v kumov'ia*) or

²⁵⁷ Chumachenko, 134-135.

²⁵⁸ Chumachenko, 135-136.

²⁵⁹ RGANI, f. 5, op. 16, d. 689.

²⁶⁰ Ibid., 21.

²⁶¹ Ibid., 114-115.

²⁶² Ibid., 115.

²⁶³ Ibid., 116.

baptized their child in church. What business is this of anyone's (*komu kakoe delo do etogo*)? As long as one works honestly in industry, this is an affair of each person's conscience, which is written about in our Constitution. We need to clarify for people their incorrect worldview, but we should not persecute them for this."²⁶⁴

With regards to the effect of the regime's new approach to antireligious work on the long-term goal of eradicating religion within Soviet borders, the popular response indicated that the official change of course produced some unexpected results. While the Party had initially expressed reservations about this more tolerant position, fearing that the more lax November 1954 resolution would promote church attendance, local reports indicated that it actually produced the opposite trend. Indeed, in the months following the new resolution, Councils reported a *decrease* in church attendance in comparison with 1953, explaining this phenomenon as the result of believers no longer rushing to the church out of a fear for its imminent closure. As CAROC reported, the November decree "brought to believers a calm about the fate of their churches, which expressed itself in a certain decline, in various locations of the Soviet Union, in the amount of participants in church services even during such a venerated holiday as Christmas."²⁶⁵ In Riga, Latvia, the Party's new resolution on religion "calmed believers, so that even those who constantly attended solemn church services were lazy about showing up to every mass during these Christmas holidays, while before they would have never missed them."²⁶⁶ In the city of Krasnodar, some local clergy were reported to have predicted a rise in church attendance, since believers "would no longer be embarrassed," yet, as it turned out, "The [expectation that] the activities of believers would increase, in comparison with 1953, did not turn out to be justified."²⁶⁷

Generally, then, the Party's change of course on religion and atheism following the 10 November 1954 decree received mixed reactions and produced a great deal of confusion among Soviet cadres at all levels. While the general policy was broadly welcomed by church officials, state cadres whose job was to administrate Soviet church-state relations, and ordinary believers, the specific ideological implications of the resolution, as well as the details of implementation, remained unclear. People in the audience at local-level meetings asked clarifying questions ranging from whether Communists who lived with religious family members were permitted to keep icons in their homes, to why so many officers and Generals of the Soviet army attended church. Local officials wanted to know if the new decree meant that they could provide their collective farm workers with state-owned transportation during religious holidays. Other ordinary citizens inquired about why religious educational institutions existed at all in the Soviet Union, and why the government could not close churches completely. Finally, while some wanted to know why Communists who performed religious rites were not excluded from the Party, others asked whether the November 1954 decree meant that all young people were now permitted to marry in the church.²⁶⁸ The existence, in Soviet conditions, of "two ideologies at the

²⁶⁴ Ibid., 116.

²⁶⁵ RGANI, f. 5, op. 16, d. 705, l. 47.

²⁶⁶ Ibid.

²⁶⁷ Ibid.

²⁶⁸ RGANI, f. 5, op. 16, d. 689, l. 117. Party officials collected reports on "questions that interest people as a result of the November 1954 decree": (1) Is it allowed, after the Resolution, for members of Communists' families who are believers to keep icons in their homes? (2) Why do religious educational institutions exist in our country? (3) Why are there many officers and Generals of the Soviet army among those who come to church? (4) On religious holidays, it is permitted to give believers transportation that belongs to the collective farm? (5) Why are

same time,” a point that vexed those like comrade Marenkov, did indeed cause confusion, and—at least in the short term—allowed for a broad spectrum of interpretation on the question of Soviet church-state relations and atheist education.

The experience of the 1954 antireligious campaigns caused the Soviet Party-State to revisit old categories for understanding and measuring belief, as well as to define new topics of concern for the future of the Soviet secularization project. With regard to the usual categories used to measure the state of health of religion within Soviet borders—church income, number of churches, holiday church attendance, manifestations of popular religion, and private ritual observance—statistics gathered in the years following the 1954 campaign cast serious doubt on the effectiveness of the measures used thus far by the Soviet state. Throughout the mid-late 1950s, the income of the Russian Orthodox Church continued to increase. In Moldova, Russian Orthodox Church income increased from 12,562,000 rubles in 1954, to 13,521,000 in 1955 and 16,378,000 in 1956, while in Ukraine church income grew from 130 million in 1955, to 145 million in 1956.²⁶⁹ The Council pointed out that increases in church income were in large part produced by the general increase in the material welfare of the population. As the report stated, “The size of church and clergy income reveal that the believers’ care for the interests of the Church is not weakening but growing, and that at this point a religious community can expend (*raskhodovat’*) serious means on the capital improvement of its religious buildings (*molitvennykh zdani*).”²⁷⁰

Much of the increase in church income was attributed to a rise in ritual observance, another important indicator of religiosity. F. V. Fedoseev, the CAROC commissioner in Leningrad, cited comparative statistics for religious rituals and church income in the first quarter (January-March) of 1956-1957. The number of baptisms increased from 2697 in 1956 to 3769 in 1957; marriages from 70 in 1956 to 111 in 1957; and funerals from 1955 in 1956 to 1958 in 1957. Church income for the city of Leningrad, meanwhile, increased from 85,768 rubles in the first quarter of 1956 to 94,894 rubles in the first quarter of 1957.²⁷¹ Holiday church attendance and ritual observance also continued to rise. Even in large Soviet urban centers like Moscow and Kiev, churches were full on major religious holidays (especially Christmas and Easter).²⁷² In Moscow, officials noted that large Orthodox churches were filled with as many as 4,000 people when religious holidays fell on non-working days.²⁷³

In Ukraine, the CAROC official for Kiev region described high levels of observance of Radonitsa, the collective day of mourning for the dead, on May 13-15, 1956 (levels that, he noted, were considerably higher than the previous year).²⁷⁴ For three days, people flocked to the city’s cemeteries, filling public transportation to capacity. Priests struggled to keep up with

Communists who perform religious rites not excluded from the Party? (6) Is it allowed, now, to open Churches in areas where they had been closed? (7) Why can’t the government close churches completely? (8) Are all young people permitted to get married in the church?

²⁶⁹ RGANI, f. 5, op. 33, d. 90.

²⁷⁰ Ibid., 10.

²⁷¹ RGANI, f. 5, op. 33, d. 53, l. 67, 78.

²⁷² RGANI, f. 5, op. 33, d. 54, ll. 3-4.

²⁷³ Ibid.

²⁷⁴ TsDAGO, f. 4648, op. 1, d. 144, ll. 71-73. In Russian Orthodox tradition, Radonitsa is a day for remembering the dead, typically with visits to the cemetery. It takes place on the ninth day following Easter. Radonitsa has pre-Christian roots in Slavic culture, and is also referred to as Radunitsa, Mogilki, and Grobki, among other names.

demand as people waited in line in order to have them perform services for the dead over the graves of their relatives. Ultimately, the official notes, there were not enough priests, and people made do with less formal commemorations.

Having lost hope of performing the services for the dead over the grave because of the absence of priests, groups of people laid out the food and drink (*sned' i vypivku*) that they brought from home on the graves, singing familiar Easter songs before sitting down and beginning to “commemorate” (*pominat'*). Others did the same thing without any singing beforehand. People commemorated their relatives (*rodichei*) until late into the evening. I left the cemetery around 9, and there were still many people at the cemetery.

Regardless of the fact that there were few priests at Baykovo cemetery, services over the grave of the ascetic Demian of the Caves (*Demiana Lavrskogo Skhimnika*)—who, among believers, was considered to be a clairvoyant when alive—continued until late into the evening. His venerators (*pochitateli*) gathered in groups, bringing priests, and performed the services for the dead. One group replaced another, and this continued until night. All the cemeteries had many people asking for alms.

They were given Easter cake (*kulich*), white bread, and money in abundance.

On these days, vendors supplied visitors with foods, nonalcoholic drinks, and wines and vodka. They put their stands at the gates of the cemetery and inside the cemetery and sold their wares.²⁷⁵

The Council official concluded that, despite such high attendance on the “days of the graves,” he did not observe any breaches in discipline. On the other hand, he also reported a trend of using the days given off work and school for major state holidays (such as May 1 and November 7) to attend church and perform religious rituals, especially baptisms.²⁷⁶ In Kiev, the three churches investigated saw 32, 35, and 62 children baptized during the 1956 October holidays. “It is worth noting,” the report continued, “that the phenomenon of timing baptisms to coincide with revolutionary holidays is not just urban, but can also be observed in villages.”²⁷⁷ While church attendance was affected by local conditions—such as the weather, or whether or not the religious holiday fell on a workday—the general trend seemed to indicate that people continued to be drawn to religion.

Rising holiday church attendance was noticed not just in major urban centers, but across the USSR—indeed, it seemed to be more prevalent on the peripheries and in rural areas. In Kaunas, Lithuania, Catholic Church attendance during Easter continued to rise annually, with 12,000 people reported in attendance in 1954, 15,000 in 1956, and 20,000 in 1957.²⁷⁸ The report also noted that church attendance increased especially in those Catholic churches that had acquired a priest after not having one in the previous decade. In one church in the Brest region of Belarus, where there had been no priest for the past eight years, church attendance on major

²⁷⁵ TsDAGO, f. 4648, op. 1, d. 144, l. 71-73.

²⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, 84, 123-131.

²⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, 84.

²⁷⁸ RGANI, f. 5, op. 33, d. 90, l. 30.

religious holidays had not gone above 150 people, but after a priest was assigned to the church attendance increased to 2,000 people. This trend could be seen across Belarus, where formerly priestless churches now enjoyed regular attendance figures around 1,500, and over 3,000 during major religious holidays and local feast days.²⁷⁹

Finally, Councils reported a persistent increase in private ritual observance of life-cycle rites. In Lithuania, Catholic clergy were reported to have invested considerable effort on youth confirmations, with figures rising from 52,957 confirmed youth in 1956, to 64,462 in 1957. Some of these confirmations were conducted en masse, with 4,000 youth confirmed in two days.²⁸⁰ From the perspective of the state, the cumulative effect of religious rituals was exponentially greater when one considered not only those being confirmed, but also those in the audience. In the mass confirmation cited above, the report noted that over 15,000 people participated in the ritual, “arriving from many districts of Lithuania on 140 trucks, as well as 3,000 collective farm wagons.”²⁸¹

From Battling Against Religion to Fighting for Atheism

The attempt to overcome religion at the outset of the Khrushchev era was intimately connected to other spheres of concern for the regime, such as youth, education, nationalities, ritual practices, and broader ideological preoccupations with morality and governance. As the regime mobilized the population for the next phase of socialist construction, it became increasingly apparent that the goal of creating an atheistic society, and the future of the Communist project more generally, was inextricably tied to the leadership’s ability to win over the youth. The state found it imperative to appeal to the youth—first, because young people were the most quickly growing demographic, and, considering the human devastation of the recent war, on their way to becoming a majority of the adult population, and second, because ideological regimes traditionally depended on the enthusiasm and support of the youth for their legitimacy.²⁸²

For this reason, Soviet officials were especially troubled by youth religiosity, and linked this problem to broader concerns with education and the family. Schools began to be criticized for insufficient attention to the atheist upbringing of students, and teachers were urged to be more vigilant about students’ home lives (especially those with religious families), and to exert a more forceful influence on the worldview of those in their care.²⁸³ Yet reports revealed that

²⁷⁹ Ibid., 31.

²⁸⁰ RGANI, f. 5, op. 33, d. 90, l. 32.

²⁸¹ Ibid.

²⁸² On the significance of youth in the postwar era, see Zubok, 23-23, 33-40; Juliane Furst, “Prisoners of the Soviet Self? Political Youth Opposition in Late Stalinism,” *Europe-Asia Studies* 54, no. 3 (2002) and Juliane Furst, “Friends in Private, Friends in Public: The Phenomenon of the Kampaniia among Soviet Youth in the 1950s and 1960s,” in *Borders of Socialism: Private Spheres in Soviet Russia*, ed. Lewis H. Siegelbaum (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006), 135-153; and Alexei Yurchak, *Everything Was Forever, Until It Was No More: The Last Soviet Generation* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2006).

²⁸³ For an overview of atheist education in Soviet schools, see Larry E. Holmes, “Fear No Evil: Schools and Religion in Soviet Russia, 1917-1941,” in Sabrina Petra Ramet, ed., *Religious Policy in the Soviet Union* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 131-136; Michael Froggatt, “Renouncing dogma, teaching utopia: Science in schools under Khrushchev,” *The Dilemmas of De-Stalinization: Negotiating Cultural and Social Change in the Khrushchev Era*, 250-267; and David E. Powell, *Antireligious Propaganda in the Soviet Union*.

teachers were often unwilling to explicitly and regularly engage with students on religious questions, and implied that the general consensus seemed to be that Soviet education, which focused heavily on the natural sciences and technology, was inherently atheistic and would naturally produce atheist students. In response to such passivity on the part of Soviet pedagogues, the state pointed out that leaving the subject of religion and atheism unaddressed left room for a dangerous amount of family influence in the home, a situation with potentially grievous consequences. Indeed, in light of the state's new interest in religion atheism, the great disparity in the influence of the family as opposed to the school became even more apparent. After the antireligious campaign was initiated in the press and students were gathered to discuss the topics raised, one Russian seventh-grader articulated the crux of the dilemma that the state had to address.

In school, teachers teach us to listen to our parents. At home, parents teach us to respect and listen to our teachers. Once each year, either before or after Easter, teachers tell us not to go to church, but our mothers and fathers tell us every day to pray to God and go to church. Teachers tell us that they will lower the grades of those who go to church, while parents tell us if we do not go to church they will throw us out of the house. So who should we listen to? It is essential for all adults, for our teachers and parents, to come to an agreement amongst themselves.²⁸⁴

Alongside secondary schools and higher education institutions, Communist youth organizations, and the Komsomol in particular, were charged with atheist upbringing. The Komsomol press began an extensive discussion around atheism and linked it to the broader concern with “new and healthy everyday life” (*novyi i zdorovyi byt*). This produced articles like the one in *Komsomol'skaia Pravda* that published reader's letters on the question of whether Komsomol members can go to church.²⁸⁵ Finally, youth were a particular area of concern because data seemed to imply that they were especially susceptible to the attraction of religious holidays and rituals, and oftentimes saw these as an opportunity to pass the time in a novel and unusual way. In the republic of Georgia, for instance, the rise in religious rituals was attributed precisely to the new fascination with religion of Georgian youth.²⁸⁶ In short, the regime saw the youth issue as central to the religion problem, because the fate of religion in the Soviet Union, as some authorities pointed out, depended on its ability to reproduce in younger generations. Religion could not “die out” as long as Soviet youth participated in the activities of the church.

One of the theories used to explain youth religiosity was the connection between religion and nationality, especially in areas where confessional identity was intimately connected with political concerns and where these were often expressed in the language of folk traditions. This had been a major concern for the Soviet regime from inception with regards to the republics in general, and in the Western borderlands, Central Asia, and the Caucasus in particular. And again, the broader concern with religion and nationality was made evident through instances of ritual practice, such as the case of Latvia, where clergy were reported to use religious rites and sacred

²⁸⁴ RGANI, f. 5, op. 33, d. 53, ll. 126-129.

²⁸⁵ Rossiiskii gosudarstvennyi arkhiv sotsial'no-politicheskoi istorii-m (formerly Tsentri khraneniia dokumentov molodezhnykh organizatsii) [henceforth RGASPI-m], f. 1, op. 32, d. 757.

²⁸⁶ RGANI, f. 5, op. 33, d. 53, ll. 83-84, 87-88.

spaces like cemeteries to foment nationalist dissent, especially on the occasion of religious holidays.²⁸⁷ In Ukraine, levels of ritual observance were used to draw a political distinction between the eastern and western regions of the republic. As a secret report by Korchevoi, the Council commissioner on Ukraine, noted, while the number of religious marriages in the eastern regions was “insignificant,” in the west “the majority of those who [were] married [were] married in a church.” Meanwhile baptism, “one of the most tenacious rituals,” was commonly observed in both the east and the west, with 40-50 per cent honoring the tradition in the east, and “almost the entire population” performing baptisms in the west. Religious funerals, likewise, were reportedly around 35-40 per cent in rural areas of the east, while “almost everyone” had a religious funeral in the western regions.²⁸⁸

In general, then, many of the regime’s worries about religion were concentrated on the issue of ritual observance, which comes as no surprise considering the categories on which the Soviet state relied to understand and measure religiosity, as well as the fact that religious rituals were often the most visible manifestation of concerns with both youth and nationality. As one report on rising church attendance in Voronezh region put it, “It is important to note that the increase in church attendance is not only on account of elderly people, but, to a considerable degree, on account of the youth. The rise in the number of religious weddings and baptisms can serve as evidence of this increase, since it is evident that only young people get married and baptize children.”²⁸⁹ Yet while the problem of religious rituals in Soviet conditions increasingly vexed Soviet officials, there was little clarity about how to make sense of this phenomenon and what measures could be taken to effectively address it.

This problem was compounded by the fact that religious rituals were not uncommonly observed by loyal Soviet citizens, and even by upstanding Party members. In April 1954, a secret report on Ukraine noted that, in one region in the previous two years, a Party candidate was excluded from the Party after he was married according to religious ritual at the insistence of his bride; a collective farm worker was criticized for burying his young daughter according to religious traditions; and another worker was criticized for baptizing his son. Moreover, the report noted that *all* the collective farmers had icons in their homes, including some Party members.²⁹⁰ In Lithuania, the local commissioner reported that youth, Party members, and directors of collective farms regularly went to church and performed religious rituals, while local atheist clubs and reading rooms were in an atrocious state: “Feed for pigs is prepared in the reading room/club of the Velikanskii village soviet, thanks to which an unpleasant smell is disseminated. Scattered newspapers lie strewn across the tables.” The chairman of the Bigaiskii collective farm, Klimavicius, was reported to have registered his marriage at the ZAGS, but only “actually” began to live with his bride after their marriage was also conducted according to the religious rituals of the Catholic Church.²⁹¹ This was a problem that seemed to be more frequently reported outside central cities, although the center was by no means unfamiliar with the phenomenon.

Local-level discussions of state policy on religion and atheist propaganda, authorities regularly questioned whether it was appropriate for Communists to participate in religious

²⁸⁷ RGANI, f. 5, op. 33, d. 215, l. 121.

²⁸⁸ RGANI, f. 5, op. 30, d. 53, l. 49.

²⁸⁹ RGANI, f. 5, op. 33, d. 58.

²⁹⁰ RGANI, f. 5, op. 30, d. 53, l. 51.

²⁹¹ *Ibid.*, 11-13.

rituals. Indeed, when individuals responded to the state's attempts to govern the religious sphere, the topic of ritual observance inevitably surfaced, and attention turned to party members as a way to gauge the proper place of religion in a rapidly-changing environment. In the summer of 1954, when *Pravda* published two prominent articles on atheism—"Expanding scientific-atheist propaganda (*Shire razvernut' nauchno-ateisticheskuiu propagandu*)" (24 July 1954) and "Light against darkness (*Svet protiv t'my*)" (4 August 1954)—almost all of the readers' response letters received by the newspaper focused on the topic of religious rituals, and touched on the question of Communists' participation in them.²⁹² Some letters portrayed religious rituals as the most tenacious element of religion, describing specific instances of others' religious ritual observance (typically, the letter-writers addressed the actions of their neighbors), highlighting the role of personal experience in order to impress upon the editors the seriousness of the problem. Emblematic of this genre is a letter from Z. I. Moshlevskaia, who identified herself as a Party member from Moscow.

For the last fifteen years, I have lived with my family in the dormitories for construction workers, and therefore can bring up many examples of how strongly these harmful religious prejudices intrude into the everyday lives (*byt*) of laborers, and especially of the youth.

Let us take a family: the mother (a worker), the son, little Valerii, thirteen years old, and an elderly grandfather and grandmother. Little Valerii is a straight-A student in the fifth grade and a member of the Pioneers (*otlichnik, pioner-obshchestvennik*). The grandfather is the senior firefighter at the Academy of Sciences. The grandfather and grandmother perform all religious rituals, go to church, mark all the saint's days, treat all illnesses with "holy water" and so forth.

Under his pioneer scarf, little Valeri wears a "holy cross," only not on his neck, but at the armhole of his undershirt, so that no one will notice. As a rule, every Sunday and on every Orthodox holiday the grandson goes to church with his grandfather. Before his exams, he goes to church with his grandmother, buys a candle, and on his knees asks Saint Nikolai to help him pass his exams with excellent marks.

[...]

Among believing workers, I know members of the Communist party. And just try to have a conversation with such a party member, to shame him (*pristydit' ego*), to prove to him the contradiction of his belief. You know what he answers: "You, don't touch religion. The party and the government have permitted the freedom of religion."²⁹³

Moshlevskaia's letter is, in many ways, a formula denunciation (*donos*) typical of the Soviet era in general, and the Stalin era in particular. She shows no reservation about relaying the intimate minutiae of the family's private life, down to the particulars of how little Valeri manages to hide

²⁹² RGANI, f. 5, op. 33, d. 53, ll. 167-181: Secret report to Party Agitprop department from S. Krushinkin, director of *Pravda*'s department of letters, on letters received on antireligious propaganda in response to two prominent articles, "Shire razvernut' nauchno-ateisticheskuiu propagandu," *Pravda*, 24 July 1954; and "Svet protiv t'my," *Pravda*, 4 August 1954.

²⁹³ RGANI, f. 5, op. 33, d. 53, ll. 170-171.

his cross under his pioneers' scarf and avoid detection. Yet what really seems to irk Moshlevskaia is her inability to shame a believing party member, who instead defends his right to freedom of conscience. Indeed, Moshlevskaia's tone implies that, for her, the notion that the Soviet Party and government have "permitted the freedom of religion" undermines the very foundations of that same party and government. What is interesting, though, is that the position expressed by the ideologically vigilant Moshlevskaia was in the minority. In fact, her foe, the believing communist who attempted to carve out a space where political loyalty and religious belief coexisted, represented the views of the majority of letter writers.

Popular responses to the state's anti-religious measures revealed that, even within the framework of Marxism-Leninism and Soviet historical development, there was no uniform position from which to evaluate religion in the Soviet Union. This was particularly evident in the popular response to anti-religious propaganda targeting rituals. While there did seem to be some consensus that religion should be marginal in Soviet *public* life, people seemed to be considerably less willing to give up their own *private* ritual observance, or to judge others for observing religious rites.

As the Soviet regime struggled to make sense of the experiences of the 1954 antireligious campaign—experiences that were widely acknowledged to have failed in their objectives—discussions about religion and antireligious policies receded to the background for several years in both Soviet and church organs. This was compounded by the political developments that occupied the political elite in 1956-1957, namely the destabilizing processes unleashed by the 20th Party Congress, and the subsequent struggle for power between the Khrushchev faction and the so-called anti-party group. On the other hand, the specific issue of state regulation of private life as it pertained to religious observance became even more pertinent after the 20th Party Congress, when Khrushchev publicly renounced Stalinist terror and coercion as a means of governance. In the absence of coercion, as many scholars have pointed out, the Party-State had to figure out an effective means of social mobilization, propelling Soviet ideology to the center of state efforts.

The Thaw Paradox: Political Liberalization, Ideological Militancy, and Religion

The diverse and often contradictory popular responses to the 1954 anti-religious campaigns show that there was no real consensus, even among party and state leadership, about the place of religion in modern Soviet society. While there was a general assumption articulated among the Party and the educated elite that religion would decline in modern conditions in general (and in socialist conditions in particular), this applied much more to the role of religious institutions in public life. Regarding religion in the private sphere, there was much less agreement and clarity, especially among ordinary citizens, many of whom tried to articulate an identity that allowed for both political loyalty to Soviet power and their religious beliefs and practices.

While religion in private life had, from the outset of the Soviet secularization project, been a more contentious topic than religion in public life, private acts of faith became especially contentious after the 20th Party Congress, which redefined the boundaries between the government and the governed. This discussion inevitably involved a theoretical reconsideration of religion and perhaps even a re-evaluation of its place in Soviet society. Yet as Soviet officials

and prominent atheists tried to carve out a way forward for religious policy, it became increasingly apparent that the topic of religion pointed to one of the central contradictions of the era initiated by the 20th Party Congress. This contradiction entailed the paradoxical promotion of two positions: on the one hand, political liberalization, which many interpreted to include freedom of conscience, and, on the other hand, an increasingly more militant and utopian ideological terrain that promised to accelerate the construction of Communism and the creation of qualitatively new Soviet citizens, free of “survivals” from the bourgeois capitalist past.

In accordance with the first trend, the liberalization of political culture trickled down to the religious sphere. During the Thaw, the number of Russian Orthodox clergy increased substantially as those who had been imprisoned or exiled were amnestied and rehabilitated as part of the broader wave of political rehabilitation that, in this period, began to empty out the GULAG camp system. Chumachenko notes that, rescinding an earlier prohibition, CAROC now allowed local commissioners to register clergy who had formerly been imprisoned, so that, “[b]y the end of the 1950s, the portion of clergy who had either served prison sentences or been released early from prison was 30 per cent in Latvia and Lithuania, 45 per cent in Belorussia, and 80 per cent in Ukraine.”²⁹⁴ Religious literature was also allowed greater print runs, and in 1956 Bibles were printed in Russian for the first time in Soviet history, with a print run of 28,000.²⁹⁵

Moreover, the decrease in antireligious activity after the 1954 Hundred Days campaign, alongside significantly improved material conditions for Soviet citizens, resulted in substantial financial and social gains for the Russian Orthodox Church. Not only were people attending church services more regularly and performing more religious rites, they were also buying more religious objects (such as candles and crosses) and contributing more of their income to their local parish. In 1957, the Council on Russian Orthodox Church Affairs noted that the annual income of the Russian Orthodox Church was 667 million rubles, while a decade earlier, in 1948, it had been just 180 million.²⁹⁶ Finally, in a period of increasingly greater contact with the world beyond Soviet borders, the state’s promotion of a healthy church and individual freedom of conscience was politically useful in the arena of foreign policy.²⁹⁷ During the 1957 Moscow Youth Festival, which became an international showcase of Soviet modernity, foreigners visited churches, and Soviet youth debated with religious youth from England about the respective humanism and morality of socialism versus Christianity.²⁹⁸

The new ideological terrain of the Thaw and the new public face of Soviet socialism (again) placed the Council for Russian Orthodox Church Affairs and the Council for the Affairs of Religious Cults in a precarious and uncertain position. It also, naturally, created confusion for ordinary believers, many of whom took state-led de-Stalinization to be a cue for more freedom to express their religious convictions. A. A. Trushin, the Council commissioner for the city and region of Moscow reported that, in the wake of the 20th Party Congress, church attendance and the demand for rituals remained constant, and that, on any given day, twenty to fifty baptisms were performed in Moscow churches.²⁹⁹ Trushin also reported that the new political atmosphere created an increase in believers’ petitions to open local churches, explaining the phenomenon as a result of their perception that liberalization also applied to the sphere of religion. As one

²⁹⁴ Chumachenko, 137. Clergy ranks were also filled by a new, energetic generation of seminary graduates.

²⁹⁵ Ibid., 139.

²⁹⁶ Ibid.

²⁹⁷ RGANI, f. 5, op. 30, d. 240, l. 22.

²⁹⁸ GARF, f. A-561, op. 1, d. 398, ll. 16, 21.

²⁹⁹ RGANI, f. 5, op. 33, d. 53, ll. 93-97.

petitioner wrote, “Before we did not bother (*ne khlopotali*) about opening churches because we thought that it would all be in vain. But now, when we learned from Bulganin’ and Khrushchev’s pronouncements in India that we have full freedom of conscience, we took this task upon ourselves.”³⁰⁰ Trushin relayed that other petitioners, following a similar logic, connected their requests to open churches and register religious communities with contemporary political developments. These included the regime’s new emphasis on socialist legality; the apparent opening of communication between the Soviet state and the Russian Orthodox Church indicated by the meeting of N. A. Bulganin, chairman of the Council of Ministers, with Patriarch Aleksii; and press coverage of foreign church delegations visiting the USSR.³⁰¹

The response of religious believers to the 20th Party Congress—evident in such optimistic interpretations about the future of religion in the Soviet Union—placed the Soviet leadership in a difficult predicament. In particular, it made clear the need for greater clarity on the Party line concerning religion. Receiving such clarity was especially crucial to the work of the Councils which, after the denunciation of Stalinism at the 20th Party Congress, became even more politically vulnerable for their association with the lenient line on religion under Stalin. In the new political and ideological atmosphere of the Thaw, the Councils were aware that their role and image had to be transformed, both because their work had always been guided by Stalinist policies on religion, and frequently overseen by Stalin personally, and because the twin goals of the Thaw—to enforce socialist legality, and to achieve ideological purity by rooting out religion as an alien ideology—were so contradictory that they made it almost impossible for the Council to figure out the correct direction for church-state relations.³⁰²

Over the course of 1956 and 1957, there were internal disagreements within CAROC about the way forward, and certain officials made efforts to get clarity from the Party. In a note to Central Committee member and prominent ideologist P. N. Pospelov, I. I. Ivanov, head of CAROC’s Division of Inspectors, explicitly requested the Party’s opinion on religious matters in light of the 20th Party Congress.³⁰³ Ivanov’s approach to the Council’s function was, above all, pragmatic. He argued that instead of refusing believers’ petitions, which he saw as a violation of the Soviet Constitution’s guarantee of the right to perform religious rites, the Council should provide a “safety valve” for grievances.³⁰⁴ Meanwhile, Ivanov’s deputy, V. Spiridonov, proposed his own vision for the future of the Council’s work. Spiridonov saw the primary function of the Council to be the guarantee of citizens’ rights, writing that in order to “successfully execute the decisions of the 20th Party Congress and the quick movement forward towards Communism” the Council “should not turn into a headquarters of the political war with religion, and not do anything that would violate normal relations between the church and the state.” The primary

³⁰⁰ Ibid., 97. Nikolai Aleksandrovich Bulganin (1895-1975), Soviet political and military leader, was initially Khrushchev’s ally in the struggle with Georgii Malenkov, and replaced Malenkov as the chairman of the Council of Ministers in 1955. He held this position until 1958. In November-December of 1955, Bulganin and Khrushchev travelled together to India, Burma, and Afghanistan. On Malenkov’s and Bulganin’s meetings with the Patriarch in 1954-1956, see Chumachenko, 137-140.

³⁰¹ RGANI, f. 5, op. 33, d. 53, l. 97.

³⁰² Chumachenko, 143-144.

³⁰³ RGANI, f. 5, op. 33, d. 53, ll. 34-44. On 15 December 1956, Ivanov sent a note to Pospelov indicating the need for clarity of the Party line on religious issues after the 20th Party Congress. P. N. Pospelov was a prominent party propagandist and academician of the Soviet Academy of Sciences. As editor-in-chief of *Pravda*, director of the Institute of Marxism-Leninism, and head of the Commission that investigated Stalinist crimes and compiled materials for Khrushchev’s Secret Speech, he had immense influence on the course of Soviet ideology.

³⁰⁴ Chumachenko, 144. Article 124 of the Soviet Constitution.

objective, Spiridonov argued, was to support the church in its “active battle for peace and its support for the affairs of the party and government in the country. This is the main thing, and not inventing some kind of strategic and tactical actions in the war against religion.”³⁰⁵ On the whole, Spiridonov proposed that, in light of new political developments, the Party should cooperate with the church and to conduct the battle with religion “by the word only”—that is, to keep it on the level of ideology.³⁰⁶

Yet both Ivanov’s “pragmatic” approach to Soviet church-state relations, and Spiridonov’s “liberal” vision of protecting the legal rights of citizens, were out of sync with the ideological utopianism of the Khrushchev era. The regime’s ideological mobilization made both the continued existence of religion on Soviet territory increasingly less tenable and the notion of a loyal Soviet believer increasingly less possible.³⁰⁷ While the Councils initially attempted to fall in line with the liberalizing trends of de-Stalinization, the Party grew more impatient with the contradictions that religion presented for socialist reality and began mobilizing for a new attack. From the Party’s perspective, the role of the Councils in the new era of communist construction was to eradicate religion and to create citizens with a scientific-atheist worldview through strengthening the communist education of workers. Over the course of 1957, scientific atheism began to re-appear in Party discussions, articles on religion and atheism appeared in the press with increasing frequency, and a number of the Council’s leading members were retired from their posts and replaced with younger cadres (although Karpov was kept on as chairman for some time longer, likely to create a sense of continuity).³⁰⁸ Chumachenko points to the Party’s simultaneous attempts, on the one hand, to gear up for a new atheist campaign (for instance, by actively limiting the activities of the Russian Orthodox Church), and, on the other hand, to reassure the Russian Orthodox Church that no such campaign was in the works and that the Party line on religion remained unchanged.³⁰⁹ Yet by the beginning of 1958, the internecine struggles within the Party were definitively decided in favor of Khrushchev with his victory over the so-called “antiparty” group, and denunciations of Stalinist crimes in the Party’s ideological rhetoric made way for more optimistic pronouncements about the construction of communism. As a result, the new antireligious campaign, which had been building for the last two years within the

³⁰⁵ RGANI, f. 5, op. 33, d. 53, ll. 39-40.

³⁰⁶ Ibid.

³⁰⁷ RGANI, f. 5, op. 33, d. 53, l. 44. In the spring of 1957, both Ivanov and Spiridonov were invited by the Department of Propaganda and Agitation for a conversation that clarified the implications of the 20th Party Congress for church-state relations.

³⁰⁸ Chumachenko, 144-147. The Council did participate in the new drive by replacing “obscurantist or reactionary” bishops with ones more loyal to the regime. This difference of opinion on the new course on religion called for, from the Party’s perspective, a change in the composition of the Council. Over the course of 1957, a number of the Council’s top officials retired and their posts were filled with younger cadres. The chairman himself felt that he had been “placed under suspicion for disloyalty to the regime” as early as 1956, but, despite his attempts to retire, Chumachenko argues that he was kept on as chairman of the Council with the purpose of creating a continuity in light of the newly arriving cadres, and to assure the Moscow Patriarchate that “the emergence of a ‘new line’ toward the church” did not exist.

³⁰⁹ Ibid., 148. A new drive to limit the activities of the ROC began forming in the Central Committee in the spring of 1957, and accelerated over the course of the summer, just as Khrushchev denounced the antiparty group and won unquestioned leadership within the Central Committee. Chumachenko argues that “the religious question could not be found in the struggle for power that unfolded after Stalin’s death and was not numbered among those problems over which the interests of the various sides clashed.” The defeat of the antiparty group signaled a broader victory over “Stalinists” in the party hierarchy, and in the sphere of religion allowed supporters of the new line to attack the Stalinist leniency on religious questions.

Party's top organs, was activated in earnest, and the attempts to disguise it were no longer either possible or necessary.³¹⁰

Religion and Communist Construction

The political, social, and cultural transformations of the Thaw produced confusion about the place of religion in Soviet society, and while the regime campaigned that there was no room for religion in communist modernity, some voices posited a curious “third way”—a potential path forward for Soviet church-state relations. Presented as a possibility that would transcend the contradictions between Communist ideology and religion, this position—articulated by many ordinary believers, some clergy, and by a segment of the Soviet intelligentsia—denied the opposition of Communism and religion, and even proposed that religion be put in the service of Communism's construction.

Evidence that many Soviet citizens protested the notion that there was a contradiction between their twin allegiances to the Soviet regime and to the church—allegiances that, interestingly, were both often expressed in spiritual terms—can be found in responses to Soviet space achievements and scientific enlightenment propaganda discussed in chapter One, as well as in reactions to the 1954 antireligious campaigns. As Soviet officials pursued this question further over the course of the late 1950s and early 1960s, they only became more aware of the unexpected ways that different segments of the population reconciled what, from the perspective of Soviet atheists, should have been an irreconcilable contradiction between the trinity of science, modernity, and Soviet power on the one hand, and religious beliefs, practices, and traditions on the other. Moreover, while initially people attempted to get around the problem of their religious faith and communist allegiance by denying that the two were incompatible, the goal of reconciling communism and religion began to acquire a new element as the political, cultural, and social changes that defined the Khrushchev era picked up pace in the second half of the 1950s. With the Soviet regime's revived emphasis on individual welfare and morality during the Thaw, some citizens sought to actively include religion in their vision for the future of the Communist project.

Sociological research on “Impressions of the contemporary believer about God” conducted in the Ivanovo region in the early 1960s revealed that ordinary believers identified tradition, social pressure, and the comfort they received from religion in difficult times, as significant factors in their continuing religiosity. But often interview subjects also stressed that they saw the vision of Communist society professed by Marxist-Leninist ideology as the embodiment of Christian ideals.³¹¹ As Anna Aleksandrovna Voliankhina, a middle-aged Orthodox woman from Ivanovo, the region's central city, put it, “Belief in God brings me solace (*uteshenie*). Maybe my soul will go to Heaven because on Earth I try not to hurt anyone, to work honestly, wish no one harm, and never grumble at God (*na boga ne ropshchu*).”³¹² Indeed, Voliankhina saw labor as central not only to her vision of herself as a member of Communist

³¹⁰ Ibid., 149. In light of the goal of building Communism, “A new political war against religion and the clergy was unavoidable. The Council of ROC Affairs had to be transformed into an instrument for war against the strongest religious confession in the USSR—the Orthodox Church.”

³¹¹ RGASPI, f. 606, op. 4, d. 133.

³¹² Ibid., 40-42.

society, but also as a path towards salvation, since “God does not love loafers (*bezdel'nikov*), those who live off the labor of others, and one must show one’s worth in labor and in education, since this is what man was created for, as opposed to animals.” Voliankhina envisioned Communism as the embodiment of Christ’s teachings, a world where “everyone will be equal before God and before one another, no one will force anyone else to work for another, each person will be a comrade and brother to others, there will be agreement among people about everything (*soglasie vo vsem*), everyone will respect one another. The less evil there is, the more pleasing this is to God. This is why the construction of Communism is likewise from God, [a product of] His will.”³¹³

Another believer from Ivanovo, the “sectarian” Nikolai Nikolaevich Zagorodnyi, expressed a similar point of view even more forcefully, arguing that all developments in Soviet politics, science, and technology, not only were not a contradiction of religious teachings, but were in fact a manifestation of God’s ultimate plan for mankind.³¹⁴ While his interviewer noted that Zagorodnyi did not deny the “victory of Soviet scientists in the conquest of space,” the interview subject was said to have “based this victory on Biblical understandings,” stating that “the world-famous inventions and discoveries are created by people according to God’s will, and the Bible itself states as much when it is written that the laws of nature, and God’s mysteries, are opened to those who fear God.” The interviewer tried to clarify for Zagorodnyi that Soviet cosmonauts were atheists, and that they did not “fear God” either on Earth or in space. Instead, “as they penetrated hundreds of kilometers into the Universe, and moved freely along a course pre-determined by scientists, [that] no one got in their way, and that in the heavenly mysteries of the cosmos they saw neither God, nor heavenly paradise, nor angels.”³¹⁵ In response, Zagorodnyi simply repeated his former conviction—namely, that “God exists in the inaccessible world of the transcendent skies. God forgives all people who fly to space with love in their soul, with noble and peaceful goals. But if they fly with other intentions, then God can punish them with his forces.”³¹⁶ Such a formulation that accounted for the success of Soviet cosmonauts by attributing love to their souls and peaceful intentions to their goals allowed Zagorodnyi to keep the foundations of his faith undisturbed, and to believe in the fundamental goodness of Soviet cosmonauts. Zagorodnyi likewise constructed Soviet social reality in Biblical terms, acknowledging that while, indeed, one could see a decline in religious belief in contemporary society, he believed that the “last judgment (*strashnyi sud*)” was coming, and that “[i]t remains only to wait for it.” Then, those who lost their belief would suffer in hell, while those who “have the spirit of God” in their souls will “live eternally in blessed paradise.” For contemporary believers, Zagorodnyi stated, the battle for Communism had become “the center of the circle of life” and, as he recalled, this was even discussed in the prayer house to which he belonged. According to the interviewer, “the believer insisted that the rules of behavior in social, family, and individual life professed in Biblical commandments and religious dogma do not contradict the principles of Communist morality.”³¹⁷

As Zagorodnyi’s remark about the discussion of Soviet Communism in the prayer house indicates, some religious leaders actively sought to reconcile the opposition of Soviet ideology

³¹³ Ibid., 40-42.

³¹⁴ Ibid., 65-68.

³¹⁵ Ibid., 66.

³¹⁶ Ibid., 67.

³¹⁷ Ibid., 68.

and religion both for their flock and for themselves. Following in the lineage of so-called “red priests”—who sought to align religion with Soviet power both to insure the survival of religion within Soviet borders and to fight the trend of marginalizing religious institutions and believers from participation in the Soviet project—some members of the clergy advocated religious morality as a manifestation of Communist ideals.³¹⁸ Typical of this position was the statement made by Archpriest Taranovskii recorded in a Soviet research study that investigated the activities of the clergy in the Vladimir region in 1960-1965. As Taranovskii put it in October 1964, “The clergy sermonizes the good [and] the moral, which does not contradict the Party Program and the construction of communism. I am a priest, and I can be a communist, and there is nothing reprehensible about this. But I believe in God and prepare myself for the afterlife. If Soviet power and its leadership turned to the Church, they would win a lot by it.”³¹⁹

Other religious officials sought to reconcile religion and socialism by minimizing religion’s risk to Communist construction. In his study of the antireligious campaign among the rural population of the Novgorod region, Andrew Stone describes the story of the priest Elagin, who appropriated the regime’s rhetoric about the inevitable decline of religion in order to depict administrative measures against the church as unnecessary.³²⁰ Elagin’s perspective, as articulated to local Council officials, was that priests and churches should exist for the sake of the “disappearing older generation.”³²¹ While he reportedly did not “want to interfere with the communist upbringing of children, because they will have to live without churches and us priests,”³²² he also did not see Orthodoxy as a subversion of Communism, and in fact, as Stone shows, argued that “being anti-Soviet was equivalent to being antithetical to the true spirit of Orthodoxy.”³²³

The efforts of ordinary believers and religious officials to reconcile political and religious loyalties in the era of communist construction point to varying degrees of unwillingness among parts of the population to completely excise religion from the Soviet social fabric. Indeed, many sought to “normalize” the image of the Soviet religious believer by working around, and sometimes even through, the conflict between religion and Communism as articulated by Soviet state officials. Nevertheless, the tactics used by different people varied in the degree to which they were willing to explicitly confront Soviet power on the religious question. Oftentimes, those clergy and ordinary believers who chose to engage in negotiations with the Party-State fought for the existence of religion under socialism by appealing to an image of a declawed religion—that is, one that posed no threat to the bright prospects of Communism, the principles and aims of which were never explicitly questioned. In a rather different approach, another group made up largely of intelligentsia members proposed that religion was not only *not* threatening to

³¹⁸ On the phenomenon of “red priests” see, Edward E. Roslof, *Red Priests: Renovationism, Russian Orthodoxy, and Revolution, 1905-1946* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2002).

³¹⁹ RGASPI, f. 606, op. 4, d. 126, l. 31.

³²⁰ Andrew B. Stone, “‘Overcoming Peasant Backwardness’: The Khrushchev Antireligious Campaign and the Rural Soviet Union,” *Russian Review* 67, no. 2 (2008): 296-320.

³²¹ *Ibid.*, 317.

³²² *Ibid.*

³²³ *Ibid.* It is worth noting that the position of “red priests” like Elagin was often found to be suspect by the Russian Orthodox Church hierarchy. As Stone shows, other priests questioned Elagin’s allegiances, and consequently, his qualifications for leading the parish. Among other instances showing Elagin as not fitting the appropriate model of an Orthodox priest, the former prior of Elagin’s church cited his “modern stylish haircut” and the fact that his wife does not attend church.”

communist construction, but was in fact essential to overcoming the challenges socialism faced on the ground.

This position was articulated by Boris Aleksandrovich Roslavlev, the self-professed “voice of believers within the intelligentsia,” in an extensive proposal about religion in contemporary conditions (addressed to the Council on Russian Orthodox Church Affairs and passed on to the Central Committee).³²⁴ In his proposal, Roslavlev focused on the positive role that religion, and especially religious morality, could play in a period when Soviet society found itself on the “threshold of communism” (*v nashem preddverii k kommunizmu*). He also sought to explain the attraction to religion of the “believing intelligentsia,” noting that the intelligentsia saw in religion “the improvement of human morality.”³²⁵ Sometimes, Roslavlev wrote, “One wants to be alone with oneself, face to face with one’s own conscience. And seeing in front of oneself an image towards which man should strive. That image is Christ. It is said that it is possible to turn away from man’s judgment, but not from that image [of Christ].”³²⁶

Implicitly, Roslavlev questioned whether the man-made morality of Soviet society could affect individuals as profoundly as the prospect of religious judgment. Explicitly, he suggested that perhaps Soviet people had not yet reached the moral purity that would make them fitting communist citizens. He proposed that the Soviet state needed the Russian Orthodox Church (which, Roslavlev noted, represented the majority of Soviet citizens) to achieve its goals of building the ideal communist society. “Communism demands total development (*vseobshchego razvitiia*), total spiritual purity, the elevation of morality, and the most spiritual relations among people,” Roslavlev put forth, “And the church, the true church, can very much help us on the threshold to communism, in the spiritual strengthening of the right and the just.”³²⁷ Meanwhile, the communist morality proposed by Soviet ideology, Roslavlev argued, was not fit for the task at hand.

They will tell us—we have communist morality—that this is what should be inculcated into the human masses. True. But this demands an enormous amount of education; it demands many decades and a great deal of work. We can plan on this, which is what our government is doing, but to say that we will definitely and completely achieve this ... We cannot say this. There are many conditions that have not yet been overcome, as a result of which many will remain outside of this elevated (*blagogo*) and great plan, outside of the educational system. If we speak about the broad masses of people, it is easier to approach the soul and the conscience. Therefore, it is likely that we can be more successful at improving morality with the help of such an image as Christ. Especially if we see (and we undoubtedly see) that religion is not so easy to emasculate (*vykholostit*).³²⁸

Roslavlev, in pointing to the numerous shortcomings of Soviet reality, also specifically implicated the Soviet regime’s failures in the arena of secularization, invoking the powerful image of the Soviet state’s inability to “emasculate” religion and rob it of its power. In effect,

³²⁴ RGANI, f. 5, op. 16, d. 754, ll. 103-109.

³²⁵ RGANI, f. 5, op. 16, d. 754, l. 102.

³²⁶ *Ibid.*, 103.

³²⁷ *Ibid.*, 103-104.

³²⁸ *Ibid.*, 104.

then, Roslavlev proposed that religion continued to exist not only because of what it offered to believers, but also because of what Soviet reality failed to provide to Soviet citizens—namely, material well-being, high levels of education equally accessible to all citizens, and, perhaps most crucially, spiritual nourishment.

From the perspective of the Communist Party, Roslavlev's solution—to put religion in the service of Communist construction—was a non-option, especially in the utopia rhetorically cultivated by the Khrushchev regime. While Stalin had actively sought the support of the Russian Orthodox Church in the defense of the Motherland during the war, his policies of peaceful coexistence with religion stayed within the borders of pragmatic state interests. The Khrushchev regime, on the other hand, no longer viewed the Church as a buttress for state power, but instead saw it as a competing ideology that threatened to undermine the purity of Marxism-Leninism. But it did point to several issues that Soviet ideologists recognized to be crucial to the atheist project, and, consequently, to the Communist project more broadly. Roslavlev's thesis and others like it were diligently collected and analyzed because they revealed important areas in which Soviet understandings of religion and antireligious policies fell short. First, Roslavlev's proposal highlighted the modernization of religion, that is, its potential to adapt to contemporary conditions and needs both institutionally and theoretically. Second, he underscored the particular relevance that religion had to the problem of morality, a problem that, in this period, became central to the larger goal of creating the new Soviet citizen. Finally, Roslavlev's explicit emphasis on the deficiencies of Soviet reality pointed to the problem of the pace of development—as Roslavlev noted, it would take decades to inculcate Communist morality, while religious morality was already a fundamental part of many people's worldview.

As the Party-State solidified its antagonistic position on religion during the revived antireligious campaign of the late-1950s and early 1960s, attempts to reconcile religion and socialism—whether they came from Soviet cadres in charge of religion and atheism, ordinary believers, religious officials, or the intelligentsia—became less and less welcome. By 1958, the Council on Russian Orthodox Church Affairs received clear indications that the way it conceived its role and conducted its activities had become unacceptable. Chumachenko summarizes the state of affairs by noting that the new Party line broadly denounced the work of the Councils as “a manifestation of Stalinism,” and pointing out that, “[e]verything that was achieved in church-state relations from the moment of the Council's creation was declared to be ‘a deformation of the ecclesiastical policy of the socialist state’ and ‘an incorrect political and tactical line.’”³²⁹ Instead, the purge of the Council's ‘old guard,’ as well as Party pronouncements on religious questions that appeared with increasing frequency, announced that, in the new epoch of communist construction, such institutions were to become instruments of the state in the war against religion.³³⁰ They also indicated to the Council that the Party had definitively assumed

³²⁹ Mikhail Ivanovich Odintsov, *Gosudarstvo i tserkov' (Istoriia vzaimootnoshenii, 1917–1938 gg.)* (Moscow: Znanie, 1991), 119. Quoted in Chumachenko, 153-154. On the paradoxes of de-Stalinization in the sphere of religion, also see Bohdan R. Bociurkiw, “De-Stalinization and Religion in the U.S.S.R.,” *International Journal* 20, no. 3 (Summer 1965): 312-330.

³³⁰ Chumachenko, 149-152. Chumachenko makes this point specifically with regards to the Russian Orthodox Church: “A new political war against religion and the clergy was unavoidable. The Council had to be transformed into an instrument for war against the strongest religious confession in the USSR—the Orthodox Church.” By the fall of 1958, Karpov understood that the new party line on religion in the USSR would preclude any further positive interventions on behalf of the Church (such as opening churches in response to petitions).

control of this sphere of ideological work, and that the Council's function would be to execute Party policy on those grounds.

In effect, the new course on religion aimed to employ all necessary administrative and ideological measures in order to limit church influence on the population. The population, meanwhile, saw its channels for communications and negotiations with Soviet authorities on religious questions drastically reduced. Local Council officials, for instance, were instructed to curb petitions by both discouraging believers to file them, and by indicating to believers that they would not be passed along to higher organs. Finally, as the Party intensified its struggle to control the interpretation and course of de-Stalinization, the emphasis on “socialist legality”—which had initially led some citizens to petition for the legal rights of the church and believers and to appeal to freedom of conscience—was recast by the Party to mean more vigilance with regards to limiting religious activities on the ground, as well as increased administrative measures against the church and believers. Former laxity on these matters was painted as a product of Stalinism, and Soviet officials, as well as volunteer groups organized explicitly for this purpose, persecuted religious organizations for using public spaces and property for religious purposes, performing religious rites outside of the confines of specially-designated religious spaces, conducting pilgrimages and other manifestations of popular religiosity, and charitable activity. Under the guise of monitoring “socialist legality,” Chumachenko notes, “everything that was permitted by special legislative acts, resolutions, and instructions of the government in the 1940s and early 1950s now was declared a violation of Soviet law.”³³¹

The new antireligious campaign was part of the broader struggle to control the course of de-Stalinization, to define the meaning of socialism, and to establish who had the power to define the Soviet path and, in effect, speak for the people. In this arena, Roslavlev's proposal also suggested a broader problem faced by the Communist Party in the Khrushchev era: the intelligentsia. Roslavlev's proposal went to the heart of the Party's attempt to monopolize the public debates of the Thaw and to assume leadership in paving the Communist path forward.³³² In a number of ways, the Thaw appealed to the intelligentsia's historic understanding of itself as a cultural vanguard whose mission was to enlighten the masses. In the aftermath of disillusioning revelations about Stalinism, Soviet ideology was charged with mobilizing society and re-legitimizing the Soviet project, and in the middle and late 1950s the Soviet intellectual and cultural elite still largely believed in the possibility of reforming the Party from within. Many saw their participation in socialism as contributing to redirecting the Soviet project back to untainted socialist principles. This generation of intelligentsia, who saw themselves as “children of the 20th and 22nd Party Congresses” saw the ideological overhaul initiated by the top Party organs as a signal to mobilize—and even those who had strong reservations about the communist past, and Stalinism in particular, did not reject the Soviet system outright, but rather sought to redeem the Soviet system through their messianic efforts.³³³ In this respect, it is indicative that Liudmila Alekseeva, who later became a major voice in the Soviet dissident movement, at this point still sought to reform the system through participation, by joining the “Knowledge” Society

³³¹ Chumachenko, 161.

³³² On the intelligentsia during the Thaw, see Zubok, *Zhivago's Children*; M. R. Zvezina, *Sovetskaia khudozhestvennaia intelligentsiia v 1950e-1960e gody* (Moscow, 1999); Erik Kulavig, *Dissent in the Years of Khrushchev: Nine Stories about Disobedient Russians* (New York, 2002); Vail and Genis, *60-e: Mir sovetskogo cheloveka*.

³³³ On the intelligentsia's efforts to reform the system from within see Zubok, 154-160.

as a lecturer and reading the entirety of Lenin's works in order to return to authentic socialism and find the best path forward.³³⁴ The Khrushchev decade, then, was a unique moment when the Soviet regime had the opportunity to harness the creative and intellectual energies of the intelligentsia (broadly defined) in the service of the Communist project.

Yet as the intelligentsia mobilized their participation in the Soviet project, they undermined the power of the regime, both directly and indirectly. Before long, the regime came to approach their relationship as a battle for the hearts and minds of the population.³³⁵ In this battle, both sides—the Communist Party and the creative intelligentsia—relied on the tools they knew best in their respective arenas: ideology and culture. The power dynamic between them was, of course, unequal. Indeed, it was precisely in this period that the Party waged a brutal assault on the intelligentsia in order to co-opt creative initiative and make it subservient to the prerogatives of the Party.³³⁶ On the other hand, as popular responses to Soviet antireligious policies and the insights of Roslavlev's proposal indicate, Party cadres had to explain and tackle the many contradictions present in Soviet reality, and were constantly made aware of the fact that they neither possessed a coherent theoretical basis for ideological pronouncements, nor had an effective methodological approach that would allow them to turn ideological goals into social realities. Indeed, failures in earlier campaigns, especially in the arena of religion and atheism, never allowed the Party to forget about the fragility of its control over the population; the contradictions that constantly threatened to undermine Soviet goals; and the need for better data, better cadres, and better tactics.

In the early Thaw period, glaring and profound contradictions emerged in the sphere of religion and atheism. The first was the persistence, and even growth, of religious “survivals”—forty years after the October Revolution. Attempting to address this contradiction through antireligious campaigns and the revival of atheist education in the context of the Thaw in effect produced the second contradiction—the paradoxical attempt to simultaneously liberalize political culture (resulting in the promotion of ‘freedom of conscience’) and to whip up enthusiasm for the construction of Communism through ideological militancy. As the Soviet ideological elite began, for the first time in almost thirty years, to systematically gather data on religion in the Soviet Union, such contradictions became increasingly apparent. For instance, in one case, the Party had to make sense of Karpov's report on a manuscript of “Religion in the USSR”—authored by P. Soloviev, an instructor of the Council on Religious Cults, and V. I. Gostev, the deputy chairman of the Council—that provided uncomfortable statistics about the flourishing of sectarian communities under Soviet power.³³⁷ As Karpov complained, Soloviev and Gostev provided disturbing statistics and described the general religious situation far too approvingly in their effort to prove the existence of freedom of conscience in the USSR.³³⁸ Karpov also complained that the manuscript's “mistakes” were at least partly motivated by the authors' attempts to protest what they saw to be an unequal treatment of religious confessions outside of Orthodoxy, and “sectarian” communities in particular. They saw this in the administrative separation and inequality of the Council on the Affairs of Religious Cults and the Council on

³³⁴ Alexeyeva and Goldberg, *The Thaw Generation*.

³³⁵ One of the most well-known direct battles between the state and the creative intelligentsia was the Manege Affair. See Susan E. Reid, “In the Name of the People: The Manege Affair Revisited,” *Kritika* 6, no. 4 (Fall 2005): 673-716.

³³⁶ Zubok, 193-225.

³³⁷ RGANI, f. 5, op. 33, d. 53, ll. 16-19.

³³⁸ *Ibid.*, 18.

Russian Orthodox Church Affairs, and posed problematic questions such as, “How is sectarianism worse than the Russian Orthodox Church?”³³⁹ Such formulations reveal that while Soloviev and Gostev, as representatives of the Council, saw their work as fulfilling the function of proving the existence of Constitutional rights for all Soviet citizens, they clearly did not see the degree to which their revelations undermined the regime’s other goal—the construction of a Communist society, which, during this period, increasingly came to mean an atheist society.

In effect, such revelations about the growth of religiosity and the persistence of religious practices proved that many citizens chose religion. From the perspective of the state, this choice was difficult both to understand and to regulate, since, as this chapter shows, people chose religion both when they perceived it to be threatened by the aggressive antireligious policies of the state, and when they perceived it to be guaranteed by their right to freedom of conscience, and therefore approved by Soviet power. Even when the state sought to improve the material welfare of its citizens, these efforts often backfired—a classic case being when the Party discovered that the new 1956 law on pensions, so welcomed by Soviet society, had the unintended effect of significantly increasing the income of the Church, since pensioners often contributed their pensions to their local parishes.³⁴⁰ Indeed, many of the state’s policies, both in the sphere of religion and beyond it, undermined their ultimate goals with regards to limiting the influence of religion and promoting atheist education.

The most important effects of the regime’s early experiences with Soviet antireligious work was, first, that Soviet ideologists recognized religion and atheism as a serious point of weakness in their work; and second, that they became increasingly self-reflective, both about the reality of religion in Soviet conditions, and the effect that their own practices had on this reality. Data gathered by local-level council and party cadres revealed, again and again, that Soviet citizens often did not acknowledge their religious beliefs to be out of sync with Soviet ideology. As one Party report on religion in Lithuania put it, “with increasing frequency one can hear: ‘We believe in God, Lenin, and Khrushchev,’ [and] it is not rare to find, in the home of a believer, a prayer book lying next to the Program of the Communist Party.”³⁴¹ Some citizens even argued, quite innovatively, for the ways that religion could contribute to the Soviet project, rather than undermine it. On the whole, then, information on church attendance and income; pilgrimages; ritual observance; and the religiosity of youth, nationalities, and even Communist party members, made evident that religious “survivals” were still very much a part of Soviet life. The question that the Party put to atheist activists and social scientists as it intensified its efforts to eradicate religion was: Why? Their objective, over the course of the revived antireligious campaign, was to find out, and to propose solutions.

The story of the 1954 antireligious campaign is valuable not so much for the questions it answered, but for the questions it asked. Returning to the question posed by the Latvian clergyman in response to the antireligious campaign, why was the Party-State trying to break through an open door? That is, why—given the acknowledged political loyalty of religious institutions and the predicted demise of religion inherent in the Party’s foundational ideology—did the Soviet regime again begin to care about religion after Stalin’s death? Why, moreover, did the state concern itself with the beliefs and practices of Soviet citizens when, on the whole, these

³³⁹ Ibid., 19.

³⁴⁰ RGANI, f. 5, op. 33, d. 91.

³⁴¹ RGANI, f. 5, op. 33, d. 215, l. 145.

remained in the sphere of private life? Was there, in fact, a contradiction between faith in religion and faith in the Communist project, and were these faiths ultimately incompatible? Certainly the ideological elite, which tried to root out religious “survivals,” saw it this way. But many ordinary people did not. And this—from the perspective of the regime—was the problem. This chapter shows that, despite the regime’s confident pronouncements, the door was not, in fact, open. And when the door did open, it opened up to a home, inside which one might find newspapers extolling Soviet feats of technology and labor, images of cosmonauts, and the collected works of Maksim Gorkii, but perhaps also an icon in the corner and baptized children. While the person living in this home might consider themselves a loyal member of Soviet society, the state increasingly saw a disciplinary problem that needed correction.

Chapter Three

Making Sense of Life's Questions: Atheism's Appeal to the Spiritual

On 18 January 1960, at the height of Khrushchev's antireligious campaign, prominent Soviet ideological cadres gathered at a "Knowledge" Society conference to take stock of their efforts. The discussion focused on the reasons for the existence of religious "survivals" in the Soviet Union, the source of religion's tenacity, and the results of antireligious measures on the ground.³⁴² The mood was bleak. Most agreed that customary theories on the persistence of religion in socialist conditions—economic explanations about continued social inequalities and the existence of private property; political explanations about the reactionary nature of religious organizations and the penetration of Soviet borders by foreign ideological influences; epistemological explanations about the lag between material conditions and consciousness; and even naturalistic explanations that credited religion's strength to its ability to make sense of spontaneous acts of nature like earthquakes, floods, and epidemics—all failed to explain the complex situation Soviet cadres faced on the ground. When Soviet atheists set out to "overcome" religion, they found that—contrary to the patterns of development outlined by Marxism-Leninism—religion was not disappearing under the pressure of scientific progress and socialist construction. On the contrary, the religiosity atheists were finding among Soviet citizens was not the same kind of "religion" they had expected to overcome through administrative measures and scientific enlightenment. It was not a socially-marginal phenomenon of "sectarians" and old women, but an intrinsic part of many ordinary Soviet people's worldviews, customs, and everyday lives.

N. I. Gubanov, a prominent atheist author, painted an especially dark picture of the regime's failed approaches to religion and atheism. Gubanov told fellow atheists that, rather than make progress, they continued to misunderstand the nature of Soviet religiosity and the sources of religion's strength. He reminded his audience of a comic short story by Anton Chekhov, "The Death of a Civil Servant."³⁴³

There were two civil servants in a factory, one a little old man, the other a young man. And, at the same time, there was a person who, on all special occasions—weddings and funerals—would roll out the speeches (*rechi zakatyval*). When the civil servant died, he was again charged with the speech. But he thought that the civil servant who died was the old man, when in fact it was the young

³⁴² Gosudarstvennyi arkhiv Rossiiskoi Federatsii [henceforth GARF], f. A-561, op. 1, d. 399.

³⁴³ Anton Pavlovich Chekhov, "The Death of a Civil Servant," in *The Comic Stories of Anton Chekhov*, trans. Harvey Pitcher (Lanham, MD: Ivan R. Dee Publisher, 1999), 71-74.

civil servant who had died. So he gave a speech in memory of the old civil servant, who was standing next to him and was very pleased because he got to hear his own eulogy in his lifetime.³⁴⁴

Gubanov's allegory implied that atheist work was misdirected—that atheists allowed religion to complacently observe their failures and appreciate the irony of hearing it's own premature eulogy. Religiosity, Gubanov observed, seemed to have an unexpectedly complicated relationship to material well-being and scientific progress.³⁴⁵ Not only did Soviet believers seem untroubled by the “contradictions” that Soviet space conquests presented to the religious worldview (*kartina mira*), but it turned out that the leisure time and material welfare created for the Soviet people by technological and economic advancements were often used by them to attend church, participate in religious rituals, and contribute to their local religious communities.³⁴⁶ To illustrate his point, Gubanov described a conversation he had with an elderly woman about her life. The woman admitted that her family's lot had improved in recent years, yet when Gubanov followed up by asking her how these improvements affected her attitude towards religion, she—seemingly missing the intent of his question—told him, “Well, I suppose now I can go to church, and can give more to the priest.”³⁴⁷ On the whole, Gubanov's speech suggested that atheist efforts had, so far, misfired. As he put it, “In our scientific atheist propaganda, we bury the wrong civil servant.”³⁴⁸

The previous chapter examined the initial experiences of Soviet antireligious and atheist work in the early Khrushchev era, focusing in particular on the immediate and long-term results of the 1954 antireligious campaign. The chapter argued that, above all, early efforts to eradicate religion brought to light two crucial issues that set the course for the future of the Soviet approach to religion and atheism. First, the experiences of antireligious work in 1954-1957, and especially the public's responses to the regime's policies, made central authorities increasingly aware of the importance of religion for Soviet ideology. In particular, the early antireligious campaign made apparent the degree to which officials lacked a sufficient theoretical understanding of religious dynamics and were, therefore, ill-equipped to manage the Soviet religious landscape. Second, in evaluating the unexpected and unintended results produced by Soviet antireligious policies, Soviet atheists had to acknowledge that large numbers of people—from the clergy, to ordinary citizens, to the intelligentsia, and even Soviet officials—remained unbothered by the contradictions between religion and communist ideology that so vexed the Soviet ideological elite.

Soviet officials tried to make sense of the fallout of the 1954 antireligious campaign over the course of 1955-1957, but they were also faced with more immediate and pressing obstacles in the political arena as they tried to manage the power struggles among the political elite and the public course of de-Stalinization. As a result, religious policies receded to the background of top-level political concerns, easing pressure on religious institutions and believers. Moreover, confusion about the Party line on religion produced a broad spectrum of interpretations about the

³⁴⁴ GARF, f. A-561, op. 1, d. 399, l. 54.

³⁴⁵ This revelation on the part of Soviet atheists is the subject of chapter One of this dissertation.

³⁴⁶ The discovery that there is not a necessary correlation between material developments and secularization are discussed in chapter Two of this dissertation.

³⁴⁷ GARF, f. A-561, op. 1, d. 399, l. 51.

³⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 54.

future of religion under socialism. As chapter Two showed, religion's continued existence, even flourishing, led some to propose that a place for religion could be carved out in the new Soviet society being constructed. Indeed, some even suggested that the construction of communism would benefit from cooperation with religious institutions, especially in the sphere of morality—an interpretation that the regime found ever more troubling and ever less tolerable.

This chapter tells the story of the revived anti-religious campaign (1958-1964), focusing in particular on the regime's efforts in the field of atheist education. It looks at the regime's responses to earlier experiences with atheism—both in the early Soviet period and during the 1954 antireligious campaign—and analyzes how they shaped a more intensive campaign in the late Khrushchev era, as well as the future of Soviet atheist work and the fate of religion within Soviet borders. The regime's 1954 attempt to tackle the religious question suggests that the battle against religion, and the battle for socialism, were two separate, though of course related, processes. In order to draw out the significance of this distinction, the chapter approaches the attempt to fight religion and the effort to inculcate atheism as two discrete stories. To shed light on the fate of both religion and atheism in the late Soviet period, the chapter first tells the story of the antireligious campaign by putting it in the context of the broader ideological developments of the Khrushchev era. It shows that, in part, this widespread and directed campaign was a reaction to liberal visions that posited peaceful and even productive coexistence between religion and Soviet ideology. The regime's militant response—the assertion that religion and Marxism-Leninism were mutually exclusive ideologies that could not coexist under communism—was, the chapter argues, driven by certain underlying anxieties among the Party elite. These anxieties included both the Party's control over the meaning and direction of socialist development and the growing awareness of a parting of ways between Marxist-Leninist ideology and Soviet reality. The antireligious campaign forced the ideological elite to confront numerous new questions for which, they increasingly realized, Marxism-Leninism and scientific atheism did not provide concrete and coherent answers.

This dilemma produced a qualitatively new element in antireligious and atheist work during the late Khrushchev era—a dilemma that lies at the center of the chapter's second story. An emerging cohort of professional atheist cadres became aware that religion was strong precisely where atheism was weak, a sphere that began to be designated as *spiritual*. As Soviet atheists narrowed their focus on spirituality, Soviet atheism began to rely less on “negative” measures that administratively sought to limit the influence of religion on the population, and more on “positive” measures that attempted to construct an atheism fit to meet the spiritual needs of Soviet citizens. In this period, the driving principles of Soviet antireligious and atheist work were, on the one hand, to limit the ability of religion to satisfy the spiritual needs of Soviet people, and, on the other, to fill the spiritual void produced by negative antireligious propaganda with a meaningful and coherent Soviet atheist worldview, accompanied by attractive and satisfying practices. This chapter analyzes the developments that led Soviet atheism to appeal to the spiritual, and the implications that the new approach had for both religion and atheism in the late Soviet period.

The Campaign Against Religion: Policies and Results

One of the most interesting questions about religion and ideology in the Soviet Union is how the official approach to religion and atheism evolved from the militancy that marked the early Soviet and (after a period of uneasy coexistence under Stalin) the Khrushchev era, to the liberalization in church-state relations and the re-evaluation of Soviet atheism that came to the fore under Gorbachev.³⁴⁹ While most studies focus on the party-state's persecution of religious institutions and believers, showing both the victimization and the resistance and ultimate resilience of religion, few studies have examined the discussions and debates *within* the atheist community, as well as between atheists and administrative officials—debates that mostly, though not always, took place behind the scenes.³⁵⁰ One of the goals of this chapter, then, is to examine discussions about religion and atheism within the primary organizations charged with coming up with and implementing policies on religion and atheism in the Soviet Union—the Communist Party, certain academic institutions, and, most prominently, the Society for the Dissemination of Political and Scientific Knowledge (later renamed the “Knowledge” Society).³⁵¹ Our understanding of the Soviet secularization project can benefit from opening up this semi-official sphere of debate to closer scrutiny.

Recent scholarship on religion in the Soviet Union—most notably, by Tatiana Chumachenko and John Anderson—has shed valuable light on the institutions that coordinated Soviet religious policies, focusing in particular on the work of the Council on Russian Orthodox Church Affairs (CAROC), and, to a lesser extent, on the Council on Religious Cults.³⁵² Yet the Councils, while indeed central to understanding the practical dynamics of Soviet church-state relations, are less revealing on the evolution of Soviet understandings of religion and atheism. They also tell us little about the coordination of atheist education, which, unlike religious policy, did not fall under their supervision. Furthermore, while the Councils (united in December 1965 into the Council on Religious Affairs headed by Vladimir Alekseevich Kuroedov, Suslov protégé and former chairman of CAROC) were certainly the official bodies responsible for the

³⁴⁹ This is one of the central questions guiding John Anderson's excellent study of religious policy in the postwar Soviet period, although, as I will go on to discuss, his sources limit his ability to uncover the dynamics and development of this process. John Anderson, *Religion, State and Politics in the Soviet Union and Successor States* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1994).

³⁵⁰ The majority of studies of religion in the Soviet Union focus on the state's persecution of religious institutions and believers. For the most recent publication to take this approach, see Paul Froese, *The Plot to Kill God: Findings from the Soviet Experiment* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2008). See also Nathaniel Davis, *A Long Walk to Church: A Contemporary History of Russian Orthodoxy* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 2003). For earlier examples, see Gerald Buss, *The Bear's Hug: Religious Belief and the Soviet State* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1987); the works of Michael Bourdeaux, especially *Opium of the People: The Christian Religion in the USSR* (London: Faber and Faber, 1965); *Land of Crosses: The Struggle for Religious Freedom in Lithuania, 1938-1978* (Devon: Augustine Publishing Company, 1979); and *The Politics of Religion in Russia and the New States of Eurasia* (New York: M. E. Sharpe, 1995); and the works of Dimitrii V. Pospelovskii, such as his *Totalitarizm i veroispovedanie* (Moscow: Bibleisko-bogoslovskii in-t sv. Apostola Andreia, 2003).

³⁵¹ As noted earlier, this dissertation does not focus in great detail on the work of the Council on Russian Orthodox Church Affairs and the Council on Religious Cults, first, because the Councils, unlike the other organizations examined in this dissertation, have already been the subject of serious scholarly investigation, and second, because the primary function of the Councils was the regulation of church-state relations rather than atheist education (the central concern of the present investigation).

³⁵² Tatiana A. Chumachenko, *Church and State in Soviet Russia: Russian Orthodoxy from World War II to the Khrushchev Years*, trans. and ed. Edward E. Rosloff (Armonk, NY: M.E. Sharpe, 2002); John Anderson, *Religion, State and Politics in the Soviet Union and Successor States*; John Anderson, “Out of the kitchen, out of the temple: religion, atheism and women in the Soviet Union,” in *Religious Policy in the Soviet Union*, ed. Sabrina Ramet (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 206-230.

coordination and execution of religious policies, they were rarely the source of these policies.³⁵³ As Anderson points out, the Councils were generally “spoken of and viewed as organizations which implemented decisions taken elsewhere, notably the Central Committee.”³⁵⁴ Indeed, finding the direct source of the late Khrushchev era campaign against religion has proven to be elusive.³⁵⁵ While Khrushchev himself made several public pronouncements on the subject of religion in the Soviet Union—pronouncements that were notably more aggressive than those of either his immediate predecessor or his successors—his explicit engagement with the topic was rare and his personal role in the antireligious campaign remains unclear. When prodded to express his position on religion in the Soviet Union in interviews with foreign journalists, Khrushchev spoke of his personal unbelief, argued against the notion that an atheist was less of a humanist than religious believer, and generally stressed the hypocrisy of religion which professed lofty ideals while engaging in immoral behavior both on the level of international politics and on the level of personal conduct. Yet at the same time, Khrushchev made sure to state that, in the Soviet Union, the question of belief remained an issue of individual conscience rather than state policy. As he put it in an interview with the French newspaper *Le Figaro*, “The question of who believes in God and who does not is not a question that should give rise to conflicts—it is the personal affair of each individual. Therefore let us not discuss the subject in detail.”³⁵⁶ Khrushchev’s own recollections, as well as the memoirs of his son Sergei Khrushchev and his son-in-law Aleksei Adzhubei, as some have noted, are conspicuously silent on the topic.³⁵⁷ Nevertheless, Anderson suggests that while it is indeed true that Khrushchev made few public statements on religion, it is difficult to find another sponsor for the campaign.³⁵⁸

³⁵³ On the unification of the councils, as well as the connection between Kuroedov and Suslov, see Anderson, *Religion, State and Politics*, 74. For a discussion of Kuroedov’s biographical background, see John Anderson, “The Council for Religious Affairs and the Shaping of Soviet Religious Policy,” *Soviet Studies* 43, no. 4 (1991): 689-710.

³⁵⁴ Anderson, 25. As Anderson notes, “Official documents spoke of the councils’ role as essentially mediatory and supervisory, and gave no indication that they had any role to play in decision making—though there were references to them drafting laws regulating religious life, and in the Central Committee archives there are frequent references to the [Party] Secretariat commissioning the councils to draft decrees or investigate specific problems. In general they was [sic] spoken of and viewed as organizations which implemented decisions taken elsewhere, notably the Central Committee.” Chumachenko’s analysis of CAROC work confirms this.

³⁵⁵ Indeed, the source of the antireligious campaign was the first point of debate in studies of religious policies at the time, with some arguing that the initiator was Malenkov (and pointed to his prominence in the 1954 campaign), while others saw the campaign as the direct product of Khrushchev, citing the continuation of the campaign after Malenkov’s removal as evidence. On these early debates, see, for example, Joan Delaney Grossman, “Khrushchev’s Antireligious Policy and the Campaign of 1954,” *Europe-Asia Studies* 24, no. 3 (January 1973): 374-386. In my interview with Evgraf Duluman, one of the most prominent public atheists in the Soviet Union, he referred the antireligious campaign as Khrushchev’s “*idee fixe*,” and indicated Khrushchev was acknowledged to be personally invested in the eradication of religion. Evgraf Kalen’evich Duluman, interview, Kyiv, Ukraine, 10 February 2009.

³⁵⁶ “N. S. Khrushchev interviewed by Correspondent from French newspaper *Le Figaro*,” *Pravda and Izvestiia*, 27 March 1957, 1-2. See also “N. S. Khrushchev Interview with Newspaper Chain Director W. R. Hearst,” *Current Digest of the Post-Soviet Press* 9, no. 46, 25 December 1957, 10-17.

³⁵⁷ Sergei Khrushchev, *Khrushchev Nikita. Reformator. Trilogiia ob otse* (Moscow: “Vremia,” 2010); and Aleksei Adzhubei, *Krushenie illiuzii* (Moscow: Interbuk, 1991). As Chumachenko points out, the exact role of Khrushchev personally in the antireligious campaign is not entirely clear, although as leader of the party at the time he was undoubtedly involved. His position is never made explicit, and neither he nor those closest to him (such as Sergei Khrushchev or Adzhubei) mention his position on religion and the church in their memoirs. Chumachenko, 148. Andrew B. Stone also notes Khrushchev’s silence on the topic of religion: “Scholarship on the Khrushchev era has usually not acknowledged this connection, perhaps following the lead of Khrushchev himself, who rarely addressed the antireligious campaign in later interviews and did not mention it in his memoirs.” See Andrew B. Stone,

The degree of Khrushchev's personal investment in the antireligious campaign is difficult to quantify (and perhaps, ultimately, more revealing in the search for the origins of the campaign, than in understanding its results), but there is no question about his deep personal investment in the construction of communism in the Soviet Union—a project that was inherently connected, as numerous ideological pronouncements of the time state, to the eradication of religious “survivals” and the inculcation of a scientific-atheist worldview in the country's citizens. There is also every indication that the country's top Party organs initiated the revived campaign. As the regime mobilized for an extensive campaign against religion after a period of relative calm in 1955-1957, pronouncements emanating from the top made increasingly clear that the party-state sought to monopolize control over the course of policy and debate about religion. Above all, three postulates on the subject of religion in the Soviet Union defined the new party line, and, consequently, public debate: the incompatibility of science and religion, the inevitability of eradicating religion in Soviet society with the construction of socialism, and the re-assertion of regime control over the meaning and process of de-Stalinization.

Regarding the relationship between science and religion, Khrushchev himself stated in 1958, “I think that there is no God. I have long ago freed myself from such an idea. I am an advocate of the scientific worldview. Science and belief in supernatural forces are incompatible and mutually exclusive views.”³⁵⁹ The regime denounced religion's efforts to modernize, adapt to contemporary conditions, and claim compatibility with science, and intensified efforts to fight religious worldviews with claims about scientific and technological progress—claims much aided by the achievements of the Soviet space program that, fortuitously for the regime, began to dominate Soviet public culture at this time.³⁶⁰ The Party's re-assertion of the incompatibility of science and religion extended beyond claims about nature and the universe. Indeed, the second postulate of the revived antireligious campaign asserted the impossibility of the coexistence of religion and socialism in the Soviet Union, and re-affirmed the vision of an entire world without religion as a practical possibility.³⁶¹ The utopian teleology presented at the 22nd Party Congress put forth that religion was alien to socialist modernity and was, therefore, fated to “die out.”³⁶² Indeed, indicative of the anti-religious fervor of the time is the leader's claim that religion would

“Overcoming Peasant Backwardness”: The Khrushchev Antireligious Campaign and the Rural Soviet Union,” *Russian Review* 67, no. 2 (2008): 298.

³⁵⁸ Anderson cites an interview with Kuroedov, chairman of the Council on Religious Affairs for almost two decades (1965-1984), by the Ukrainian atheist journal *Lyudina i svit* as suggesting that no single politician was responsible for promoting the campaign, though mentions that Suslov “spoke more harshly than most on the issue.” Originally in *Lyudina i svit* 1 (1992), 21. Anderson sees Il'ichev as the most senior figure to publicly speak on the religious question, but writes that “despite Khrushchev's later attempts to blame Il'ichev for the rather crass ideological campaigns of the early 1960s, there is little evidence that he was more than a faithful executor of his master's policies.” Anderson, 16. My own interview with Viktor Elenskii, the former editor of *Lyudina i svit*, who interviewed Kuroedov, generally confirmed Khrushchev's leadership in the antireligious campaign. Viktor Elenskii, interview with author, Kyiv, Ukraine, 18 March 2009.

³⁵⁹ *Pravda*, 27 March 1958. Quoted in Anderson, *Religion, State and Politics*, 15.

³⁶⁰ The regime's use of scientific progress in its battle with religion are covered in chapter One.

³⁶¹ Anderson, *Religion, State and Politics*, 20. Anderson describes the claim that religion could be definitively overcome as a prominent feature of the “orthodox position” restated with the new campaign.

³⁶² *Ibid.*, 16-17. John Anderson likewise sees the construction of communism as the primary impetus behind Khrushchev's antireligious campaign, citing in particular numerous statements made by Il'ichev and others in the central Party press, especially the journal *Kommunist*.

soon exist only in museums, as well as his promise to show Soviet people the last Soviet priest on television.³⁶³

Finally, the third postulate driving the revived antireligious campaign was the regime's effort to direct the course of de-Stalinization by reclaiming control over the interpretation of "freedom of conscience." As chapter Two showed, the liberalizing direction of de-Stalinization was interpreted by many to apply equally to the sphere of religion—a notion that the revived campaign was intended to 'correct.' While the leader made occasional overtures to the constitutional rights of Soviet believers, largely intended for foreign consumption,³⁶⁴ the new campaign increasingly interpreted the relatively lax relations with religion under Stalin to be a violation of "socialist legality." Indeed, the whole course of church-state relations since Stalin's rapprochement with the Russian Orthodox Church in 1943 was characterized as a deviation from Leninist principles and a manifestation of Stalinism.³⁶⁵

Naturally, this new party line on church-state relations had negative implications for the Councils, whose whole existence was intimately connected with, and indeed the product of, Stalin's 'pragmatic' approach to religion.³⁶⁶ As Tatiana Chumachenko writes with regards to the Council on Russian Orthodox Church Affairs,

Everything that was achieved in church-state relations from the moment of the Council's creation was declared to be "a deformation of ecclesiastical policy of the socialist state" and "an incorrect political and tactical line." This led to the strengthening of religion and the church, plus the creation of favorable conditions for propagandizing "reactionary ideology" and for activity by numerous "open and hidden enemies of Soviet power" among the clergy. Special emphasis was given to the fact that, instead of aiming for the strictest limitation on the activity of religious organizations and actively assisting in shrinking the religious

³⁶³ Mikhail Vital'evich Shkarovskii, *Russkaia pravoslavnaia tserkov' pri Staline i Khrushcheve (gosudarstvenno-tserkovnye otnosheniia v SSSR v 1939-1964 godakh)* (Moscow: Krutitskoe patriarshee podvor'e, 1999), 382. This claim by Khrushchev has a great resonance in popular memory and was often mentioned during my interviews with former atheist cadres.

³⁶⁴ In an interview with an American journalist, Khrushchev described the situation of believers in the Soviet Union in the following manner: "We still have people who believe in God. Let them believe. To believe or not to believe in God is the personal affair of each individual, a matter for his conscience. All this does not, however, prevent the Soviet people from living in peace and friendship. And it often happens that there are believers and atheists in one family. But those who believe in God are becoming fewer. The vast majority of young people growing up today do not believe in God. Education, scientific knowledge and the study of the laws of nature leave no room for belief in God." *Pravda*, 29 November 1957. Quoted in Anderson, *Religion, State and Politics*, 15.

³⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, 20. Anderson particularly singles out Il'ichev and Brazhnik for advancing this new line on church-state relations as a product of Stalinism.

³⁶⁶ Many have seen the course of Soviet religious policy as the product of the debate between "fundamentalists" and "pragmatists" (borrowing the formulation made famous by Bohdan Bociurkiw). See, for example, Bohdan Bociurkiw and John Strong, *Religion and Atheism in the USSR and Eastern Europe* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1975), and Bohdan Bociurkiw, "Religion and Atheism in Soviet Society," in *Aspects of Religion in the Soviet Union*, ed. Richard Marshall (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1971). John Anderson sees "fundamentalists" as much more powerful in the Khrushchev campaign—having the Party apparatus and press behind them. The "pragmatists," on the other hand, tended to be affiliated with state and academic institutions. Anderson argues that while some disagreements did exist under Khrushchev, "none of the more overt statements of a pragmatic view could be described as genuine arguments for a radical liberalization of policy." Anderson, *Religion, State and Politics*, 29.

network, the Council made concessions to various “demands,” “showing off the church to please foreigners.” The whole earlier course in “religious matters” was denounced as “a manifestation of Stalinism.”³⁶⁷

The party line advanced by the antireligious campaign clarified that the role of the Councils in these new conditions was not to promote “normal” relations between religious institutions and the Soviet party-state, but to implement the regime’s policies, which were now aimed at limiting the scope of activity of religious organizations and the influence of religious ideology over the population.

Starting in 1958, state and party organs began to issue decrees, statements, and resolutions whose primary objective was to limit the influence of religion in the Soviet Union. Where it concerned state institutions and the Councils, this process was largely administrative and legal. Religious hierarchs in the Russian Orthodox Church were instructed to reduce the number of functioning monasteries and churches.³⁶⁸ They were also burdened with increases in taxes and limitations on sources of church income, such as the production of candles and other religious objects. Religious officials were persecuted for performing religious rites outside of sanctioned religious spaces (for instance, in people’s homes), charitable activity, religious education, and the purchase of spaces and transportation intended for religious purposes.³⁶⁹ In particular, the revived campaign sought to limit the influence of religious organizations on the youth. Having noted the persistence of youth religiosity during the 1954 antireligious campaign, new measures sought to prohibit youth participation in religious groups. Moreover, the Russian Orthodox Church hierarchy was instructed to limit the number of applicants accepted into theological seminaries and to raise the age for application from eighteen to thirty.³⁷⁰ As Chumachenko writes, “everything that was permitted by special legislative acts, resolutions, and instructions of the government in the 1940s and 1950s now was declared a violation of Soviet law.”³⁷¹

³⁶⁷ Mikhail Ivanovich Odintsov, *Gosudarstvo i tserkov’ Istoriia vzaimootnoshenii, 1917–1938 gg* (Moscow: Znanie, 1991), 199. Quoted in Chumachenko, 153-154.

³⁶⁸ GARF, f. 6991, op. 1, d. 1543, ll. 152-160, 164-169. Quoted in Chumachenko, 152. These included the government resolutions of 16 October 1958, “Monasteries in the USSR” and “Levying Taxes on Income Received by Diocesan Enterprises and also on the Income of Monasteries.” By mid-1959, the Patriarch adopted measures to eliminate twenty-two Orthodox monasteries and seven hermitages and set age limits for acceptance into the monastic life, instructing bishops not to accept anyone younger than thirty. Chumachenko, 154.

³⁶⁹ Chumachenko, 186. These measures were introduced with the 10 January 1960 Central Committee resolution, “Measures for Eliminating Violations of Soviet Legislation on Cults,” the 13 January 1960 Central Committee resolution, “Measures for Eliminating Violations by Clergy of Soviet Legislation on Cults,” and the 16 March 1961 Soviet Council of Ministers resolution, “On Strengthening Control over Obeying Legislation on Cults.” Both CAROC and CARC approved “Instructions Concerning the Application of Legislation on Cults.”

³⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, 176. In the case of seminary applicants, Chumachenko notes that only two out of eight Orthodox seminaries were able to fill a class of first-year students in 1959-1960, since applicants were often drafted into the military, denied residence permits, and otherwise prevented from pursuing their chosen course.

³⁷¹ *Ibid.*, 164. Council discussed the new direction of its work in light of the 13 January 1960 resolution and the replacement of Karpov at an All-Union Conference of Commissioners held on April 21-23, 1960, where the Council’s former approaches were generally criticized. Chumachenko sees the dismissal of Karpov from the top post of the CAROC as the end of a “special period in the history of church-state relations. [...] a period when church policy was established and truly implemented in the interests of the state.”

The two goals of the regime’s antireligious campaign—upholding socialist legality and limiting the influence of religion—were, in many ways, contradictory. As the above accounts show, rather than upholding the constitutional rights of Soviet believers, ‘socialist legality’ was increasingly interpreted to mean increased limitations on religious activities. Nevertheless, the campaign to uphold “socialist legality” did not only target the religious community. Standards of “socialist legality” were also applied to the activities of local officials, who were sometimes accused of violating it in their excessively zealous efforts to stamp out religion. In his study of the antireligious campaign in the Novgorod region, Andrew Stone cites several instances of local officials “being called to ‘administrative accountability’ for their actions,” and argues that such internal criticism, typically found in documents marked “secret” and not intended for public consumption, should be taken seriously.³⁷² That a particular (and peculiar) understanding of legality was often taken seriously is also evident in the application of Soviet antireligious policy on the ground, especially in the lengths to which local officials sometimes went to create a semblance of public consensus of administrative closures and restrictions. Cases where communities and individuals renounced religion, such as the “unanimous vote” against religious holidays noted above, were widely and conscientiously disseminated in the press and among agit-prop workers. Moreover, as recent scholarship has made evident, the process of closing a local church was oftentimes not simply the product of a decision ordered from above. Rather, local officials went to the trouble of producing the semblance of antireligious initiative from below through antireligious campaigns in the local press, as well as meetings in work places and housing districts whose purpose was to produce—or, at least, portray—consensus about local antireligious decisions through votes.³⁷³

The nature of these contradictory interpretations of “socialist legality” accounts partly for the spectrum in the application of antireligious policies on the ground, and consequently for the broad range of results in different localities.³⁷⁴ In Ukraine, where statistics persistently reported the highest levels of religiosity in the country (made up largely of Russian Orthodox and Eastern Rite Catholics, but also including a disproportionate concentration of “sectarian” communities), the Ukrainian Party hierarchy recognized religion as their “cursed question” from the point of view of lining up Ukrainian reality with ideological proclamations. With the antireligious campaign, Ukrainian authorities often sought to “catch up and overtake” central directives on

³⁷² Stone, 306-307. Stone argues that such internal criticism of antireligious work should be taken seriously, and cites several instances of Novgorod officials “being called to ‘administrative accountability’ for their actions” in documents that were not intended for public consumption (marked “secret” in the archives).

³⁷³ Sonja Christine Luehrmann, “Forms and Methods: Teaching Atheism and Religion in the Mari Republic, Russian Federation,” (Ph.D. dissertation, University of Michigan, 2009), 158. In her dissertation, Sonja Luehrmann provides an illuminating account and analysis of a campaign to close a local church in Joshkar-Ola, the capital of the Mari El autonomous republic in the RSFSR. As Luehrmann writes, “Between August 15 and 18, 1960, 110 enterprises and medical, education, and cultural institutions across the city of Joshkar-Ola held assemblies in their workforce. On the agenda everywhere was a lecture on the topic “The communist education of the toilers and the overcoming of religious prejudices at the present stage,” followed by a discussion and resolution on the closing of the last functioning Orthodox church in the city, the Church of the Resurrection. The result was not surprising, given the mounting pressure to close houses of worship all over the Soviet Union in 1960 and 1961: all assemblies, representing 17,000 workers and white collar employees, passed resolutions demanding the church be closed, many of them unanimously.

³⁷⁴ Chapter Two discussed the contradictory position of religion in the broader context of de-Stalinization in greater detail. Andrew Stone also points to this problematic inconsistency in antireligious policy in his analysis of policy application in the Novgorod region. Stone, 306.

limiting the activity of the church, and implementation of antireligious policy in Ukraine tended to be more consistent, directed, and aggressive than elsewhere.³⁷⁵ In at least one instance, when the Ukrainian Party Central Committee intended to close eighteen monasteries instead of the directed eight, Georgii Grigor'evich Karpov, the chairman of CAROC, explicitly intervened in Ukrainian affairs by formally objecting.³⁷⁶

An administrative attack of this scope against the church, clergy, and believers was bound to produce results. Over the course of the campaign, five out of the Soviet Union's eight theological seminaries were closed, and the number of functioning monasteries, which had reached 100 in 1945, was reduced from 63 in 1959, to 44 in 1960, and only 18 by the mid-1960s.³⁷⁷ The number of Christian churches and chapels was reduced from around 13,000 in 1960, to between 7,000-8,000 in the mid-1960s.³⁷⁸ To put these figures in context, it should be noted that by 1964, there were just over half as many functioning churches as there had been in 1947.³⁷⁹ Yet the results of the campaign make much more of an impression when examined on

³⁷⁵ On the antireligious campaign in Ukraine, see Volodimir Pashchenko, *Pravoslavna tserkva v totalitarnii derzhavi. Ukraina 1940—pochatok 1990-kh rokiv* (Poltava: ASMI, 2005); Volodimir Pashchenko, *Pravoslav'ia v novitnii istorii Ukraini* (Poltava: ASMI, 2001); Nadezhda Alekseevna Beliakova, "Evoliutsiia otnoshenii vlasti i khristianskikh denominatsii v Belorusii, Ukrainie, i respublikakh Pribaltiki v poslednei chetverti XX—nachala XXI vv" (Dissertatsiia na soiskanie uchenoi stepeni kandidata istoricheskikh nauk, Moskovskii gosudarstvennyi universitet imeni Lomonosova, 2009); and Igor Stanislavovich Pkhidenko, "Svitogliadna politika v osvitiians'kovikhovnomu protsesi Ukraini 1970-kh – pershoi polovini 1980-kh rr. XX stolittia (religieznavchii aspekt)," (Disertatsiia na zdobuttia naukovoogo stupenia kandidata istorichnikh nauk, Luts'k, 2001).

³⁷⁶ GARF, f. 6991, op. 1, d. 1649, ll. 115-118. Quoted in Chumachenko, 159. Chumachenko writes that the aggressive implementation of the new party line along the Western border—in Moldavia, Ukraine, Belarus, Lithuania, and Latvia—was a point of contention between the central Party authorities and the Councils, and Karpov officially requested that local organs in those regions apply a "more careful and gradual implementation of measures for reducing the number of monasteries and hermitages, conducting them only in agreement with the Council."

³⁷⁷ The theological seminaries closed during the Khrushchev-era campaign include Saratov, Stavropol, Minsk, Volyna (Lutsk), and Kiev. Among the monasteries closed was the Monastery of the Caves in Kiev, considered by many to be the center of Orthodox Christianity. Chumachenko, 187-188. According to political scientist Sabrina Ramet, renewed pressure on the Russian Orthodox Church beginning in 1958 "abolished certain tax exemptions on monastic properties that had been introduced in 1945 [...] and called for measures to curb monastic activity. In 1959 sixty-four monasteries still functioned. The vigor of antimonastic measures reduced their number to 18 in 1965." Sabrina Petra Ramet, *Nihil obstat: Religion, Politics, and Social Change in East-Central Europe* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1998), 233.

³⁷⁸ As already noted, while there is a general consensus on the administrative closures of churches during the Khrushchev-era campaign, it is difficult to arrive at exact figures since the results depend, in part, on the criteria one uses. For example, Nathaniel Davis writes, "In 1989, Iurii Khristoradnov, the new head of the Council on Religious Affairs, stated that there were 12,000 Orthodox churches in 1956 and 7,000 by 1965. The archive and other official sources have 13,417 and approximately 7,500 for the years in question. Khristoradnov may have been using figures for churches that were functioning, even if irregularly, while the other statistics may have been for registered Orthodox religious societies, including inactive parishes still on the council's rolls. The two ways of counting show consistent differences." Nathaniel Davis, "The Number of Orthodox Churches before and after the Khrushchev Antireligious Drive," *Slavic Review* 50, no. 3 (Autumn, 1991): 614. Chumachenko, 187-188, provides the figures 13,008 on 1 January 1960 to 7,873 on 1 January 1965. The Russian ethnographer Kira Tsekhanskaia cites 13,372 functioning churches at the beginning of 1959, and 8,314 in 1963. See Kira V. Tsekhanskaia, "Russia: Trends in Orthodox Religiosity in the Twentieth Century (Statistics and Reality)," in *Religion and Politics in Russia: A Reader*, ed. Marjorie Mandelstam Balzer (New York: M. E. Sharpe, 2010), 9.

³⁷⁹ Ramet, 234.

the level of union-wide statistics. On the local level, the effects of the antireligious campaign paint a more nuanced and contradictory picture.

A recent analysis of the antireligious campaign in Krasnoiarsk region (*krai*) by Maria Redko, for instance, reveals that while the campaign profoundly affected religious life, many central directives had unexpected, and even unwanted results.³⁸⁰ Redko observes that the regime's first attempt to fight religion during the 1954 campaign made little impact on the Russian Orthodox Church in the region.³⁸¹ Indeed, as elsewhere in the U.S.S.R., the aftermath of the campaign (1955-1957) was a period of relative calm in religious affairs.³⁸² The income of local parishes increased, as did the number of religious rites performed (in 1954, there were 2,031 baptisms in Krasnoiarsk's churches; in 1955, the number rose to 2,598). When the antireligious campaign was revived in 1958, it was conducted most effectively along administrative and financial lines. For instance, the state's new resolutions placed financial restrictions on the economic activity of the church: the price of candles in candle workshops was increased twentyfold, yet increasing the price of candles sold in churches was banned. As a result, the profit made by the church on candles dropped from 84,857 rubles in 1957 to 76,684 rubles in 1959. Administrative measures also produced a drop in the number of regional parishes, which went from sixteen to five between 1958-1964.³⁸³

Redko also points to a concerted effort made by local authorities to limit the visibility of religious activity by, for example, confiscating central churches and moving the religious communities that had used them to the outskirts of the city, in one case to a temple located at the cemetery. Indeed, she asserts that the antireligious campaign targeted not only Orthodox society, but also Orthodox spaces—especially when beautiful historic temples were located in the center of the city, thereby attracting even “irreligious and indifferent people,” and making visible the local authorities' lack of progress in ideological work. In some cases, in their efforts to fulfill central directives, local authorities even seemed to prefer to demolish churches that were undoubtedly historically-significant architectural monuments—such as the Voskresenskii Cathedral in Krasnoiarsk, constructed in 1795—than to restore them. But the most effective administrative measure employed was the intensified control over the church's performance of religious rites that began in 1962. With new pressure to enforce legality in the ritual sphere coming from top state and party organs, local parishes were now obligated to record the personal information—names, addresses, and passport data—of ritual participants. Not unexpectedly, such monitoring on the part of the state, combined with the militant antireligious rhetoric of the campaign, led to a dramatic decrease in ritual participation. In Krasnoiarsk *krai*, baptisms decreased from 9,098 in 1958 to 3,887 in 1964, and religious wedding ceremonies from 98 to 41.³⁸⁴

Yet despite state efforts to limit religious influence and activity in Krasnoiarsk *krai*,

³⁸⁰ Maria V. Redko, “Realization of the State Religious Policy of the Krasnoyarsk Kray in 1954-1964 (on the Example of the Russian Orthodox Church),” *Journal of Siberian Federal University* 1 (2010): 154-158.

³⁸¹ Redko, 154. In the mid-1950s, there were 17 active Orthodox churches (10 urban, 7 rural) in the Krasnoiarsk *krai*, with 35 priests, most of whom were older than 50.

³⁸² For more general recent histories of Soviet church-state relations by Russian scholars, see I. I. Maslova, *Sovetskoe gosudarstvo i Russkaia Pravoslavnaia Tserkov': politika sderzhivaniia (1964-1985 gg.)* (Moscow, 2005); I. I. Maslova, *Veroispovednaia politika v SSSR: povorot kursa (1985-1991 gg.)* (Moscow: 2005); Olga Vasil'eva, ed. *Istoriia religii v Rossii* (Moscow, 2004).

³⁸³ Redko, 155.

³⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, 156.

“religious life didn’t die down.”³⁸⁵ Where church revenues decreased, they did not do so substantially, and indeed, on the whole, the income of the Russian Orthodox Church in the region even increased between 1960 and 1965—from 327,583 rubles to 383,997 rubles, respectively. In large part, Redko credits such increases to income earned through religious rituals. Indeed, two trends counter-balanced the decreases in official statistics noted above: the fact that religious burials did not decline, but on the contrary increased rather dramatically (from 3,899 in 1961 to 6,564 in 1964), and the fact that many religious rites were performed unofficially in order to avoid registration (a fact that was acknowledged even by local authorities). Redko concludes that notwithstanding its intensity, the antireligious campaign in Krasnoiarsk *krai*—even with the noted decreases in church income and officially registered rites—failed to produce the intended results. If anything, antireligious policies pushed religious life in the region into ever more “clandestine” corners, out of the view and control of state authorities.³⁸⁶ Another study that looks at religious life in Orenburg region observes yet further unintended consequences of Soviet antireligious policies, in particular of CAROC’s attempt to decrease Soviet religiosity by taking away the registration that existing religious communities needed to operate legally, as well as refusing to register new religious communities.³⁸⁷ Because rural religious communities were often the target of such measures, the campaign produced an “urbanization” of religious life in the region, as believers from locations that were now “churchless” filled urban congregations.³⁸⁸

On the whole, then, despite such impressive statistical results, the regime was ever more aware of the population’s enduring religiosity. This awareness meant that the Party could no longer maintain the self-satisfied notions that religion was in steady decline and bound to eventual extinction. Moreover, unexpected successes with certain new methods and approaches (such as the effort to replace calendar-cycle religious rituals with labor holidays), seemed to indicate that administrative measures alone were insufficient to speed this “inevitable” process along. The Soviet atheist establishment began to devote increasingly less attention to administrative measures, and increasingly more to criticism of atheist education as it had thus far been conducted, as well as to discussions and proposals for the improvement of atheist theory and practice.

“A Man Can’t Live By Working Days Alone”

Perhaps the only area in which the aims of the regime and the Russian Orthodox Church hierarchs converged was in the campaign’s revived effort to fight popular religious practices,

³⁸⁵ Ibid., 157.

³⁸⁶ Ibid., 157.

³⁸⁷ K. Iu. Popova, “Religioznye ob’edineniia v Orenburgskoi oblasti v 1960-1980-e gg: problema registratsii,” in *Orenburgskii krai: istoriia, traditsii, kul’tura: sbornik*, ed. G. I. Biushkin (Orenburg, 2009), 88-92. Popova writes that by the end of the Soviet period, the majority of churches in Orenburg region were in the cities. On the Soviet practice of refusing registration as an antireligious measure, see N. A. Beliakova, “Vlast’ i religioznye ob’edineniia v ‘pozdnem’ SSSR: problema registratsii,” *Otechestvennaia istoriia* 4 (2008) and I. I. Maslova, “Sovet po delam religii pri Sovete ministrov SSSR i Russkaia pravoslavnaia tserkov’ (1965-1991 gg.),” *Otechestvennaia istoriia* 6 (2005).

³⁸⁸ Popova, 92. Popova writes that by the end of the Soviet period, the majority of churches in Orenburg region were in the cities.

such as mass pilgrimages to holy sites, as manifestations of superstition. This campaign was aimed especially at rural areas.³⁸⁹ In this instance, the Church's interest in reinforcing the line between popular superstition and religious discipline coincided with Khrushchev's broader agenda to raise agricultural productivity and enlighten the rural population. Above all, the campaign against popular religion in the countryside targeted religious holidays and mass pilgrimages as ruinous for labor discipline and economic productivity.³⁹⁰ Holy sites across the country were seized and restricted under numerous pretexts. Such pretexts ranged from pressure on local religious leaders; to administrative re-appropriations of the spaces for use by other, presumably more worthy, institutions (such as a site in the village Glinkovo in Zagorsk (Sergeev Posad) region, where efforts to stop pilgrimages were unsuccessful until the site was given to a Theatrical Society to build a pioneer's camp);³⁹¹ to propaganda campaigns that emphasized the dangers that pilgrimages posed to sanitation and hygiene, including claims that springs spread malarial mosquitoes and venereal disease.³⁹² The regime's antireligious campaign in the countryside also included the effort to limit the influence of self-appointed religious leaders (*samo-chintsy*)—most often old women who were seen as repositories of religious knowledge when other authorities were unavailable,³⁹³ or religious figures (priests, mullahs) who had lost their official registration but continued to perform religious services and rites, sometimes wandering the countryside from village to village to avoid persecution.³⁹⁴

Finally, in an effort to reduce lost labor hours and improve discipline and productivity in agriculture, the regime again sought to eradicate communal religious celebrations, such as local feast days.³⁹⁵ Yet unlike previous efforts in the 1954 antireligious campaign, which tried to achieve this goal largely through aggressive rhetoric that shamed participants (and local leaders

³⁸⁹ Chumachenko, 154-155. On 28 November 1958, the Presidium of the Communist Party adopted the resolution "On Measures for Stopping Pilgrimages to So-Called 'Holy Sites.'" Chumachenko observes that the elimination of "holy sites" of mass pilgrimage was the only measure in the struggle against religious superstitions was "sufficiently painless for both the Council and the Moscow Patriarchate."

³⁹⁰ For a thorough analysis of the connection between the Khrushchev's agricultural policies and the attack on cultural "backwardness" in the countryside, see Stone, "'Overcoming Peasant Backwardness'."

³⁹¹ Rossiiskii gosudarstvennyi arkhiv noveishei istorii [henceforth RGANI], f. 5, op. 33, d. 91, ll. 111-112.

³⁹² On holy springs being a source of venereal disease, see Rossiiskii gosudarstvennyi arkhiv sotsial'no-politicheskoi istorii-m (formerly Tsentr khraneniia dokumentov molodezhnykh organizatsii) [henceforth RGASPI-m] f. 1, op. 32, d. 1198, ll. 21-41. The case of a holy spring in the Soletskii district of the Novgorod region being drained in order to "fight malarial mosquitoes" is described in Stone, 303.

³⁹³ I often encountered this vision of elderly women as repositories of religious knowledge in official reports, atheist literature, as well as ethnographic studies from different periods, which makes this understanding appear fairly widespread. Their role was especially pronounced in atheist literature on rituals. See, for example, Genadii Gerodnik, *Dorogami novykh traditsii* (Moscow, 1964).

³⁹⁴ The discussion of the "Saratov Affair" in chapter Two indicates that such a convergence of church and state interests was not new, though in the context of the revived campaign, when religious institutions were under ever-increasing threat, the church's interest in picking its battles gained a new urgency. As Andrew Stone notes, both the Russian Orthodox Church and Soviet authorities had an interest in limiting the activities of such *samo-chintsy*, who "were perceived as challenging the church's canonical authority and as potentially jeopardizing the church's official position in an uncertain time." Stone, 304-305.

³⁹⁵ Stone, 308. The problem of lost productivity was, understandably, troubling for local officials who complained about days lost to celebrations and drunkenness around religious holidays. For example, Stone reports that the Kalinin collective farm, which contained fifteen villages, lost 36,400 labor days on seventy-nine different religious holidays celebrated annually. For a history of feast days in Orthodox Christian ritual culture, see Vera Shevzov, *Russian Orthodoxy on the Eve of Revolution* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004), 131-170.

especially) for taking part in such “backward” religious practices,³⁹⁶ the regime slowly began to implement new “positive” tactics. While the most common recourse was still administrative efforts by local officials to prohibit feast day celebrations (especially during critical agricultural periods like sowing and harvest), central authorities increasingly stressed to local officials that such measures were ineffective, especially in terms of the regime’s long-term goals.³⁹⁷ As a result, some local officials attempted to use propaganda agitators to convince collective farm workers and villagers to renounce religious celebrations.

Yet when these campaigns, largely concentrated around major religious holidays, likewise proved ineffective, some began to question whether local holidays and customs were, in fact, inherently harmful, and posited that perhaps they could be cleansed of “survivals” and transformed into a positive, morally upright, force of Soviet rural life. Indeed, in December 1957, *Izvestiia* published the Ukrainian writer Ivan Tsiupa’s account of his journey through the Ukrainian countryside. In his article, Tsiupa relayed to Soviet readers a conversation about holiday culture with a local collective farm brigade leader who described how a recent harvest festival at his collective farm had been criticized by a Party official visiting from the district center. The brigade leader recalled how, while locals enjoyed the village festival—singing songs, eating, weaving wreaths, and honoring exemplary laborers with prizes—the party official criticized the event as “archaic” and “smell[ing] of the past.”³⁹⁸ Such a position from a district Party official would have previously gone unquestioned, but the new campaign, with its search for “positive” components, opened up room for debate about the place of local customs and traditional holiday culture in Soviet society. In the new atmosphere created by the antireligious campaign, the brigade leader could ask a visiting writer (who was perceived to be a mediator between central powers and local culture), “Why are comrades like that afraid of the past? Who’ll be the worse for it if the farmers observe fine old customs?” The brigade leader assured Tsiupa that locals had “forgotten the old holidays—all those Feasts of the Intercession and Ascension Days,” but also noted that “a man can’t live by working days alone. He needs holidays too.”

What was necessary, the article suggested, was to draw a distinction between religion and folk customs, since the first clearly ran counter to Soviet ideology, while the second could be constructed to fit into a Soviet policy on nationalities that sought to diffuse tension through a “folklorization” of ethnic cultures.³⁹⁹ To illustrate his point, the brigade leader recalled the fate of the fir tree, which had been “revived” in the 1930s after being cleansed of its ideologically problematic association with Christmas. In its new Soviet guise, the fir tree was united instead

³⁹⁶ Chapter Two discusses 1954 antireligious efforts against popular practices.

³⁹⁷ Stone, 308-309. Stone’s investigation of the antireligious campaign in the Novgorod region includes a discussion of efforts to convince collective farm workers to abandon religious holidays, and confirms that simple prohibitions “drew official reprimands” from regional CAROC commissioners as both ineffective and a violation of Soviet laws on religion. While Stone goes on to discuss agitation efforts to compel locals to abandon holidays—arguing that while these were “at times successful in temporarily ending such celebrations,” the celebrations often resumed after agitators left the collective farm—he does not discuss efforts to implement Soviet replacements, presumably because these did not take place in the Novgorod region.

³⁹⁸ Ivan Tsiupa, “Village Working Days and Holidays—From a Writer’s Notebook,” *Izvestiia*, 16 December 1957, 2.

³⁹⁹ For the history of Soviet nationalities policy, see Yuri Slezkine, “The Soviet Union as Communal Apartment, or How a Socialist State Promoted Ethnic Particularism,” *Slavic Review* 53, no. 2 (Summer 1994): 414-452; Terry Martin, *The Affirmative Action Empire: Nations and Nationalism in the Soviet Union, 1923-1939* (New York: Cornell University Press, 2001); and Francine Hirsh, *Empire of Nations: Ethnographic Knowledge and the Making of the Soviet Union* (New York: Cornell University Press, 2005).

with holiday celebrations of the New Year. Collective farmers, the brigade leader proposed, likewise deserved a holiday, and a celebration cleansed of religious associations, such as a Farmer's Day or a Harvest Day, would do nicely. Farmers needed a time and a place for "a young lad to show his youth, skill, boldness, and strength" and for girls to "display their beauty." The club, he put forth, was insufficient in meeting the needs of the population for a healthy leisure, and observed that without holidays it was no wonder that some "get drunk and get into fights." Yet the fate of the fir tree also indicated that the rehabilitation of customs and holidays needed a champion—after all, the brigade leader pointed out, it was only after Pavel Petrovich Postyshev "sp[oke] up for the fir tree in the 1930s" that children could again "make merry under it on New Year's Day." In order to revive old customs and holidays and transform them into an ideologically correct part of "new and healthy everyday life" (*novyi i zdorovyi byt*), then, "All we need is for someone to show some courage and to tackle this thing in earnest."

Of course, the fact that such an innocent account of a writer's travels through the Ukrainian countryside and seemingly candid conversations with locals were published in the central state newspaper indicates that, in fact, the topic was already being tackled in earnest. Agitators began to rely on a new tactic: to offer something in return for the abandonment of religious holidays. Rather than simply trying to convince participants that their practices—which lasted several days, included feasts and drinking, and gathered the community together in a shared experience that reaffirmed local traditions—were "backward" and possibly even politically subversive, agitators began to offer Soviet holidays as replacements that were more morally fitting for "builders of socialism" and, presumably, less devastating for labor discipline.

The new Soviet holidays introduced during the campaign involved significant efforts by local officials, and did manage to effectively involve locals in festive activities. For instance, in May 1964 in the Donetsk region of Ukraine, 15,000 people, including members of the Shevchenko and "Rossiia" collective farms, took part in "Irrigation Day" (*Den' orosheniia*). Also referred to as the "Day of the first watering" (*Den' pervogo poliva*), the holiday celebrated the region's new reservoir and included meetings where local officials made speeches about labor achievements and awarded leading workers with ceremonial banners and prizes, as well as more festive and joyful elements that incorporated local talent, traditions, and even folk and magical elements.⁴⁰⁰ Participants took part in a procession where "distinguished" (*znatnye*) people of the Donbass were given the "high honor" of turning the valve and "opening the Mariiskoe Sea." Local poet Evgenii Letiuk read a poem specially dedicated to the holiday, and professional musicians from the local philharmonic and amateur musicians from the House of Culture performed Ukrainian music for the audience, including the overture to the opera "Taras Bulba" by the composer N. Lysenko. Amateur dance troupes performed folk dances in traditional costumes and sang songs, and the holiday included leisurely boat rides on the new reservoir.

But the celebration also included an enchanted component selected specifically with the water theme in mind. As the photo album of the event noted, "Where there is the sea—there is a Water Spirit (*Vodianoi*) and mermaids." Local people dressed as "Vodianoi" and mermaids arrived at the celebration by boat. The mermaids performed a ceremonial dance, and "Vodianoi" symbolically presented the local grain growers with a key to the "Mariiskoe Sea." Such efforts to

⁴⁰⁰ Tsentral'nii Derzhavnii Arkhiv Gromads'kikh Ob'ednan' Ukraini [henceforth TsDAGO], f. 1, op. 70, d. 2379. Dokladnaia zapiska i al'bom Donets'kogo obkoma partii o provedenii oblastnogo prazdnika "Dnia orosheniia," 24 May 1964.

replace religious holidays with joyful communal celebrations of Soviet labor achievements seemed to yield better results than oral propaganda that sought to replace leisure and fun with nothing other than labor commitments. Indeed, descriptions of local antireligious efforts began to report that some villages and collective farms, when offered Soviet replacements, had ‘unanimously voted’ to stop celebrating religious holidays.⁴⁰¹ While such claims of success by atheist agitators and local officials should certainly be treated with caution, they nevertheless point to three new elements in Soviet atheist efforts: the regime’s concern with at least a semblance of popular consensus and initiative from below; the awareness that “positive” methods were considerably more effective than “negative” administration or propaganda; and that the regime’s proposed “positive” replacements could not simply ridicule their religious counterparts as unenlightened and absurd, but had to offer their own way of satisfying the communal, emotional, and spiritual components of religious experience.

Their Strength is Our Weakness: New Atheist Approaches

Arguably, the late Khrushchev-era antireligious campaign was ignited by the critical eye of a Soviet atheist, when, on 15 April 1958, Mikhail Suslov, the guardian of Party ideology, received a letter from V. D. Shapovnikova, a special correspondent of *Literaturnaia gazeta*.⁴⁰² In her letter, Shapovnikova sought to outline and contrast Soviet atheist propaganda’s weaknesses with the sources of strength and power of religion. Shapovnikova, a member of the urban intelligentsia, described her shock upon encountering religion in the Soviet countryside when, some years earlier, she was writing a feature story about Baptist prayer meetings. What shocked her, to begin with, was the basic fact of Soviet religiosity, which ran counter to the official version of Soviet life that she absorbed in daily encounters with Soviet ideology. The eventual publication of her article received an enormous reader response, indicating to her that religion—as both subject and experience—was still very much alive in Soviet socialist conditions. Indeed, Shapovnikova wrote to Suslov that her work revealed both that “a great force stands behind the preacher” and that “we are very weakly armed against such a force.”

In part, Shapovnikova saw the shortcomings of atheism to be the result of a political climate that encouraged journalists to avoid the topic of religion as “dangerous.” The danger lay, Shapovnikova suggested, in the potential of a journalist’s discoveries to show Soviet reality in an unfavorable light. Moreover, the topic was difficult since there was often the possibility that overzealous cadres might find themselves on the wrong side of an unpredictably shifting Party line. While Shapovnikova did not address the second possibility directly, there were certainly cases where journalists found themselves the subject of criticism for offending the feelings of believers, and such incidents became increasingly common as the atheist campaign progressed. Shapovnikova also criticized the work of central atheist institutions—the Museum of Religion and Atheism in Leningrad, or the “Knowledge” Society—calling them sluggish and stagnant. The fact that the “Knowledge” Society’s journal “Science and Religion” (*Nauka i religiia*) had

⁴⁰¹ The effort to replace local feast days with Soviet labor holidays on the “Sovet” collective farm in Kostroma oblast’ is discussed in RGANI, f. 5, op. 34, d. 112, l. 105 and RGASPI, f. 556, op. 15, d. 96.

⁴⁰² RGANI, f. 5, op. 33, d. 91, ll. 23-29. After I concluded my archival research, I encountered Shapovnikova’s letter again in Chumachenko’s book. Chumachenko’s discussion of how the letter fits into the development of the antireligious campaign from the perspective of the Party and the CAROC was very helpful in putting the letter in context. Chumachenko, 149-150.

still not begun publication, four years after it had been permitted by the 7 July 1954 decree, was further evidence that atheists failed to use available resources.

Finally, Shapovnikova pointed out the problematic disconnect between central atheist cadres and the majority of the population, whose lived experiences were unfamiliar to the majority of Soviet atheists. Shapovnikova preferred the approach of *kraevedenie*—a discipline akin to local history and regional ethnography. As Shapovnikova saw it, the *kraeved*'s familiarity with local conditions made him accessible to his audience, and such accessibility would greatly improve atheist work. Beyond their unfamiliarity with religion as a concrete phenomenon, she also criticized atheists' unfamiliarity with the contemporary religious situation and their unsophisticated understanding of religion's role in the modern world. Above all, Shapovnikova suggested that her colleagues failed to appreciate both religion's strengths and atheism's weaknesses, pointing out that “we cannot even say with certainty the extent of the danger before us. I am convinced that the danger is great.”⁴⁰³

Shapovnikova's letter sounded an alarm within the Party, evident in the numerous reports, conferences, and decisions that followed shortly after. Indeed, Chumachenko even suggests that the letter provided the “certain stimulus” for the revived antireligious campaign.⁴⁰⁴ But the letter also pointed to new doubts and questions within the atheist community, and indicated to the Party leadership that the meaning of scientific atheism in contemporary conditions, and its significance for communist construction, had yet to be defined. More importantly, the leadership seemed to appreciate that, first and foremost, atheism's meaning and role had to be defined by the Party. In the aftermath of Shapovnikova's letter, the Central Committee organized a conference for leading institutions involved in atheist education that produced the “Report by the Agitation and Propaganda Department of the Central Committee of the KPSS for Union Republics on Shortcomings in Scientific-Atheistic Propaganda.”⁴⁰⁵ New attention to the topic in the country's top Party organs gave the clear signal that religion and atheism had been put on the official ideological agenda, and initiated a host of efforts to disseminate the new priority across Soviet institutions, down to local-level cadres. But indicating that atheism now had a new *ideological* importance did not necessarily explain the exact *nature* of this new importance, nor what concrete measures should be taken to achieve the new agenda. As a result, atheists attempted to work out the answers to these questions in numerous forums that discussed atheist theory and practice, many of which took place within the “Knowledge” Society.

⁴⁰³ RGANI, f. 5, op. 33, d. 91, ll. 23-29. Quoted in Chumachenko, 149.

⁴⁰⁴ Chumachenko, 159-150. Indeed, Chumachenko sees Shapovnikova's letter to Suslov as the “certain stimulus” that “is essential for the start of any wide-ranging campaign.” Chumachenko follows up Shapovnikova's letter with a discussion of Suslov's immediate response—ordering a closer investigation of the situation outlined in the letter—as well as the developments in policy that followed shortly thereafter. In April 1958, the Central Committee organized a conference for leading institutions involved in executing atheist education and training atheist cadres, and produced the “Report by the Agitation and Propaganda Department of the Central Committee of the CPSU for Union Republics on Shortcomings in Scientific-Atheistic Propaganda.” According to Chumachenko, this conference and report formed the foundation of the resolutions of 16 October 1958, “Monasteries in the USSR” and “Levying Taxes on Income Received by Diocesan Enterprises and Also on the Income of Monasteries.”

⁴⁰⁵ RGANI, f. 5, op. 33, d. 91, l. 135. The report was then discussed and disseminated in subsequent months among the various institutions involved in the antireligious campaign. CAROC asked to hold council for its local representatives (114 people) in December 1958 to discuss the new party line.

The spectrum of reactions to both the 1954 antireligious campaign and de-Stalinization (discussed in the previous chapter) show that, until the late Khrushchev-era, the relationship between atheist education and communist construction remained, to a certain degree, open. This lack of clarity about what role religion and atheism would play in the new era was clear in the brief revival of religious activity in the mid-1950s, as well as in the confusion of institutions like the “Knowledge” Society when it came to the place of atheist education in their broader ideological and cultural work. Indeed, an internal Society report noted that many members had interpreted the events of 1956—both the denunciation of Stalinism and the pronouncement of a new era of communist construction—to mean that religion and atheism were no longer relevant issues in the new society being produced.⁴⁰⁶ The RSFSR branch of the Society noted a significant decline in the number of atheist lectures in 1956 (from 24,574 in the first half of 1955, to 16,946 in the first half of 1956), as well as a decrease in the proportion of total lectures that were atheist (atheist lectures decreased from 6.3 per cent of the total in the first six months of 1955, to 3.5 per cent in the same period of 1956).⁴⁰⁷ In light of the revived antireligious campaign, the report criticized the 1956 decline, explaining it to be the result of confusion both on the part of lecturers and among the population as a whole. While local branches of the Society were blamed for “undervaluing this most important area of ideological work,” the population as a whole showed little enthusiasm for the Society’s services. In 1956, the Moscow branch of the Society only received six requests for atheist lectures, and even when branches actively offered their services to local enterprises and organizations, these offers were often declined “regardless of the qualifications of the lecturer.”⁴⁰⁸

Not all blame was put on the failures of the local party, state, and enterprise leadership to correctly estimate the importance of atheist work in contemporary conditions. The Society also directed criticism at its own cadres. Citing the 10 November 1954 Central Committee decree that condemned administrative “excesses” and brought the 1954 campaign to a close, the report noted that some lecturers continue to “offend the feelings of believers.” A lecturer in Kemerovo was singled out for characterizing religious believers as “defective” (*nepolnotsennye*) and another in Moscow had accused believers of having the “morality of a merchant” (*moral' torgasha*), since they were only capable of sacrificing their lives “by calculating on getting to the heavenly kingdom.” Other lecturers were criticized for mistakenly thinking that in current conditions religion was no longer harmful since it no longer contradicted science and had become loyal to the Soviet state, “supposedly stepping on the path of the battle for communism.” In short, many atheists did not understand the essence of scientific atheist propaganda and the political line of the party-state towards religion and the church in the new era proclaimed in Soviet ideology.⁴⁰⁹

In light of the Party’s new antireligious campaign, the “Knowledge” Society made an effort to remedy the situation. An internal report written in the wake of the 21st Party Congress (1959) outlined the significance of atheism in contemporary conditions, and explained that the successful construction of communism depended on the “ideological conviction” and the “moral characteristics” of the people.⁴¹⁰ In order to achieve a “most just and actualized” society, when

⁴⁰⁶ GARF, f. A-561, op. 1, d. 375, ll. 35-38.

⁴⁰⁷ Ibid., 35.

⁴⁰⁸ Ibid., 36.

⁴⁰⁹ Ibid., 37.

⁴¹⁰ Ibid., 8-27.

“the best qualities of a free person will fully reveal themselves,” it was especially important to cultivate communist morality.⁴¹¹ Counterposed with bourgeois (capitalist) morality, communist morality entailed “dedication to communism and an uncompromising attitude towards its enemies, the consciousness of one’s societal duties, the active participation in labor for the benefit of society, the essential upbringing of the man of the future, [and] the overcoming of capitalist survivals in people’s consciousness.” Among the “survivals” that needed to be overcome, the task of eradicating religious “survivals” was “one of the most significant.”

The report re-asserted the irreconcilability of religion and Communism and stressed that the issue went beyond the question of political loyalty.

The Communist party, basing itself on science, has always been irreconcilable (*neprimirima*) towards religion, which in the lives of laborers plays the role of spiritual hog-wash (*dukhovnoi sivukhi*), poisoning man’s consciousness. Preaching resignation to fate, the passive wait for heavenly life in the next world, religion gets in the way of believers becoming conscious builders of communist life, lowers their initiative and energy in their labor and social lives. The observance of religious rituals is often accompanied by violations in labor and government discipline, is detrimental to agriculture, and leaves people spiritually desolate (*opustoshaet*).⁴¹²

The author also argued against the incorrect view that, with the “liquidation” of religion’s material base, there was no longer any need to battle religious holdovers, “as if, in the course of communist construction, these survivals will die off spontaneously, of their own accord.” Such opinions were considered to be “in complete contradiction to Marxist-Leninist theory and to the facts of reality,” since religious survivals continued to persist, in part because of the “activities of church people and sectarians.”⁴¹³ For this reason, it was essential to “conduct, develop, and actualize scientific-atheist propaganda—our weapon in the battle against religion.”

While the primary targets of scientific-atheist propaganda were believers, atheists could not forget about unbelievers, including communists and Komsomol members. “The propaganda of scientific-atheist knowledge is needed by everyone: for some, it will help strengthen the scientific worldview; for others, especially youth, [it will help them] to protect themselves against the influence of religious ideology; [and] for a third [category], [it will help them] become knowledgeable agitators against religion.”⁴¹⁴ Moreover, the report proposed that, rather than be conducted only by designated atheist lecturers in specially organized lectures, atheism should be connected to all spheres of knowledge—lectures in the natural and social sciences, foreign affairs, art, and literature, should all touch upon the atheist significance of their topic. On the whole, then, the report aimed to show the intrinsic connection between the battle against religious ‘survivals’ and the “great goals of communist construction” set for 1959-1965. In these new conditions, the demands placed on the “Knowledge” Society were especially high, and its social role increasingly critical. As the group’s leadership saw it, every lecture had to contain

⁴¹¹ On communist morality in the Khrushchev era, see Deborah A. Field, *Private Life and Communist Morality in Khrushchev’s Russia* (New York: Peter Lang, 2007).

⁴¹² *Ibid.*, 9.

⁴¹³ *Ibid.*, 10.

⁴¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 10. The new positions outlined in the report explicitly cited the 10 November 1954 Central Committee decree, which had criticized administrative methods and offensive behavior towards clergy and believers.

antireligious material and have an atheist “pointedness” (*zaostrennost*): “Life demands that scientific-atheist propaganda approach the broad masses of laborers. The task is to guarantee no less than one lecture per month in every collective farm and industrial enterprise. We must get to every industrial brigade, production department, dormitory, housing administration, [and] courtyard.”⁴¹⁵

New demands placed on ideology cadres and enlightenment institutions prompted the “Knowledge” Society to intensify its work accordingly. Since the activation of the campaign, the Society’s RSFSR branch reported that it had published 24 methodological brochures; organized an exhibit titled “Science against Religion”; and coordinated three republican and 154 regional seminars for atheist lecturers. In 1959, the branch read over 400,000 lectures, of which 131,663 were on scientific atheism (a figure that was higher than either of the two previous years).⁴¹⁶ Certain areas were cited especially for their successful atheist work. In the Perm region, for instance, the local Society branch first organized a cycle of atheist lectures for graduates of the local university, and then, in 1958-1959, prepared a program for a course on foundations of scientific atheism to be taught in higher education institutions. Perm Society members were lauded for their frequent discussion of atheist topics in press publications and radio appearances, as well as for actively reaching out to the broader community of enlightenment workers in training seminars and consultations. Perm was also among the regions cited for effective cadre training in courses and seminars coordinated by the local Party organs and Society branches.⁴¹⁷ Aside from disseminating the party line on religion and the latest directives on atheism, training seminars provided a general background in the history of religion, an overview of the latest scientific achievements, and information about local conditions (especially the activities of “sectarians”).⁴¹⁸

Alongside courses and seminars, cadre training also began to be implemented in a more permanent and consistent way. Exemplary were the so-called “evening universities” (*vechernie universitety*), which offered one or two-year programs that emphasized the practical side of atheist education. As part of their training, students were sent into local communities to conduct atheist work that ranged from lecturers at collective farms, industrial enterprises, and schools, to newer and more innovative methods, like “individual work” with believers. In Tambov, for instance, the 185 evening university students enrolled in 1958-1959 were assigned to local families for individual work.⁴¹⁹

As noted earlier, cadres were encouraged to see atheist education broadly and holistically—not only as a weapon against religion, but also as means to enlighten the countryside. In the Michkapsk district of the Tambov region, local organizations referred to this campaign as the “three-year march for culture” (*3-kh letnii pokhod za kul'turu*). Conducted on each collective farm, the campaign entailed the construction of clubs, libraries, day care and kindergartens, regional sanatoriums (*doma otdykha*), homes for the elderly, as well as planting and landscaping in the villages. Nevertheless, the report noted that atheist propaganda received “special attention.”⁴²⁰ The local youth press, *Komsomol'skoe Znamia*, organized a

⁴¹⁵ Ibid., 27.

⁴¹⁶ Ibid., 11.

⁴¹⁷ Such regional seminars, typically training over 100 agitators, lasted from two days to an entire week and were intended for enlightenment workers, party agitators, and educational professionals.

⁴¹⁸ Ibid., 13-14.

⁴¹⁹ Ibid., 14-15.

⁴²⁰ Ibid., 19.

“Correspondence Atheist University for Youth.” Brochures based on local experiences were published on topics like “Sectarianism in the Tambov region,” “Local religious holidays and their harm,” and “Superstitions about ‘holy springs’ and their harm.” Likewise, local Society branches conducted a review of training methods, and sought to extend their reach by attracting local intelligentsia to atheist work, “especially in those villages where there [were] churches.” The Tambov campaign reportedly produced certain results. In the village of Berezovka the church had formerly been regularly filled with believers, including youth, “Yet when the population activated the ‘march for culture,’ Society members and cultural workers involved the youth [and] opened up life’s prospects (*perspektivy zhizni*).” Lectures and individual conversations began to be conducted regularly, and soon “church attendance decreased to such a degree, that even during religious holidays people go to the club, rather than the church.”⁴²¹

Atheist work was reported to be especially successful when it relied on visual pedagogical aids (*nagliadnye*) that engaged the audience.⁴²² For example, in the Tula region an atheist evening in a local club, titled “Science and Superstition,” included a question-and-answer session (where the school principal, teachers, a doctor, and a correspondent from the local newspaper fielded questions); an amateur theater troupe performance of S. Mikhalkov’s play “Darkness” (*Temnota*); and a viewing of the film “On the threshold of consciousness” (*U poroga soznaniia*).⁴²³ Besides improving the forms and methods of atheist work, cadres were also encouraged to “capture” the maximum number of believers by conducting atheist propaganda not only in clubs, Houses of Culture, and local enterprises, but also in the fields, among tractorists and farm workers, and among parents, women, and youth. Among these more remote audiences, the report suggested that lecture cycles on general topics, be supplemented with topics of local interest, such as “Where does drought come from and how can it be combated,” “Why are there solar and lunar eclipses,” as well as scientific demonstrations that “debunk religious ‘miracles.’”⁴²⁴

The above report—addressed to A. D. Gusakov, Professor of Economics and deputy chairman of the executive committee of the RSFSR “Knowledge Society”—largely focused on the progress made by local Society branches since atheism had again become prioritized by the Party. Despite the generally positive tone, it also included criticism of atheist work. While most of the criticism was general and predictable—such as accusations about unfamiliarity with local conditions, especially in the countryside, and the failure to attract local intelligentsia to atheist work—some observations pointed to deeper troubles that atheists had to face on the ground. In particular, the report noted the danger of direct encounters between atheist agitators and religious figures, and warned atheists away from “outdated” forms of approach like organized disputes between atheists and believers, which could be used as a “tribune for the propaganda of the religious worldview.” To illustrate the point, the report described a recent atheist evening in Vladivostok, where the leader of the local Pentecostals (*piatidesiatniki-triasuny*)—an illegal ‘sect’—informed the audience that they had listened to “a lot of lies (*lzhesloviia*),” and insisted

⁴²¹ Ibid., 20-21.

⁴²² On the importance of visual aids (*nagliadnost'*) in atheist lecture methodology, see Luehrmann, “Forms and Methods: Teaching Atheism and Religion in the Mari Republic, Russian Federation.”

⁴²³ GARF, f. A-561, op. 1, d. 375, l. 22.

⁴²⁴ Ibid., 23-24. General topics included lectures like, “What is religion and how did it originate?,” “Scientific predications and religious prophecies,” “The Vatican in the Service of Imperialism,” and lectures on space and the origins of life on earth.

on the reality of Christ and biblical “myths” like the flood, proving their veracity with scientific evidence. The report argued that the Vladivostok experience showed that instead of achieving atheist objectives, such events—of which local atheists had organized more than 90—allowed for the “unhealthy encounters of believers and unbelievers and could not but enflame religious fanaticism.”⁴²⁵

Criticism that pointed to the danger of direct contact with religious figures implied, albeit indirectly, that in such encounters atheists were the weaker party. In transcripts of Society meetings and conferences where atheists exchanged field experiences, such concerns—and criticism more generally—were often much more explicit than in official reports, and undoubtedly more revealing. For instance, at a Society seminar in April 1959, I. N. Uskov, an atheist lecturer in the Moscow region, pointed out that “the ice [had] budged” (*led tronulsia*) on atheist work recently, but he was alarmed that atheists already found themselves overwhelmed by new responsibilities. As he observed, “sometimes we drown trying to execute these demands.”⁴²⁶ The time was coming when atheist propaganda would become more and more necessary and would need to be further and better developed, and “We, speaking frankly, are not ready.” Atheist work itself was full of “survivals,” Uskov suggested, marked by old ways of thinking and an uncritical approach to its “insufficiencies.” Atheists complacently cited statistics about increased lecture propaganda, yet Uskov wondered “What is the difference if I say that we have increased the number of lectures by 100-200-500 per cent in comparison with the previous year? [...] All of this remains infinitely insufficient (*bez konechno malo*) in comparison with those demands that are placed upon us by the times, by the party.”⁴²⁷ Indeed, Uskov noted, “Even in Moscow we not infrequently encounter organizations, enterprises, worker’s associations (*arteli*), schools, and institutes where, in the postwar period, there has not been one lecture, not one conversation on atheist themes.”⁴²⁸ The time had come, Uskov insisted, when atheist propaganda was necessary for the entire population, and believers most of all. Yet the new generation, he criticized, lacked militancy with regards to the religious situation, and grew up “without being brought up in the atheist spirit, in the spirit of (*neprimirimo*’), a Leninist attitude towards religion, of militant atheists.” As a result, even among Communists one often encountered a naïve attitude to religion and atheism. As evidence, Uskov cited a recent lecture he gave for 500 party propaganda workers in Moscow where he received a curious note from one propagandist: “During Easter, by tradition, we have Easter cakes and painted eggs in our home. But we do not believe in God. I am a communist, and my brother is in the Komsomol, and my father is a Party candidate. Is it really so very bad?”⁴²⁹

Clubs and Lectures Against Churches and Sermons: Results and Revisions

As the antireligious campaign gained momentum and new atheist propaganda methods began to be employed, central organs gathered information about results on the ground. Local representatives periodically reported on progress and problems in their areas, and central

⁴²⁵ Ibid., 26.

⁴²⁶ GARF, f. A-561, op. 1, d. 281, ll. 56-61.

⁴²⁷ Ibid., 43-44.

⁴²⁸ Ibid., 44.

⁴²⁹ Ibid.

institutions attempted to evaluate the overall effect of the regime's intensified efforts to battle religion and create an atheist society. Certainly, some reports provided evidence of successful policies on the ground and consequently hope for the state's broader agenda. In the republic of Estonia, for instance, local initiative in Tartu had organized a "people's university" (*narodnyi universitet*) in 1959. People's universities were a novel institution run by the "Knowledge" Society, and were conceived as part of the broader campaign to enlighten the countryside and bridge the gap between rural and urban populations.

Aimed largely at agricultural workers, the people's university of Tartu was supported by its proximity to the University of Tartu, one of the oldest and best universities on the territory of the Soviet Union. A. M. Mitt, a prominent Estonian cultural figure and a lecturer of the republican "Knowledge" Society, relayed the successes of the new university's Department of Atheism to the executive committee at the IV All-Union "Knowledge" Society Congress in 1963.⁴³⁰ Mitt stressed that Estonian atheists had no available model in organizing their work, and were therefore starting from scratch. They established a two-year program for students that each year consisted of 25 lectures read every other Sunday evening, four question and answer sessions, three evenings devoted to specific themes, and six excursions that included a visit to an atheist film festival and a trip to the Museum of the History of Religion and Atheism in Leningrad. Each lesson lasted approximately 90 minutes and was followed by a short film. Likewise, students were given the opportunity to ask questions and express their opinion about each lecture at the end of each session. Moreover, in order to evaluate the program, members of the departmental council attended lectures and gathered feedback from students and visitors.⁴³¹ Mitt clarified that while registered students were usually already atheists, the department's activities also attracted a large number of voluntary visitors, many of whom tended the fall on the religious spectrum, from "sectarians" and "religious fanatics" to people on the fence. Most attendees were elderly people who, Mitt reported, nonetheless found atheist meetings more interesting than going to church. As evidence of this, he described high attendance at the evening titled "Religious miracles in light of science" that despite being held the day after Christmas, still gathered an audience of 300. Likewise, the atheist film festival held in the House of Culture during Easter week attracted 8,000 viewers, around 10 per cent of the population of Tartu.⁴³²

How—Mitt asked—could the population's interest in atheism and the success of the Tartu people's university be explained? In part, Mitt attributed positive results to the fact that lectures were often read by professors from University of Tartu, which was much-esteemed in the community. The proximity also brought numerous established academic and cultural figures to the area—prominent figures like the biologist H. M. Haberman of the Institute of Zoology and Botany of the Estonian Academy of Sciences, the astrophysicist A. Ia. Kipper, the director of the Institute of Physics and Astronomy of the Estonian Academy of Sciences, as well as the theologian-turned-atheist Aleksandr Osipov—who would lecture at the people's university.⁴³³ It also provided access to numerous resources—from technical devices used during chemistry lectures aimed at showing the scientific foundations of miracles, to opportunities for excursions

⁴³⁰ GARF, f. R-9547, op. 1, d. 1353, ll. 190-196.

⁴³¹ Ibid.

⁴³² Ibid., 193.

⁴³³ Aksel' Ianovich Kipper (1907-1984) was an Estonian astrophysicist. He was the Vice President of the Soviet Academy of Sciences in 1946-1950, and the founder and director of the Institute of Physics and Astronomy of the Estonian Academy of Sciences (1950-1974). The story of Aleksandr Osipov is covered in greater detail in chapter Four of this dissertation.

to the Geological and Zoological Museum, the Astronomical observatory, and university's computing center, and the Museum of Ethnography. The cumulative effect of the department's atheist education was that students and visitors became "convinced that atheism is not the whimsy of 'professional blasphemers' but the direct and incontrovertible consequence of scientific achievements."⁴³⁴ Mitt also provided more concrete evidence of the results of atheist work by using the common measures that the Soviet regime customarily used to monitor religiosity: ritual observance, the quantity of churches and church attendance, and individual conversions. According to Mitt, between 1957—that is, before the onset of the antireligious campaign and the founding of the Tartu people's university—and 1963, the number of religious rituals had declined significantly, with baptisms and confirmations falling by 90 per cent, and funerals by 50 per cent.⁴³⁵ Moreover, two churches had been closed in Tartu since 1961, "due to the absence of attendees" and the number of "sectarians" declined steadily, with one former "sectarian" even becoming a member of the council of the Department of Atheism.

Finally, Mitt pointed to the department's most recent graduate, an 80-year-old man "with the beard of the venerable Abraham" who had spent the last thirty years of his life as an Adventist, and now "declared that he had wasted (*zagubil*) half of his life, and is grateful to us, that we finally helped him make sense of all of life's questions."⁴³⁶ Mitt's observations demonstrate the major breakthrough of atheists' experiences on the ground: "making sense of life's questions" was the foundation of their work, and would ultimately determine the success of the project. He observed that people, and religious people especially, actively engage with life's questions, and that the department's lectures "force people to again and again attend the next sessions, and, ultimately, to begin to decide, in their own conscience, the main question—where is truth, in science or religion? Where does one look for it—at church with the priests or in the House of Culture with the scientists?"⁴³⁷ Indeed, Mitt pointed out that alongside his other activities in the department, he had to begin having office hours for individual conversations with students and visitors, who "come to bare their souls and ask me to clarify questions that have become critical for them (*kotorye u nikh naboileli*) and to which they seek answers."⁴³⁸ Even in cases of reported success, then, atheists stressed that their work extended beyond the traditional borders of atheist propaganda and pointed to new areas of concern for future work.

Mitt's account of successful atheist work in Estonia, while certainly plausible, is not typical. To be sure, the fact that he reported at the congress of the All-Union "Knowledge" Society—the most elite forum of the Society—suggests that the Tartu case was meant to serve as an example to which other branches should aspire. Indeed, on the whole, reports from regional organizations paint a much more troubled and discouraging picture of atheist progress, especially as these reports became closer to local experiences, both in content and in their intended audience. The antireligious campaign continued to exert pressure on religious institutions and believers, and ideological organizations like the "Knowledge" Society pressed on with atheist

⁴³⁴ GARF, f. 9547, op. 1, d. 1353, ll. 194-195

⁴³⁵ Ibid., 195. The figures for rituals are noted in pencil on the side of the transcript.

⁴³⁶ Ibid.

⁴³⁷ Ibid., 193.

⁴³⁸ Ibid., 195-196.

education, multiplying the ranks of atheist cadres, but the results of these efforts were mixed, at best.⁴³⁹

A February 1963 report by D. Sidorov, deputy chairman of the RSFSR Society to Vladimir Il'ich Stepanov, the head of the Central Committee's Propaganda department,⁴⁴⁰ relayed the state of atheist work in the Kalinin, Pskov, and Iaroslavl' regions.⁴⁴¹ Sidorov reported that, even at the height of the antireligious campaign, all three regions had a significant number of places of worship and functioning religious communities (both registered and unregistered).⁴⁴² All three regions likewise showed persistently high levels of religiosity, evident in the high percentage of religious holiday observance and participation in rites. In 1961 in Iaroslavl' region, for example, 57.7 per cent of all children were baptized, 162 couples had religious weddings, and 70 per cent were buried according to religious rites. Moreover, Sidorov noted that "in certain districts of these regions, the number of rituals is significantly higher than the averages." In Iaroslavl's Danilov district, 80 per cent of all newborns were baptized, while in the Iaroslavl' district the number rose to 130 per cent on account of the fact that many children were brought in for baptism from nearby districts without a functioning church. A similar situation was reported for religious funerals—in the Iaroslavl' district, the proportion of religious funerals (to deaths in the district) was 116 per cent; in Tutaev district, 108 per cent; in the city of Riabinsk, 96 per cent. Even more troubling was the fact that despite the fact that the campaign was at its peak, the quantity of religious rites "decrease[d] extremely slowly" and in some areas was even on the rise, with religious funerals in Iaroslavl' district rising from 65 per cent in 1960, to 70 per cent in 1961. Increased religiosity was also noted beyond the sphere of rituals, such as in the amount of people making confession (*ispoveduiushchikhsia*)—which, in one district of Iaroslavl' region increased from 103,738 in 1960, to 109,426 in 1961—as well as in the sales of religious objects, with the report noting that in 1961 alone, 69,428 crosses (*natel'nykh krestikov*) had been sold to people in the area.⁴⁴³

Naturally, such high levels of religiosity at the height of the antireligious campaign, and especially trends indicating increases, had to be explained, and Sidorov made the expected criticism of "weak work" among local organizations responsible for atheist education, as well as a poor understanding of certain institutions—such as the Komsomol and professional unions (*profsoiuzy*)—of their place in the system of atheist education. Alongside the poor work of the institutions cited above, Sidorov also blamed cultural organizations for misunderstanding the relationship between religion and culture. For instance, the Iaroslavl' Museum's exhibit of the

⁴³⁹ GARF, f. A-561, op. 1, d. 676, l. 17. To give a sense of scale, the RSFSR branch of the "Knowledge" Society had 45,000 registered cells in 1963, with over 650,000 members, whereas in 1956, the Society had 203,000 members).

⁴⁴⁰ Over the course of the 1950s and 1960s, V. I. Stepanov became a prominent figure in the Party's propaganda apparatus. In 1957, he graduated from the Academy of Social Sciences of the Central Committee of the Communist Party (AON pri TsK KPSS). In 1964-1965, he served as the editor of *Izvestiia*, replacing Aleksei Adzhubei after his removal shortly after Khrushchev's forced retirement.

⁴⁴¹ GARF, f. A-561, op. 1, d. 676, ll. 131-138.

⁴⁴² *Ibid.*, 131. In Kalinin region, there were 47 churches, 9 Baptist and 2 Old Believer communities, as well as 47 unregistered "sectarian" organizations. In Pskov region, there were 94 churches as well as a monastery (the Pskovsko-Pecherskii Monastery), 3 Baptist and 3 Old Believer communities, and a significant amount of Russian Orthodox religious officials—106 priests, 600 church activists, and 56 monks. In Iaroslavl' region there were 97 churches and around 20 unregistered "sectarian" groups.

⁴⁴³ *Ibid.*, 132. In 1961 in Kalinin region, 9,439 children were baptized, 64 couples had religious weddings, and 7,578 people were buried according to the religious rite. In one district of Iaroslavl', Sidorov noted that the rate of confession had increased several times—from 268 total in 1960, to 506 in just the first six months of 1962.

city's (overwhelmingly religious) architectural masterpieces and local iconography failed to "unmask the reactionary essence of religion, and the role of the Russian Orthodox Church [in class warfare]." The same situation could be found in the publications organized by the architecture division of the regional executive committee (*oblispolkom*), where "atheist content was completely absent" and which were instead filled with "panegyrics admiring and glorifying" church architecture. While regional Party organs criticized the publications for the above deficiencies, Sidorov observed that they continued to be sold nonetheless.⁴⁴⁴

Sidorov also drew attention to the problematic tendency of local organs to report misleading statistics in their effort to show progress. "Many social organizations report [statistics] about thousands of lectures, conversations, seminars, [and] atheist films, [as well as] annual increases in the measures noted above. Meanwhile, scientific-atheist propaganda not only does not reach each believer, but does not capture the majority of enterprises, organizations, and population points."⁴⁴⁵ In the Kalinin region, where there were 14,000 production sites (*proizvodstvennykh ob'ektov*) and population points, only 5,111 lectures had been read by the Society in 1962, while in Pskov region, where there were 12,590 population points, only 4,244 atheist lectures had been read. Sidorov made a direct comparison between the intensity of activities of local atheists as opposed to local churches. He described one village where a Baptist community (made up of 86 collective farmers) met twice each week, whereas atheist work was completely neglected, and the local club had broken windows, ripped wallpaper, and firewood stored in the "red corner." To bring the point home, Sidorov pointed out that in the village of Staryi Izborsk, which had two functioning churches, local clergy read hundreds of sermons whereas the number of atheist lectures totaled four.⁴⁴⁶

Sidorov lamented that while the charters of both the Party and the Komsomol obligate members to actively "battle against religious prejudices," many communists have icons in their homes and participate in religious holidays and rituals. In Iaroslavl's Pereslavl' district, 30 out of the 35 communists of the local collective farm had icons in their homes, and in the home of the regional Party Secretary V. A. Krasikov there was "an entire iconostasis." Moreover, when Krasikov was asked when he would "do away with survivals of the past in his family" he replied that the question should be addressed not to him, but to his wife. Upon investigation, many other collective farms revealed a similar picture. In the "Cheliuskinets" collective farm in Kalinin region, 70 out of 105 families had icons in their homes, including those of many leading agricultural specialists. In the dormitories of an industrial site in the same region, the "absolute majority" of the rooms, occupied by 1,500 people, had icons.⁴⁴⁷

On the whole, Sidorov's report was an effort to produce a more accurate understanding of the religious situation on the ground, both by describing contemporary religiosity, and by analyzing the effectiveness of antireligious and atheist measures. Sidorov warned that excessive administrative measures were ineffective, if not outright counterproductive, and cited a Baptist community in Kalinin that, after its registration was revoked, "broke into eight illegal groups, [and] each of these has chosen a leader and conducts its work even more actively."⁴⁴⁸ With regards to atheist measures, Sidorov noted that atheist films and continued to be

⁴⁴⁴ Ibid., 133.

⁴⁴⁵ Ibid.

⁴⁴⁶ Ibid., 134-135.

⁴⁴⁷ Ibid., 135.

⁴⁴⁸ Ibid.

underutilized, and atheist books often unavailable—a situation that was problematic not just from the perspective of the broader public, but also for atheist cadres who had little access to the latest theoretical and methodological innovations in atheist work.⁴⁴⁹ Indeed, Sidorov painted a grim picture of the quantity and quality of local atheist cadres. He noted that the local intelligentsia took little interest in atheist work, giving an example of a town in Pskov region where, out of a potential cadre pool of 3,228 teachers, university instructors, doctors, engineers, and other intelligentsia groups, only 26 people conducted atheist work. Meanwhile, those who did participate received little training of mediocre quality (with periodic seminars being the primary, and sometimes the only, form of training). Many complained about being poorly networked and thus unaware of the successes and failures in atheist work being conducted in other regions.⁴⁵⁰

Putting the Soviet Home in Order: Making Communists into Atheists

In the new era of the antireligious campaign, the Party became increasingly concerned with ambivalence about religion, especially among Party members. More than ever, the central authorities tried to communicate that a Communist who painted Easter eggs—or went to church, or participated in religious holidays and rituals—was indeed “very bad.” While such “bad” Communists had certainly always existed, the new atmosphere made them ever less tolerable, in part because they were evidence that even the Party’s own institutions were ideologically undisciplined. Moreover, the numerous examples of such “bad” Communists served as an indication of the degree to which the importance of atheism was not fully appreciated. In the new Party Charter announced at the 22nd Party Congress (1961), the Party made it clear that communists were unequivocally required to actively battle religious prejudices.⁴⁵¹ As the Party’s Ideological Commission noted in its review of letters, “There are many signals that party organizations do not devote the necessary attention to the atheist education of laborers, have a conciliatory attitude towards the activities of churchmen and sectarians, do not actively battle survivals of the past. Not infrequently, communists reconcile themselves to the fact that religious rituals are conducted in their families, and sometimes even participate in them themselves.”⁴⁵² Party pronouncements re-asserted that communists could not reconcile with religion in either their personal or professional lives.

Nevertheless, internal reports and transcripts, and even press publications, continued to complain about the failure of communists to serve as model atheists for their communities. In the more frank atmosphere common at the Society’s atheist conferences, the scope and gravity of the problem was even more apparent. Rudenko, an atheist lecturer from Stavropol region (*krai*), which was considered to be a model area in terms of atheist education, relayed an exchange he

⁴⁴⁹ Ibid., 136-137. Only four feature films had been shown at local clubs and Houses of Culture: “Greshnitsa,” “Chudotvornaia,” “Ispoved’,” and “Tuchi nad Borskom.” With regards to atheist books, Sidorov suggested that occasionally this lack of access was intentional, claiming that sometimes atheist literature was bought up by local clergy in an effort to limit the population’s exposure to antireligious propaganda.

⁴⁵⁰ GARF, f. A-561, op. 1, d. 676, l. 137.

⁴⁵¹ *Ustav KPSS* (Moscow, 1961), 6.

⁴⁵² RGANI, f. 5, op. 30, d. 409, l. 116. The question of communists participating in religious rituals continued to be debated in subsequent years. See D. Sidorov, “Terpimy li religioznye obriady v semye kommunistov?,” *Agitator*, no. 6 (1964): 41-42.

had had on the way to the April 1959 conference with a regional Party secretary.⁴⁵³ “We know you atheists,” the Party secretary had mocked Rudenko, “you read lectures to yourselves.” The secretary’s derisive attitude pointed to the fact that “communist” and “atheist” were categories that, while overlapping, were certainly not synonymous. For Rudenko, it also made clear the degree to which some local communists did not take atheism seriously. To illustrate his point, Rudenko shared an anecdote:

We were in one district helping the party *obkom* work on scientific-atheist propaganda in connection with the latest Central Committee resolution. One district secretary says, let’s go check what the situation is in the families of communists, in their everyday lives (*v bytu*).

Since there were many people gathered, we checked all the villages at the same time. We walked into [the home of] each communist, and, struck dumb, stared at the iconostasis. There were many such instances, I won’t speak of percentages, but there were not a few people with icons.

So, how did they explain themselves, these communists? These aren’t mine, they are my grandmother’s, or my auntie’s, and when we reported this to the city Party secretary, he said that we should ask them whether in ideological questions they are guided by the instructions of the Party or by their grandmothers and aunties. [Meanwhile] we [atheists] do not read lectures for communists [and] Soviet state functionaries.⁴⁵⁴

Rudenko informed the audience that the above incident, “while not characteristic,” was certainly not rare. “If you look among yourselves,” he remarked, “I’m afraid you will find a similar phenomenon.”⁴⁵⁵

Evidence of such “naïve” and “unmilitant” attitudes even among Communists underscored the need not only for a better understanding of atheism’s ideological significance, but, perhaps more importantly, for more and better atheist cadres. Consequently, this revealed the need for reform in the training of professional atheists. In particular, more attention needed to be given to methodology that was “connected to life”—that is, that offered cadres practical advice about how to conduct atheist work more effectively.

In his speech to the “Knowledge” Society atheism conference, Uskov illustrated the above point by drawing a direct analogy between the training of atheist cadres and the preparation of priests.

Why is it that in seminaries homiletics (*gumiletika*)—the art of preaching—is taught as one of the most important subjects, while among us, no one ever speaks about how one should communicate, what language to use, how one should comport themselves based on the audience. After all, a lecturer is not only that person who wrote the lecture and knows the subject. Besides this, he must speak clearly, accessibly, understandably, so that [the lecture] would reach the

⁴⁵³ GARF, f. A-561, op. 1, d. 283, ll. 35-36.

⁴⁵⁴ GARF, f. A-561, op. 1, d. 283, ll. 35-36.

⁴⁵⁵ *Ibid.*

consciousness of the masses. In religion, after all [...] the lecturer must excite people's emotions [...]. This is the main art—the ability to communicate with the masses.⁴⁵⁶

In a tone reminiscent of the Vladivostok experiences noted earlier, Uskov also stressed the importance of proper training for lecturers by showing the dangers of direct confrontations with believers during unsuccessful lectures. He described a recent Moscow lecture provocatively titled “Is there a God?” (*Est' li bog?*) that ended in a “big embarrassment” (*bol'shoi konfuz*). Faced with an audience of three hundred people—an audience of precisely “those whom we must service,” that is elderly people and believers—the lecturer quickly revealed his lack of preparation as “old ladies assaulted him with questions” and he only “mumbled and could not respond.”⁴⁵⁷ For this reason, Uskov insisted that it was vital to devote attention not only to theoretical preparation, but to “the lecturer's ability to simply, accessibly, and most importantly, convincingly and brightly communicate his knowledge in such a difficult and important sphere of our propaganda.”⁴⁵⁸

Uskov's observations about cadre training and the pitfalls of unprepared propaganda workers on the ground were supported by another conference participant, the atheist Vinogradov from the Kursk region. Vinogradov, a pensioner, had conducted propaganda work since 1928, and his experiences had brought him to the conclusion that “the most difficult kind of propaganda is, after all, antireligious propaganda.”⁴⁵⁹ Antireligious lectures demanded “enormous tact, methodological mastery and serious knowledge,” all of which were especially tested, he pointed out, when the lecture took place in rural areas.

Let's say you are lecturing about Christ, then immediately after such a lecture you are asked a question: so who, then, created the Earth and the sun? Why don't monkeys today produce people? Why does the priest in the village of Volchakovka give out free suppers, but in the Soviet tea house it costs money? When a lecturer says he will not answer such questions, he loses his authority. If in a village a lecturer is asked a question that does not relate to his topic, and he does not answer the question, then they say—he can't make sense of a question like this, and he comes here to talk about God.⁴⁶⁰

Vinogradov proposed that the most important part of a lecture was not the lecture itself, but the question and answer session. This was where most lecturers floundered, especially in rural areas “where all lectures turned into conversations.”⁴⁶¹

⁴⁵⁶ GARF, f. A-561, op. 1, d. 281, l. 45.

⁴⁵⁷ GARF, f. A-561, op. 1, d. 281, l. 47.

⁴⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 48.

⁴⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 56.

⁴⁶⁰ *Ibid.*

⁴⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 58. Debates about approaches extended beyond the methodological training of cadres, touching on the most practical questions of how to make atheist propaganda more effective. Some proposed that, since the aim of Soviet atheism was to convert believers, lecturers had to go to the spaces where believers could be reached—to the fields of agricultural enterprises, or the lunch rooms of factories, to housing meetings, parent conferences at schools, and to hospitals. Others argued that such atheist lectures were simply a “profanation of a serious affair,” that the audience treated such a lunch-time lecturer as a “jester” (*shut gorokhovyi*), and that “it was high time to stop lectures during lunch breaks.” Uskov, siding with the first position, insisted that it was necessary to use all available opportunities to

To help repair the situation, Vinogradov suggested that certain elements of the early Soviet antireligious movement be re-introduced—old atheist literature should be re-issued and new studies produced, and there should be closer ties between center and periphery, with consultations available between atheist propaganda workers in urban centers and those outside. He also proposed that atheist lecturers should listen to one another’s presentations in order to provide criticism and suggest potential questions from the audience. Such practice was important because even philosophers, doctors, and biologists “are stumped” (*staiut v tupik*) when confronted by ‘sectarians,’ among whom there are many “Biblical experts” (*znatokov Biblii*).

Vinogradov also insisted that atheists must “put their own homes in order.” They must get rid of the icons in their homes, a “not uncommon” occurrence, and denounce those who participate in religious rituals. He pointed to the stereotypes that party members sometimes resorted to in order to avoid responsibility for the noted behaviors, describing a young worker and Komsomol member who blamed the icon in his home on his wife. His wife, the young worker lamented, was a believer, and he was unable to “reeducate” her. Yet when Vinogradov approached the wife, pointing out to her that it was unseemly for a young woman to have an icon in her home, she answered, “I told that fool forty times to take it down.” Instead of such “domestic atheists” the movement was in desperate need of “militant atheists.”⁴⁶²

Above all, Vinogradov urged atheists to increase individual work with believers, insisting that the successes of religion could be attributed directly to the individualized approach. Vinogradov described a village (*mestechko*) where, in 1958, there were several hundred baptisms, one hundred of which were people between the ages of 16 and 20. For Vinogradov the cited statistic, and especially the high number of adult baptisms, was evidence that individual work was being conducted by religious institutions.

It is no secret that sectarians visit people in their homes, speak with them. Does the party secretary visit people’s homes? What about the chairman of the regional division [of the “Knowledge” Society]? I know of an incident where the executive committee (*ispolkom*) refused to repair a roof, and the sectarians took care of it, meaning, they win over people’s hearts. Sectarians employ all means and approach each person individually. [...] It seems to me that the strongest effect can be achieved by way of individual conversations [...] in order to sow at least a grain of doubt.⁴⁶³

In order to produce results, Vinogradov suggested that the work of an atheist should not be confined simply to religious questions. He noted that over the course of the 178 lectures he read in 1958 he met many people whom he continues to visit: “They write to me—you read a lecture to us about morality, but our chairman curses at us every day (*matom rugaet*). Another writes that there is no day care, and she needs help placing her child. A lecturer in the village must go to the district committee [and] the executive committee (*raispolkom*) about such issues.”⁴⁶⁴ In

encounter believers, regardless of the time or place, and condemned the “aristocrat-lecturer” who was not satisfied by the half hour that a factory might allot him for atheist work.

⁴⁶² GARF, f. A-561, op. 1, d. 281, l. 61.

⁴⁶³ Ibid., 59-60.

⁴⁶⁴ Ibid., 62.

effect, then, Vinogradov proposed that atheist work should embrace the care of individual lives more broadly, drawing a parallel between the work of an atheist and the pastoral care of a priest.

Between Religion and Atheism: The Problem with Soviet *Byt*

The experiences of Soviet atheists on the ground over the course of the antireligious campaign made clear that in order to compete with religion in the Soviet Union, atheism would have to revise both its theoretical foundations and its approaches. As a Komsomol report analyzing audience questions on atheism and Islam observed, “Above all, believers are interested in life issues (*zhiznennye problemy*): do ghosts exist, is there life after death, how did the custom of wearing the veil (*parandzha*) originate, why do Muslims not eat pork, and so forth. For this reason, antireligious propaganda should be conducted along examples that are close to believers’ lives. [We must] not leave even one [religious] conclusion without our attention.”⁴⁶⁵ The Komsomol report stressed that atheists had to devote more care and attention to people, “so that human understanding and responsiveness (*chutkost*) does not become the weapon of the church.”⁴⁶⁶ Yet while observations of the forms and methods used by religious organizations pointed atheists to crucial new questions that they would have to address, they did not have a clear sense of *how* atheist work could address such issues in practice. Despite the new interest in “life issues” and “human concerns”—an interest that extended beyond the realm of atheist education—the Soviet elite had little experience in such work. The new awareness of atheists of their inexperience in this realm precipitated new discussions: on morality, everyday life (*byt*), and the way that religion and atheism competed to address them in their battle for Soviet spiritual life.

One of the primary forums for exchanges between atheist cadres and the Soviet public was the “Knowledge ” Society’s journal *Science and Religion* (*Nauka i religiia*). Not long after finally beginning publication in September 1959, the journal began to publish materials on morality, everyday life (*byt*), and existential concerns (such as the meaning of life, death, and happiness) alongside more traditional atheist articles on scientific achievements and the history of religion. These new concerns were typically addressed in leading editorials, responses to readers questions, and organized forums that published reader’s letters on a chosen topic.⁴⁶⁷

Keeping in mind the regime’s interest in the cultivation and inculcation of “communist morality,” as well as the fact that morality was increasingly becoming the focal point in the regime’s antireligious campaign, the country’s leading popular atheist publication naturally had to take up the subject. On the whole, the journal’s treatment of morality had two primary objectives: first, atheists sought to take back the everyday sphere (*byt*) from religion; and second, they attempted to break the connection between atheism and immorality. The editors’ concern with the question of morality and everyday life was inspired by a letter that the journal received from Ivan Ivanovich Kochennikov, an “ordinary laborer” from the Belgorod region. Kochennikov’s dilemma was that he and his wife had diverging attitudes towards religion—he was an unbeliever, while his wife continued to believe despite his best efforts to educate and

⁴⁶⁵ RGASPI-m, f. 1, op. 32, d. 959, l. 22.

⁴⁶⁶ Ibid., 31.

⁴⁶⁷ “Peredovaia—Moral’ i byt,” *Nauka i religiia*, no. 8 (1960): 4-10.

convince he. This divergence, Kochennikov lamented, threatened the integrity of the family. It seemed that after several decades of conflict, and now that their three daughters had grown into adulthood, his wife was fed up. She wanted to hang up the icons he had taken down years ago in one of his educational efforts, and even hinted at divorce. Kochennikov wondered what to do, and the editors, while urging him to keep the family together, tried to make sense of his domestic crisis for the broader readership.

At the heart of the crisis, the editors placed the hold religion still had on everyday life.

Above all, let us say directly: yes, a person's private life, their *byt*, is the biggest sphere into which religious prejudices try to sink their grasp, and to which the modern church tries to lay claim. It is not at all accidental that the Orthodox Church, conservative in its principles, in our days especially underscores the necessity of holding on to the ritual side of the cult. It obligates priests to festively arrange each holiday, each baptism, each funeral requiem service. More than that, the clergy (*sluzhiteli kul'ta*) stoke the fires of philistine, petit-bourgeois attitudes in various ways, [and] consciously defend and cultivate the idea that *byt*, just like religion, is a decidedly individual and private affair of each citizen.⁴⁶⁸

The editorial argued that while the construction of communism fundamentally changed the material conditions of life, and would likewise transform *byt*, religion, “not wanting to understand, or consciously closing its eyes” to this fact sought to preserve “old principles that are observed by custom.” The Orthodox Church “clung” to religious rituals and understandings that “are closely interconnected with customs and are regarded as an inseparable detail of *byt*.” These included, above all, keeping icons in the home, observing religious holidays, and participating in life-cycle rites.

Alongside cultivating customs and traditions, the editorial put forth that religion relied on the idea that there was an inherent connection between religion and morality, especially in family life. Since family life remained outside of the realm of social life—religious authorities were said to reason—it was especially amenable to religious influence. Many believers, the editors noted, believe that religion has a positive influence on family relations, and religious officials cultivate such notions by suggesting that a family's problems are often the result of the absence of religious belief, since individual conscience was upheld by the belief in God. Conversely, the editors noted, religion tried to put forth that there was a link between atheism and immorality, that “deformed *byt*, amoral and antisocial acts, are the spawn (*porozhdenie*) of atheism.”⁴⁶⁹ Interestingly, rather than disputing such formulations by arguing for a connection between atheism and morality, the authors focused instead on breaking the initial link between morality and religion. They noted, first of all, the prevalence of immoral acts in countries with vibrant religious communities, such as the United States. Indeed, America was singled out for the world's highest crime rates, especially among youth who, “read their fill of comics that advertise the adventures of professional criminals, watch their fill of television programs and films, refuse to obey their parents, become murderers and rapists, and commit crimes against those closest to them—their relatives.” Second, the editors pointed to the immorality of religious figures—who

⁴⁶⁸ Ibid., 4-5.

⁴⁶⁹ Ibid., 8.

were cited for taking bribes and keeping lovers—and noted that “amorality and corruption in everyday life [are the] most common of phenomena in the lives of a considerable part of the clergy.” Finally, the editorial put forth that religious morality lacked accountability, since even the worst criminals could ultimately repent their sins and be saved in the eyes of God.⁴⁷⁰

In opposition to such examples of compromised religious morality, the editors presented the readers with one major example of upstanding Soviet morality: Valentina Gaganova, Hero of Socialist Labor. Gaganova moral heroism consisted of the fact that she had transferred from her leading labor brigade to one that lagged behind in productivity in order to help the lagging brigade pull ahead. With this decision, the editors noted, Gaganova agreed to lose pay and “consciously worsen[ed] the conditions of her life and her byt,” sacrificing her own comfort for the sake of society. Such an act of “communist morality” showed that Gaganova’s personal happiness depended on the happiness of the collective and on being beneficial to society as a whole. Gaganova “understood her personal happiness not as the philistine immersion into the swamp of petty interests, which do not exit beyond the four walls of the home, but as the battle for the interests of society as a whole.”⁴⁷¹ *Science and Religion*’s condemnations of “philistine” and “petit-bourgeois” morality were more than familiar to a Soviet readership raised on decades of propaganda that emphasized salvation through labor and the sacrificing of individual interests for the collective. Yet while the Soviet press continued to rely on comfortable and safe ideological types, reproducing the heroic lives of Gaganovas across the Soviet Union, such examples seemed to be ever less satisfying not only to readers, but also to atheists themselves. On the whole, while the Soviet press put forth stereotyped models of communist morality, *Science and Religion* also sought to open up conversation by urging readers to submit their views.

Science and Religion’s evasiveness about the positive content of Soviet atheism was emblematic of the dilemma faced by the atheist community as a whole. During the antireligious campaign, they consciously sought to open up discussion about the meaning of atheism and its place in Soviet society, as well as the tactics used to disseminate atheism among the population. Numerous atheists suggested that atheism would benefit from learning about the theories and methods used, to great effect, by religion. Yet while there seemed to be a unanimous acknowledgement of the need to reform approaches as the campaign went on, there was considerable discomfort about some of the implications of the findings of new research. Such ambivalence was especially noticeable behind closed doors, when, in their effort to address shortcomings, leading Soviet ideologists faced uncomfortable conclusions.

One revealing episode is a discussion about the nature of *byt* that took place at the Department of Historical and Dialectical Materialism of the Academy of Social Sciences in April 1959.⁴⁷² Prominent official philosophers, V. N. Kolbanovskii and G. E. Glezerman among them, had gathered to discuss the report of an advanced AON graduate student, V. G. Sinitsyn. Titled “On the essence and particularities of *byt* as a social phenomenon,” Sinitsyn’s thesis put forth that social and individual life could be divided into three distinct categories—labor, social activities, and *byt*—and focused on the importance of *byt* in light of the many transformations in material life under way during the Khrushchev era. What made Sinitsyn’s thesis innovative was

⁴⁷⁰ Ibid., 9.

⁴⁷¹ Ibid., 9.

⁴⁷² RGASPI, f. 606, op. 1, d. 472, ll. 1-22.

his suggestion that the sphere of *byt* was qualitatively different than other spheres of Soviet life, perhaps even subject to different laws of development. Such a conclusion implicitly questioned the traditional Marxist-Leninist formula whereby *byt* was seen as inherently conservative and resistant to change, but would eventually be transformed according to the same Marxist laws that governed other spheres of socialist society.

The committee of professors generally complimented AON graduate students on their move away from traditional and dogmatic topics towards subjects more intimately connected with the numerous transformations taking place at the time. They also emphasized how little work had been done on Soviet *byt*, and how much such studies were needed. Yet most found the implications of Sinitsyn's work problematic. In particular, the committee was troubled by Sinitsyn's study of *byt* on its own terms, without the traditional criticism reserved for this sphere in ideological pronouncements. N. Kolbanovskii, for instance, revealed a genuine discomfort with Sinitsyn's departure from comfortable ideological positions. He agreed that yes, even under socialism, some people ate to live, while others lived to eat, but criticized Sinitsyn for underemphasizing the "famous conservatism of our *byt*, the fact that our everyday conditions, customs, which formed among the people over the course of centuries and millennia, possess an immense power of inertia, an enormous sluggishness (*kosnost'*), and that it is now necessary to break them and that this task is not at all simple."⁴⁷³

Kolbanovskii especially pointed to the divergent pace of development in Soviet rural life, noting that while material conditions on collective farms had improved tremendously in the last few years, creating the possibility of modernizing rural life—by, for example, getting collective farmers to abandon their private plots of farm land (*priusadebnyi uchastok*)—in reality the inertia of centuries-old traditions made the cultural transformation project "not so simple." Nevertheless, Kolbanovskii presented an optimistic front. He stressed the transformations in rural life that had already been achieved, noting that, "before peasants did not use beds or bed linens, slept in the same clothing that they used for work; now they have beds and bed linens, and other elements of culture, which, together with radio and electricity, are entering into their cultured *byt*."⁴⁷⁴ Yet this process moved far more slowly than the transformation of agricultural production and therefore demanded "active effort on our part." Moreover, cultural modernization efforts meant that traditions were not only to be destroyed, but replaced with new ones befitting contemporary Soviet conditions. "We can refuse the church wedding ritual," Kolbanovskii observed, "but we can replace it with a progressive wedding that leaves an impression. [...] We can also organize other holidays that would be brought into our *byt*, and not artificially implanted (*nasazhdalis'*) by administrative means, but would be [the result of] decisions made in social organizations, so that we can improve various sides of our *byt*." Sinitsyn's thesis, Kolbanovskii concluded, would have benefitted from a more concrete and optimistic approach to the "revolutionary reorganization of our *byt*."⁴⁷⁵ Another respondent, Makarov, agreed with Kolbanovskii's assessment, adding that it was indeed *byt* that was responsible for the lag between Soviet social reality and consciousness, since "A person's way of thinking is [the

⁴⁷³ RGASPI, f. 606, op. 1, d. 472, l. 53.

⁴⁷⁴ Ibid.

⁴⁷⁵ Ibid., 54.

product of] a person's way of life."⁴⁷⁶ From this perspective, Makarov found it problematic that, in Sinitsyn's formulation of *byt*, "it is unclear how our *byt* differs from *byt* under capitalism."⁴⁷⁷

The criticism continued to escalate. G. E. Glezerman was troubled by Sinitsyn's separation of labor into a distinct sphere, since labor, he insisted, belonged in every sphere of Soviet life. "Is there even such a sphere within social life," Glezerman asked, "where there is no place for labor?" Sinitsyn's distinction, on the other hand, had delineated *byt* as a sphere "where labor does not enter"—indeed, as a sphere primarily characterized by consumption. For Glezerman, the notion that there existed a sphere where a Soviet person was primarily a consumer, and that, for the individual, this sphere was on equal footing with labor, was ideologically intolerable. "It seems to me," Glezerman proclaimed, "that comrade Sinitsyn exaggerates the role of *byt*. [...] it turns out that *byt* is more valuable than everything else. If one approaches [the topic] in this way, then it turns out that man becomes a consumer, it turns out that the most important place in man's life is occupied by *byt*."⁴⁷⁸ Glezerman clarified that the purpose of shortening the working day and of increasing and improving public amenities and consumer services (*bytovo obsluzhivanie*) was not to create space for *byt*, but to make time for the development of "spiritual creativity" (*dukhovnoe tvorchestvo*). For Glezerman, the distinction between *byt* and culture was a crucial one, and it was incorrect to "herd" all of culture into the sphere of *byt*. As he argued, "development is not moving in the direction of *byt* taking up more and more time in a person's life, but, on the contrary [...] in the direction where a person will have more and more time for creativity in spiritual life." Making an analogy with the theater, Glezerman insisted that the cultivation of "spiritual creativity" should collapse the boundary between production and consumption.⁴⁷⁹

On the whole, then, Sinitsyn's thesis suggested that, even for Soviet people, *byt* existed as an autonomous sphere—related to social, economic, and political life, yet ultimately apart from them. For the established official ideologists in the audience, this proposal was disturbing because, in effect, Sinitsyn seemed to have re-immersed the new Soviet person in the "swamp of petty interests" and confined the socialist personality back in "the four walls of the home." Against the ambivalent portrait of contemporary Soviet life, Sinitsyn's audience wanted to be reassured that socialist reality could, and would, ultimately triumph over the "sluggishness" of *byt*.

The discomfort of some leading Soviet philosophers with the possibility that, even for socialist citizens, *byt*, in Glezerman's words, occupied the most important place in man's life, was connected to a broader concern that united Soviet philosophers and Soviet atheists: the definition of a Soviet meaning of life. As always, official pronouncements painted a bright future to be attained by following the road of Marxism-Leninism, and described the 'new Soviet man'—a creature more intelligent, physically fit, industrious, creative, and humane than his non-Soviet counterparts. As Iurii Frantsev and Iurii Filonovich proclaimed in an *Izvestiia* editorial, "We have in our hands a truly miraculous method of transformation, our 'philosopher's stone'—the philosophy of Marxism-Leninism."⁴⁸⁰ Yet increasingly, numerous atheists noted that while religion provided a coherent vision of life's meaning to believers, atheism, and Marxism-

⁴⁷⁶ Ibid., 56.

⁴⁷⁷ Ibid.

⁴⁷⁸ Ibid., 60-1.

⁴⁷⁹ Ibid., 61.

⁴⁸⁰ Iu. Frantsev and Iu. Filonovich, "Filosofskii kamen'," *Izvestiia*, September 19, 1965, 5. Quoted in Powell, 2.

Leninism more broadly, with its emphasis on labor and individual sacrifice, did not seem to fill this crucial spiritual space. With the antireligious campaign under way, atheists began to devote ever more attention to formulating an answer to life's central question.

Considering the nature of the enterprise, it should come as no surprise that Soviet ideologists did not produce clear answers. Yet what makes this period fascinating is their conviction not only that it was the party-state's role to provide the Soviet public with an answer to the meaning of life, but also that they could arrive at the answer within the various organizations charged with formulating Soviet ideology. In particular, this peculiar project was assigned to Soviet philosophers who valiantly struggled to formulate an answer, and ultimately, it seems, believed that the answer was within their reach. For atheists in particular, this project was of the utmost importance, since the results of the antireligious campaign made them aware that the weakness of Soviet atheist education was concentrated precisely in its failure to address "life questions"—from the most banal everyday concerns, to the most serious existential dilemma, including the final question about life's purpose.

One of the figures who tackled the subject first was Grigorii Abramovich Gurev, an "old atheist" philosopher whose career began before the revolution. A respected figure in the atheist community, Gurev, who published prolifically over the course of the entire Soviet period, could take a long view on atheism and draw comparisons not only with the early Soviet period but with prerevolutionary life. His manuscript, titled "What is the meaning of life?" (*V chem smysl zhizni*), provoked a lively discussion among RSFSR "Knowledge" Society atheists.⁴⁸¹ Gurev's text approached the meaning of life both from the perspective of society and the individual, addressing topics like the role of egoism and altruism in social life, as well as concepts like "happiness" and "death." Yet Gurev's text focused, in large part, on the obstacles *individuals* encountered in making sense of life's journey, and a number of Gurev's atheist colleagues found his emphasis on the individual problematic. One reviewer, N. I. Riazantsev, wondered whether it would not be better to "tie the question of the meaning of life with the actualization of human life [in the] development from that which is lower to that which is higher"—that is, to explicitly connect individual happiness to the achievement of the "communist ideal." "You speak about private happiness," Riazantsev observed, "but need to speak about communist happiness, about the communist ideal."⁴⁸² The committee agreed that Gurev's text was insufficiently political and that he had underemphasized the social component of the meaning of life. As the chairman summed up, Gurev had failed to communicate to the reader that "the goal of our life is, as a matter of fact, the victory of Communism." Yet even the chairman seemed to understand that there was something problematic in such a formulation, and he qualified his criticism by stating that "It is not necessary to give this in such a rough form (*gruboi forme*), not to put the issue directly (*ne priamo v lob stavit' vopros*), but to do it in such a way so that the reader, having read the brochure, says: indeed, the meaning of life consists of achieving such and such."⁴⁸³

Gurev largely accepted the criticism of his colleagues, but did put forth that in focusing on individual concerns, his manuscript hoped to address certain problematic areas. He also

⁴⁸¹ Grigorii Abramovich Gurev, *Darvinizm i ateizm: populiarnye ocherki* (Moscow: GIZ, 1930); *Nauka o Vselennoi i religii: kosmologicheskie ocherki* (Moscow: OGIZ, 1934); *Ateizm Charlza Darvina* (Leningrad: AN SSSR, 1941); *Edinstvo vselennoi: nauchno-populiarnyi ocherk* (1946); *Uchenie Kopernika i religii: iz istorii bor'by za nauchnuiu istinu v astronomii* (Moscow: Akademiia Nauk, 1961); and S.F. Anisimov and G.A. Gurev, *Problema smysla zhizni v religii i ateizme*, (Moscow: Znanie, 1981).

⁴⁸² GARF, f. A-561, op. 1, d. 398, l. 11.

⁴⁸³ *Ibid.*, 27.

suggested that “in some conversations accenting political moments is not always well-received.”⁴⁸⁴ In part, Gurev suggested that the problem was that “the highest and deepest meaning of life” was not always sufficiently emphasized, especially among the youth. Soviet schools, for instance, did not provide students with sufficient philosophical direction, which was problematic since it was the youth who needed such direction most of all.⁴⁸⁵ Questions about the meaning of life, Gurev noted, had always especially concerned youth—both in other times, and in other places. He recalled that in his own student years in pre-revolutionary Russia, such topics were often addressed by priests, and recounted one priests’ discussion of suicides among youth who had found themselves in a spiritual crisis. In socialist conditions spiritual concerns continued to be relevant, Gurev insisted. He reminded his audience about an organized dispute about the meaning of life that took place between Christian youth from England and Soviet Marxists at the Moscow Youth Festival.⁴⁸⁶ Each side had argued that their perspective on life’s meaning was more humane and provided people with better prospects. Since these questions would continue to be raised, Gurev insisted that it was crucial to give the “correct resolution” of a Marxist critique of the Christian meaning of life. Finally, Gurev touched on two points that Soviet atheists were beginning to recognize as particularly sensitive: death and the future. “I am often asked what will be the meaning of life after Communism is constructed,” Gurev shared. In response, Gurev suggested that atheists re-assure their audience that “communist society will be infinite, eternal.”⁴⁸⁷ As for the fear of death, which, Gurev observed, was of vital importance in people’s lives, he suggested that the best way to approach the topic was by diffusing the fear at its foundation: “I reasoned about what happens to a person when he thinks about death. He is afraid to imagine his own corpse, and so forth. But there is nothing to fear, because when he is alive, fear exists, but when he is no more, then death does not exist either.”⁴⁸⁸

The Scientific-Materialist Worldview: From Rational to Spiritual

The failure of the antireligious campaign to achieve its goals called for a re-evaluation of atheist assumptions and approaches, and one of the most visible results was an expansion in lines of communication—not only within the atheist community, but also between atheists and ordinary Soviet people (both believers and unbelievers), and between professional atheists and high-ranking regime officials with the power to influence policy and the future direction of Soviet ideological work. A revealing event in the new direction of Soviet atheism is the conference on the “Formation and development of the spiritual life of communist society,” hosted by the Institute of Philosophy of the Academy of Sciences on May 9, 1963.⁴⁸⁹ Convened in order to discuss philosophical articles to be published in the fourth volume of the five-volume *Socialism and Communism*, the conference was intended to analyze the transformation of Soviet spiritual life in the transition to communism. In particular, the focus was on the forces that impeded the spiritual development of Soviet society, with an emphasis on such issues as the role

⁴⁸⁴ Ibid., 30.

⁴⁸⁵ Ibid., 16.

⁴⁸⁶ Ibid., 16, 21.

⁴⁸⁷ Ibid., 29.

⁴⁸⁸ Ibid., 30-31.

⁴⁸⁹ GARF, f. 9547, op. 1, d. 1314.

of social psychology and public opinion in religious belief, the inculcation of the Soviet worldview, and the concrete measures to be taken in developing the new communist personality.

The realization that appeals to reason and science did not make believers into atheists in turn undermined many of the assumptions about the nature of religion and the reasons for its continued survival under socialism that had thus far guided policy—most prominently, theories about the different rates of development of the base and superstructure, the inherently conservative nature of *byt*, and the belief that “survivals” were primarily located in specific retrograde groups.⁴⁹⁰ As Professor V. N. Kolbanovskii, a prominent academic working in the field, solemnly reported at the Academy of Social Sciences:

A certain theory has gained currency among us that the carriers of survivals are specific groups of people, for the most part retrograde people, who have not managed to shed religious survivals, who are infected with tendencies towards private property, and so forth. If everything were in fact so simple, we would have managed to liquidate survivals of capitalism in people’s consciousness long ago. In reality, the situation is quite different. These survivals exist and have spread among a large segment of the population, and we do not concern ourselves with how to overcome them. Why? Because they can be observed among people who present themselves as truly progressive and very valuable. We have a significant number of people who have a communist attitude towards labor, but who, in part have not yet liberated themselves from religious survivals, which does not get in the way of their being honest laborers [...]. We have not a few good, honest workers [...] who, for example, in their family life exhibit the former bourgeois morality, and exhibit the most repulsive traits of despotism in relationship to their wife and children [...]. These traits exist not only among the most retrograde people, but in people whom we often consider progressive and cultured, and we do not talk about this with all directness, the way that it deserves in order to crush this evil and change this situation.⁴⁹¹

Kolbanovskii noted that discussion of these issues had been bound, for thirty years, by a “conspiracy of silence,” a silence that he and others attributed to the pressures of Stalin’s “cult of personality.”⁴⁹²

Since former explanations for “survivals” were found wanting, some insisted on a total approach: “The primary object of ideological work must be Man—the world of his thoughts and emotions, the cultivation in him of all the best thoughts and emotions [...] we must keep each human being in our field of vision, to see and know how he actually is not only in production, but in social spaces, in his family, in everyday life.”⁴⁹³ What prevented success, then, was precisely the lack of any real knowledge about the emotional sphere and family world of Soviet people.

The neglect of the private sphere, the family, and everyday life in ideological work became all the more grievous as the material conditions of the country improved, and citizens

⁴⁹⁰ RGASPI, f. 606, op. 1, d. 458, ll. 50-51.

⁴⁹¹ GARF, f. 9547, op. 1, d. 1314, l. 136.

⁴⁹² Ibid.

⁴⁹³ Ibid., 209-210.

had increasingly more leisure time that put them outside the ‘field of vision’ of Soviet ideologists. To illustrate the critical importance of developing aesthetic sensibilities and structuring leisure time, the artist B. M. Nemenskii recounted a conversation he once had during an enlightenment mission to the countryside. As the local director of the village school put it,

Come visit our homes, take a look at how our technological intelligentsia spends its leisure time, which our government is presently trying to increase as much as possible. They play dominoes. And we must make it so that this [leisure] time is used for the spiritual development of our people, and in order to do this, we must develop spiritual processes and uncover what is getting in the way of this development, and you, philosophers, must play the main part.⁴⁹⁴

Along with unstructured leisure time, another area was singled out as particularly dangerous: religious traditions and rituals, which were seen as an inherently conservative force that hindered progress. While the effort to remake the family’s traditions and rituals was an opportunity to reinvigorate the scientific-atheist worldview by means more sophisticated than those of the first Bolsheviks, many were still at a loss for how to treat the “spiritual world of Soviet Man” with any degree of specificity. Indeed, the failure of most authors to address these issues underscored a more serious problem in atheist development: the lack of concreteness in the programmatic visions of the future.⁴⁹⁵ While the conference revealed the obstacles that had to be overcome in order to make the transition to communism, the ultimate goal remained barely defined. As one speaker eloquently put it: “. . .it has been correctly noted that, whereas formerly we were in the period where we spoke about what *will not be* under Communism, now the time has come to discuss what *will be* under Communism.”⁴⁹⁶

Debates about “communist development,” the scientific-materialist worldview, and atheist education reached their pinnacle at a Plenum of the Central Committee in June of 1963. Headed by Leonid Fedorovich Il’ichev, Central Committee Secretary and head of the Party’s Ideological Commission, the June Plenum was a landmark in the history of the Party. The first Plenum convened to focus entirely on ideological questions, the June Plenum underscored the significance of ideology in the present stage of socialist development—when the Soviet Union, a country that began by “lag[ing] behind in every respect,” had climbed to “the heights of socio-economic progress.”⁴⁹⁷ Il’ichev asserted that the war between the two dominant world systems had become concentrated in the sphere of ideas. The “imperialists,” Il’ichev warned, would play on human weakness, which chiefly manifests in “survivals,” and counted on an “ideological erosion” of socialist society. Indeed, “the outright gangsterism of imperialist ideologists,” he stressed, is focused precisely on the Communists’ supposed inability to transform human nature and produce the new communist personality.⁴⁹⁸ The significance was clear: the modern world had become the arena of a “fierce battle of two opposite ways of life.” In order to fortify Soviet citizens against the “virus” of capitalism, the Party saw “the education of the new person as its

⁴⁹⁴ Ibid., 344-345.

⁴⁹⁵ Ibid., 279-281.

⁴⁹⁶ Ibid., 308. Italics mine.

⁴⁹⁷ See *Plenum Tsentral’nogo Komiteta Kommunisticheskoi Partii Sovetskogo Soiuza, 18-21 June 1963: Stenograficheskii otchet* (Moscow: Izdatel’stvo Politicheskoi Literatury, 1964), 6-8.

⁴⁹⁸ Ibid., 17.

most difficult task in the conversion to communism (*kommunisticheskoe preobrazovanie*).⁴⁹⁹ But, despite its open call to arms, the June Plenum did not address the grievances of the philosophers, and few concrete measures about how to fight the war of worldviews were proposed.

Following the June Plenum, discussions on atheist development and Soviet ideology continued behind closed doors at the Ideological Department of the Central Committee. The focus remained on the reasons for the existence of “survivals,” except that, armed with newly gathered ethnographic and sociological data, the debates began to approach a certain degree of concreteness. How did ideologists understand the information that was gathered on the population’s religiosity, and how did they propose to use it? At Ideological Department meetings convened in October and November of 1963 for the purpose of discussing “the means for implementing the decisions regarding atheist development of the June Plenum,” Il’ichev put forth external and internal reasons for the persistence of religion.

To begin with, secularization had called forth modernizing efforts from the church, which manifested in attempts to co-exist with both science and politics. From the ideological point of view, a modernized religion was significantly more dangerous because it co-opted and “clericalized” the ideals of Communism. In the Soviet Union, where the Church could no longer be attacked as a politically reactionary force, many believers saw no contradiction between their loyalty to religion and to the Soviet state and its ideology. Indeed, many of those surveyed stated that they considered Communism to be the manifestation of the ideals of Christianity. Most importantly, once religion lost authority over the mysteries of the natural world to science, it had concentrated on monopolizing the “spiritual-moral” sphere. The primary battle with religious ideology had moved into the realm of ‘worldviews,’ a concept that began to gain currency in Soviet ideological discourse at this time, and which Il’ichev defined as,

A rather broad complex of diverse ideas and impressions about the surrounding world, on its essence, and on the relationship of man to this world. A worldview encompasses political, economic, philosophical, natural scientific, ethical, aesthetic, and other ideas. It may also include within itself religious ideas. If these ideas dominate over all of the others, then the worldview is religious, the inverse of the scientific worldview.⁵⁰⁰

For atheist education, this revealed the need to connect Marxist-Leninist theory to Soviet reality. Il’ichev criticized those atheist agitators who “turned the Marxist postulate about the social roots of religion and the reasons for [religious] survivals into a dead dogma.” It was precisely contact with reality that was lacking in research and propaganda work, a situation dangerous because “[r]eligion is a parasite on the unsettled questions of our [communist] construction, on various difficulties in our movement forward, on disorders in people’s personal lives, and on much else.”⁵⁰¹ The results of sociological and ethnographic research confirmed Il’ichev’s position by revealing that the persistence of religion was intimately connected to the blind spots of scientific atheism itself—to the answers it did not have, and the needs it did not fulfill.

⁴⁹⁹ Ibid., 20-25.

⁵⁰⁰ RGANI, f. 72, op. 1, d. 9, l. 29.

⁵⁰¹ Ibid., 35-36.

“A parasite on the unsettled questions of communist construction”

What were the “blind spots” and “unanswered questions” in Marxist-Leninist ideology responsible for the survival of religiosity in the Soviet population? Above all, the persistence of religion was perceived to be a result of the philosophical, psychological, aesthetic, and emotional elements of religious belief, for which Marxism-Leninism and scientific atheism did not provide sufficient substitutes. Il'ichev argued that religion persisted because it provided answers to important existential questions:

In their sermons and writings, our ideological enemies from the religious camp are more and more active in expressing their opinions on the most important human problems: on the meaning of life, on joy and suffering, on conscience and other moral principles, on man's responsibility to, freedom from, and dependence on society.

In short, religion speculates on those problems that worry the mind and heart of Man, and thrust their own interpretations on both believers and unbelievers.

We often limit ourselves to the negative estimate of religion, and don't often offer believers our own positive solution to life's problems.⁵⁰²

The “war over the minds of all mankind” could only be definitively won if communists did not isolate themselves from the philosophical questions that their “ideological enemies” were not afraid of discussing. “The main thing,” Il'ichev concluded, was that communists “do not leave church figures and sectarians any loophole to people’s souls.”⁵⁰³ In short, it was imperative that atheists fill the void left by “negative” anti-religious propaganda with their own Soviet worldview.

Furthermore, research showed that people’s attachment to religion was often based on the aesthetic and emotional components of religious experience. In particular, findings underscored the importance of the “pastoral” quality of religion, its ability to console and alleviate pain and grief in difficult times. In this respect in particular, atheist education and institutions clearly fell short. The full significance of this oversight was addressed by Sergey Pavlov, Secretary of the Communist Youth Organization [Komsomol], who emphasized that “spiritual traumas” bring people to religion and are manipulated by the church. Especially noteworthy is that Pavlov laid the blame for this on Communist organizations themselves.

Why does this happen? Because, behind our various undertakings, [...] we overlook the human being, such as he is, with all his big internal difficulties.

The most difficult art is the art of working with people. Not everyone is blessed with this ability [...]. We need to keep in mind that the forms and traditions of religion have accumulated over centuries.

Some Komsomol organizations have already begun to do something about this, but what is lacking are knowledge, experience, and the plain ability to make

⁵⁰² Ibid., 42.

⁵⁰³ Ibid.

sense of the difficulties of human fate and to find the most correct solution. Let's take an example. It's difficult to imagine that a young person would come to our club in order to get some advice on matters of the heart. Even if he did come, [the director] would say: "Listen, maybe you should go to the infirmary, because it seems that you are not well." This kind of thing happens often. But the church is both the external and the internal [...] a person comes to church [...] because someone will sit with him, there will be a heart to heart [...] and good advice. And there won't be mockery or some trivial, commonplace truths. But let's even take the external. So, a church—believers go in and so do we [...] and whether you want to or not, you'll take your hat off anyway, because the circumstances somehow bring you to it. And then take our clubs...⁵⁰⁴

Pavlov's emphasis on the need for a "human approach" was echoed by the writer Vladimir Fedorovich Tendriakov when he spoke out against administrative methods and insisted that, without the human approach, "no propaganda will help."⁵⁰⁵ To stress the significance of religious emotions, Tendriakov described a Baptist meeting, whose main strength was the "creation of the illusion of humaneness." Attendees referred to one another as "brother" and "sister," creating an atmosphere of an intimate community, which he argued was, for many believers, more important than church dogmas. As one woman at the meeting told him, she really does not care whether god exists; she will continue to believe since "[b]ecause of [belief], [life] is much easier for me than for you."⁵⁰⁶ One of the few respected literary figures to publicly participate in the atheist project, Tendriakov nevertheless expressed reservations about the means by which the Soviet establishment pursued their aims: "We cannot forget that one does not cure the sick with a stick, and cannot forget that man's spiritual world cannot remain unfilled—if we do not fill it, it will be filled by those whose views are foreign to us. A sacred space never remains empty."⁵⁰⁷

Finally, preliminary research revealed that the persistence of religious practices was largely dependent on the tenacity of religious traditions. What kept people connected to religion was—if nothing else—the observance of rituals, of which life cycle rites were the most ubiquitous and durable. Echoing the warning of some early Soviet ideologists, Il'ichev put forth that "[r]eligiosity reveals itself, above all, in the sphere of everyday life (*byt*). Believers seek to accompany such events as the birth of a child, marriage, or the death of loved ones with religious rituals."⁵⁰⁸ Until scientific atheism provided Soviet rituals to mark these occasions, a significant portion of the population would continue to be tied to the church and religion, if not by conviction, then by tradition.

To underscore the grave state of affairs, Il'ichev shared some troubling statistics: while the anti-religious campaign effectively decreased the number of functioning Orthodox churches by 34 per cent between 1960 and 1962, the number of religious rituals conducted in the same

⁵⁰⁴ RGANI, f. 72, op. 1, d. 15, ll. 261-262.

⁵⁰⁵ Ibid., 290. Beginning in the mid-1950s, V. F. Tendriakov (1924-1983) authored a number of novels treating moral and ethical issues stemming from religious pressures within small communities, and especially the village and the family. The most famous of these, *Chudotvornaia* (1958), was held up as a model atheist text.

⁵⁰⁶ Ibid., 288.

⁵⁰⁷ Ibid., 291. V. F. Tendriakov grew increasingly disillusioned with the atheist project and later became an apostate of the atheist cause.

⁵⁰⁸ RGANI, f. 72, op. 1, d. 9, l. 29.

years “decreased insignificantly.”⁵⁰⁹ Indeed, in Ukraine, 40 per cent of children born were christened; in many regions of the RSFSR, 30-40 per cent; and in Moldova as many as 47 per cent. In certain regions of the USSR, the number of rituals had even increased: Riazan', Iaroslavl', Novgorod, Belgorod, and Minsk. In the Western borderland, religiosity and ritual observance remained very high—in Lithuania 68 per cent of births, 50 per cent of marriages, and 70 per cent of funerals were accompanied by religious rituals. Finally, in Central Asia, even intelligentsia and Party members were said to participate in religious rituals. To be sure, the fact of Communists and Komsomol members participating in religious rituals, despite the obvious social and political disincentives, was often cited as cause for serious alarm.

What this meant, Il'ichev concluded, was that the traditional formulas of Marxism, though “correct” and “unshakable,” were no longer sufficient; in the new era of socialist development, it was necessary to proceed to “concrete, real reality.” In what became the refrain of discussions on atheist development in the early 1960s, Il'ichev warned that, “if we only destroy an idea and do not put our Soviet idea, our Soviet way of thinking, our Soviet behavior, in its place, we will accomplish nothing.”⁵¹⁰ This repeated warning, in effect, became the prelude to the expansion and intensification of the Soviet atheist education in 1964.

Conclusion

Measuring and evaluating the effectiveness of atheist work is certainly not an exact science—either for participants or for the researcher. Nevertheless, it does seem that despite some impressive statistical reports about the results of the antireligious campaign, Soviet atheists noted little progress in their efforts on the ground. Certainly, the regime's administrative and legal measures—such as closures of religious spaces, limitations on the activities of the clergy, and increased financial pressure—were difficult, often devastating, for both religious institutions and believers. Yet one cannot help but be struck by the fact that such “progress” in the antireligious campaign was of little help to atheists. Indeed, the internal statements and reports of atheist cadres reveal that, over the course of the campaign, they saw little progress in their own objectives on the ground, with many of the same evaluations and criticisms appearing at the beginning of the antireligious campaign (1958-1959) as at its height (1960-1962) and wane (1963-1964). While some regions enthusiastically described isolated successes, most reports pointed to the counter-productive effects of administrative tactics in winning the population to their cause, and provided evidence—especially in statistics of high ritual observance—of the fact that, in many ways, atheists continued to lose ground to religion.

With this in mind, it should perhaps be less surprising that Soviet atheists increasingly addressed points of weakness in their approach. As these calls became more pronounced over the course of the campaign, they began to turn to content, forms and methods that had formerly fallen outside the boundaries of atheist work, and in fact had traditionally been considered the domain of religion, such as spirituality and the various components of religious experience (aesthetic, emotional, ritual). While atheists certainly shied away from explicit calls to make atheism into a religion, their frequent references to the effective methods used by religion—whether these were to the training of priests in homiletics, or the individualized approach that

⁵⁰⁹ Ibid., 25.

⁵¹⁰ RGANI, f. 72, op. 1, d. 15.

religious figures exhibited in their everyday work in the community—imply that atheists were ever more aware of their own shortcomings and of religion’s power. Indeed, perhaps the most striking development in the atheist movement during the Khrushchev-era campaign is the emergence of a discussion about what some atheists began to refer to as “life’s questions”—that is, about morality, death, suffering, and the meaning of life.

Chapter Four

Soviet Atheists and the Journey from Religion to Atheism

In March 1957, Evgraf Duluman, a young man born and raised on a collective farm in the Odessa region of Ukraine, published an article testifying to his break with religion in the central youth newspaper *Komsomol'skaia Pravda*.⁵¹¹ The article described Duluman's difficult spiritual journey—a journey that began in 1945, the aftermath of the war, when the sixteen-year-old Duluman turned to religion, receiving a theological education in seminaries in Odessa and Moscow; continued as his religious convictions were slowly undermined by doubt towards the conclusion of his theological training; and then reached a climax as his skepticism brought him to a crisis of faith during his tenure as instructor at the Saratov Theological Seminary, ultimately bringing him to leave the Russian Orthodox Church in the early 1950s. Entitled “How I Became an Atheist,” the article—personally commissioned by Aleksei Adzhubei, the editor-in-chief of *Komsomol'skaia Pravda* and Khrushchev's son-in-law—offered Soviet readers a model path from religious darkness to rebirth into the light of the Soviet socialist collective.⁵¹²

In Duluman's recollections, his testimony about his break with religion in *Komsomol'skaia Pravda* received an enormous response—three to four hundred letters daily—from Soviet believers and unbelievers alike.⁵¹³ Repeatedly reproduced by the Soviet ideological establishment in public lectures, radio broadcasts, and in further publications by and about Duluman, Duluman's conversion narrative became a cautionary tale for religious organizations and soon led to his official excommunication from the Russian Orthodox Church.⁵¹⁴ But as a valuable asset for the antireligious campaign under way in the Khrushchev era, it also propelled this young man from the provinces into a long career as one of the Soviet Union's most vocal and vehement public atheists.⁵¹⁵ Indeed, Duluman's atheist work continues to this day—at

⁵¹¹ Evgraf Duluman, “Kak ia stal ateistom,” *Komsomol'skaia Pravda*, March 1957. Duluman provides a fuller account of his spiritual journey in a full-length book. See Evgraf Duluman, *Pochemu ia perestal verit' v boga: Rasskaz byvshego kandidata bogosloviia* (Moskva: Molodaia gvardiia, 1957).

⁵¹² Evgraf Kalen'evich Duluman, interview with author, Kyiv, Ukraine, 10 February 2009.

⁵¹³ Ibid.

⁵¹⁴ On Duluman's excommunication, see *Zhurnal Moskovskoi Patriarkhii*, 1960, no. 2, 27. Quoted in Tatiana A. Chumachenko, *Church and State in Soviet Russia: Russian Orthodoxy from World War II to the Khrushchev Years*, trans. and ed. Edward E. Roslof (Armonk, NY: M.E. Sharpe, 2002), 177.

⁵¹⁵ Duluman discussed filling stadiums during his lectures, as well as the outpouring of letters in response to his publications, during our interview, but his popularity as a lecturer is also confirmed by archival materials. For example, a report in the Ukrainian Central Communist Party archives, “On short-comings in scientific atheist propaganda and measures for its improvement” describes a lecture by Duluman and another former student at the Odessa Theological Seminary, A. V. Mokhortov, at the grand opening of the Stalino House of Atheism as having

academic institutions and conferences, numerous publications, and, above all, on the internet—outliving the Soviet regime that produced and then deployed it, by two decades. What made Evgraf Duluman’s atheist conversion so powerful and the career that it produced so enduring? And what can this tell us about the development, dynamics, and life-course of Soviet atheism in the postwar period?

The antireligious campaign of the late Khrushchev era determined the parameters and problems of religious policy and atheist work in the late Soviet period. But the campaign was, in many ways, more than the sum of its parts. One story about the antireligious campaign that has yet to be told is that this campaign was the crucible for the emergence of a new type of Soviet ideological worker—the atheist cadre. For many Soviet atheists active in the last decades of the Soviet Union, the antireligious campaign was both the origin and the formative experience of their professional careers, and their understanding of religion and atheism was shaped by the campaign’s successes and failures. What gave birth to this emerging cohort of atheist cadres was the regime’s acknowledgement that antireligious policies had largely failed to produce results, and their growing awareness of the need for a cohort of experts to reform prevailing approaches. While the implementation of antireligious policies had typically been conducted by local officials without a necessary connection to, or background in, religion, the regime’s new attention to the weak points in the administrative campaign against religion and the need to address these with “positive” measures increased the need for educated and trained atheist cadres. The absence of such experts prior to the campaign meant that, on the whole, both religion and atheism had been approached naively and unsystematically, with the expected implications for its results and directions.

For most of those who came to work in this sphere of ideological work, it provided unprecedented exposure both to lived religion in the Soviet Union, and to the (mostly administrative) methods that had customarily been used by Soviet officials to deal with it. It also presented cadres (who now found themselves in the profession of atheist propaganda) with unprecedented opportunities. Their experiences forced them to test many of the facile assumptions about religion that they had absorbed from general ideological pronouncements. Above all, the regime’s secularization project and mission to create an atheist society forced them to discuss the nature of Soviet religiosity, the meaning of Soviet atheism, and the methods for overcoming the former and achieving the latter.

This new (and growing) cohort of “experts” has generally been overlooked in studies of religion and atheism in the Soviet Union.⁵¹⁶ In part, this is because the numerous publications

been so successful that “the hall could not fit all of those who wanted to attend.” Tsentral’nyi Derzhavnii Arkhiv Gromads’kikh Ob’ednan’ Ukraini [henceforth TsDAGO], f. 1, op. 31, op. 31, d. 1470, l. 27. A lecture by Aleksandr Osipov, a Professor of Theology who also became a public atheist, at the Gorky House of Atheism attracted 1,500 people. Rossiiskii gosudarstvennyi arkhiv sotsial’no-politicheskoi istorii [henceforth RGASPI], f. 606, op. 4, d. 68, l. 87.

⁵¹⁶ One exception is John Anderson’s *Religion, State and Politics in the Soviet Union and Successor States* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1994). Anderson focuses on the state’s increasing reliance on expertise, in the sphere of religious policy as elsewhere. Yet while he notes the existence of internal debates within the Soviet ideological community, he largely characterizes these as “dissenting” voices with little influence on policy. On the other hand, he notes the radical change of course in the Gorbachev period in Soviet religious policy, leaving the question of causality largely unanswered. Presumably, for Anderson, the impetus for a change of course on religion and atheism came from external factors outside of the ideological community. This dissertation argues that this argument needs to be revised, and that the debates among Soviet cadres should be taken seriously.

they produced at the time made the necessary, expected—and, it seems, largely sincere—overtures to the party line on religious and atheist matters, therefore making it seductive (and easy) for most scholars of religion in the Soviet Union, especially Western scholars, to dismiss them. Scholars who focused on Soviet atheism (as opposed to church-state relations or antireligious policy), on the other hand, used such published atheist sources extensively.⁵¹⁷ Writing mostly in the 1970s and 1980s, when Soviet ideology was still a living reality and Soviet atheism a ‘live hypothesis,’ these studies often provide a valuable synthesis of the direction of Soviet atheist theory and developments within Soviet atheist policy. In fact, their analysis in many ways benefits from the fact that the outcome of the project still remained unknown. However, while the fact that these studies were written in the Soviet period makes it more difficult for the authors to be complacent in their conclusions, and indeed prompts them to engage more seriously with their subject, their work suffers from the obvious shortcoming of limited-to-no access to archives, and little access to the experiences of participants. Suffering from such limitations, their analysis of Soviet atheism cannot provide much insight into the dynamics of the campaign, does not reflect the spectrum of debate that existed beneath the surface, and cannot account for the intellectual developments or lived experiences of Soviet atheists.

There are some (qualified) exceptions. For instance, John Anderson, in his study of religious policy from the Khrushchev era to the post-Soviet period, certainly disputes the notion that the regime was monolithic in its approach to religion. He also underscores the disadvantages facing the state’s implementation of religious policy—notably the absence of both a strong public debate and a cadre of experienced bureaucratic experts for most of the Khrushchev and Brezhnev era. While, in his effort to trace the liberalization of Gorbachev-era policy to an earlier period, Anderson acknowledges the existence of debate beneath the surface of public pronouncements (citing evidence of ‘moderate’ approaches to the religious question even in the central party press), he ultimately errs on the side of caution. On the whole, Anderson characterizes dissonant opinions before the Gorbachev era as “unusual,” writing that “critical voices could only make themselves known behind the scenes.”⁵¹⁸ The other factor, then, compounding the problematic oversight of atheism in studies of religion in the Soviet Union is that almost no comprehensive study has looked “behind the scenes” at the institutions that produced Soviet atheist policy and cadres.⁵¹⁹

⁵¹⁷ Kimmo Kääriäinen, *Discussion on Scientific Atheism as a Soviet Science, 1960-1985* (Helsinki: Suomalainen Tiedeakatemia Akateeminen Kirjakauppa, 1989); William van den Bercken, *Ideology and Atheism in the Soviet Union* (New York: Mouton de Gruyter, 1989); David E. Powell, *Antireligious Propaganda in the Soviet Union: A Study of Mass Persuasion* (Cambridge, Mass.: The MIT Press, 1975); Christel Lane, *Christian Religion in the Soviet Union: A Sociological Study* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1978); Christel Lane, *The Rites of Rulers: Ritual in Industrial Society: The Soviet Case* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1981); James Thrower, *Marxist-Leninist "scientific atheism" and the Study of Religion and Atheism in the USSR* (New York: Mouton, 1983); Dimitrii Pospelovskii, *Soviet Studies on the Church and the Believer's Response to Atheism* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1988); Dimitrii Pospelovskii, *A History of Marxist-Leninist Atheism and Soviet Antireligious Policies* (New York: St Martin's Press, 1987).

⁵¹⁸ Anderson, *Religion, State and Politics in the Soviet Union and Successor States*, 74-78.

⁵¹⁹ Most studies have focused on the Council for the Affairs of the Russian Orthodox Church (CAROC) and the Council for the Affairs of Religious Cults (CARC), later untied into the Council for Religious Affairs (CRA), whose archives, along with the central Party archives, have been the primary source base for scholarship on religion and antireligious policy in the postwar Soviet Union. See Chumachenko, *Church and State in Soviet Russia*; Anderson, *Religion, State and Politics*; Nathaniel Davis, “The Number of Orthodox Churches before and after the Khrushchev

In analyzing the developments in Soviet atheism that began in the Khrushchev era, this chapter, and the dissertation more broadly, relies on sources—some published, but largely archival and interview—from institutions whose debates, for the most part, took place behind the scenes; whose materials (reports, transcripts, and limited publications) were mostly intended for internal consumption; and whose comments and arguments were addressed to a specific audience of other ideological “experts,” most of whom were actively engaged in atheist work.⁵²⁰ As we have seen, over the course of the Khrushchev antireligious campaign, the Soviet political elite realized the degree to which it was ill-equipped to meet its own goals. As a result, it became increasingly open to, and indeed dependent on, ‘expert’ opinion, pouring resources into the development of atheist education and the training of atheist cadres. Access to the voices of these experts reveals the formerly unseen world of Soviet atheism, shedding light on the problems Soviet atheists encountered in their mission and offering new insights into the dynamics of secularization more generally.

Why I Stopped Believing in God and How I Became an Atheist

Evgraf Duluman’s journey from religious belief to atheist conviction, and from work as an instructor of Theology in the Saratov Theological Seminary to work as a professor of Philosophy and an atheist lecturer for the Komsomol and the “Knowledge” Society, is a model conversion narrative that went on to be repeatedly reproduced in official publications, lectures, and within the community of Soviet ideologists. As such, it both reveals and deceives. On the one hand, it provides insight into the how the Soviet establishment understood religion, as well as a model of the path that the ideological elite offered religious believers in their attempt to bring them into the Soviet community and embrace the socialist way of life. On the other hand, Duluman’s published narrative naturally avoids the difficulties and obstacles that religious believers faced in the Soviet Union at the time—as convinced believers, as wavering skeptics,

Antireligious Drive,” *Slavic Review* 50, no. 3 (Autumn, 1991): 612-620; and Nathaniel Davis, *A Long Walk to Church: A Contemporary History of Russian Orthodoxy* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 2003).

⁵²⁰ These institutions include the Society for the Dissemination of Scientific and Political Knowledge (later renamed the “Knowledge” Society (*Obshchestvo “Znanie”*)), and the Academy of Social Sciences (AON) of the Central Committee of the Communist Party, the Party’s highest training ground for ideological cadres. The archives of “Knowledge” Society, which had branches at the All-Union, republic, region, city, and district level, and even at local-level educational institutions and labor enterprises, have until now remained almost entirely unexamined. The notable exceptions are the recent works of Sonja Luehrmann and Michael Froggatt. Luehrmann, a historical anthropologist, makes extensive use of local-level “Knowledge” Society archives in her dissertation on atheist propaganda methods in the Mari El autonomous republic. See Sonja Christine Luehrmann, “Forms and Methods: Teaching Atheism and Religion in the Mari Republic, Russian Federation,” (Ph.D. dissertation, University of Michigan, 2009). Michael Froggatt’s work on science education likewise uses “Knowledge” Society materials. See Michael Froggatt, “Renouncing dogma, teaching utopia: Science in schools under Khrushchev” in *The Dilemmas of De-Stalinization: Negotiating Cultural and Social Change in the Khrushchev Era*, ed. Polly Jones Polly Jones (New York: Routledge, 2006), 250-267. The AON archives have also not received systematic attention. The AON Philosophy department focused on atheism. In 1964, the atheist component of AON’s work was transferred to the newly formed Institute of Scientific Atheism, which became the Soviet Union’s top educational and training organization for atheist cadres. Over the course of the 1960s and 1970s, the Institute established numerous local branches across the Soviet Union as part of its function of serving as the coordinating center for atheist theory and practice in the Soviet Union. The Institute of Scientific Atheism is the subject of chapter Six of this dissertation.

and as apostates who broke with religion and attempted to join the Soviet community. For this reason, while the following section is structured around the official story provided in Duluman's book and articles published during the antireligious campaign, it will seek to place this official narrative in context by supplementing it with sources that provide other perspectives on the lived experience of breaking with religious belief in the Soviet Union.

This epic tale of one man's embrace of atheism, does not, in fact, begin when Duluman stopped believing in God and became an atheist. Rather, it begins when he started to believe in God and became religious. For Duluman, this process dates back to the war years in rural Ukraine, when the Nazi occupation forced him to leave his studies, and when he, having lost his father in the war, "by necessity, became the head of the family."⁵²¹ Until the age of sixteen, though, Duluman's "upbringing did not differ in any way from hundreds and thousands of his contemporaries."⁵²² Born January 6, 1928 in the village of Bol'shaia Bokova in the Odessa region, Duluman's childhood coincided with the social mobilization and revolutionary fervor characteristic of life during the first Five-Year-Plans under Stalin. His parents, while not actively religious (they did not attend church), were not "militant atheists." Like most of their neighbors, they kept icons in the house. Duluman's father was a model collective farmer, but did not object to the fact that his mother might prepare "especially tasty things" for religious holidays, when "acquaintances and neighbors might come to our home, and one could hear tales of 'events' connected with the religious celebration." On the other hand, young Evgraf spent his time at the holiday table reciting antireligious verses by the proletarian poet Demian Bednyi and the Ukrainian poet Stepan Rudanskii, and, like other boys in the village, enjoyed the opportunity to tease the local priest with antireligious poems:

Down, down with monks!
Down, down with priests!
We will climb to the sky—
And chase out all the gods!⁵²³

Yet, as Duluman points out, such clowning around was not the result of "atheist conviction," but of youthful antics, and the boys' rejection of religion was casual and unanchored in any specific proof.

The first seeds of doubt were sown when, to make ends meet after the German occupation, Duluman's mother rented a room to the family of the village priest, Father Aleksei. Duluman actively engaged the priest in disputes, and initially "was convinced that, in arguments about religious themes, [he] would be the victor, and would even be able to change [the priests'] mind."⁵²⁴ Yet Father Aleksei's education gave him the upper hand. What initially cast a shadow on Duluman's peace of mind was that the priest undermined the opposition of religion and science by pointing out that many of the most prominent scientists—Pascal, Newton—were believers. For young Duluman, the notion of a scientist (a revered figure whose authority extended to all fields of knowledge) who believed in God collapsed boundaries that Soviet

⁵²¹ Duluman, *Pochemu ia perestal verit' v boga*, 8.

⁵²² *Ibid.*, 6.

⁵²³ *Ibid.*, 7.

⁵²⁴ *Ibid.*, 9.

antireligious propaganda had erected over the course of several decades. As Duluman notes, “It was only considerably later that I understood that the opposite of religion is not some kind of distinct science, but all sciences taken together, in their totality (*sovokupnost*). Since religion is, above all, a worldview, then we must look for its direct opposite likewise in the sphere of worldview, in the sphere of philosophy.”⁵²⁵ Interestingly, Duluman sees this opposition of science and religion as a weak point in Soviet atheism precisely because of how easily, in his own experience, such a dichotomy was undermined. Instead, he suggests that a scientist who moved knowledge progressively forward but believed in God should be considered a “giant and genius” as a scientist, but a “dwarf” as a thinker and philosopher.⁵²⁶ Yet at the time, Father Aleksei’s reasoning made Duluman doubt the correctness of materialism, and these doubts, Duluman explains, put him on the path to religious belief.

Duluman describes religious conversion—his own and others’—as an imperceptible, invisible process, whose results become clear only after the fact, when a person “finally finds himself a prisoner of the religious narcotic (*durman*), [and] begins to believe in gods, in the afterlife, in the ‘last judgment,’ and so forth.”⁵²⁷ Indeed, it is precisely the imperceptibility of the turn to belief, Duluman clarifies for his readers, that makes believers see in it the “manifestation of supernatural powers—‘the miracle of God’s visitation of man.’”⁵²⁸ Yet religious conversion, Duluman insists, is the work of man, and, in his case, also the work of circumstance. The attack on the passive atheism of Duluman’s youth coincided with difficult material conditions that forced him to leave school after eighth grade. Yet, he notes, this moment was precisely when he needed education most, since, “Like most young men my age, standing on the threshold of independent life, I thought much about the meaning of my existence. I desperately wanted for every moment of my life to have meaning [...].”⁵²⁹ He decided to seek this meaning by enrolling at the Odessa Theological Seminary.

With this step—and much to his own surprise—Duluman began his life as a “deeply religious” person. In retrospect, he did not blame the priest for this life-changing misstep. After all, he tells his readers, he should have shared his doubts with teachers and the Komsomol, but his shame about his spiritual crisis—a shame commonly felt by Soviet youth—prevented him from reaching out to the collective. Yet even with his entry into religious education at the seminary, Duluman writes that his religious conversion was still incomplete. Rather, his first encounter with the seminary, which he describes as akin to “having left the twentieth century for the middle ages,” left him feeling alienated both from his new community, as well as from the world of Soviet youth he left behind.⁵³⁰

What ultimately brought Duluman to a sense of communion with his religious surroundings was not, he insists, the truth of religious dogma espoused in courses and sermons, but rather the system of religious emotions and practices that is “so much more effective than any verbal propaganda.” The entirety of religion hinges, Duluman warns his readers, on its ability to overcome reason, “to crush all that is healthy in a person” and awaken “dark feelings.” Religion achieves this through its emphasis on the practice and experience of religious life, and

⁵²⁵ Ibid., 9.

⁵²⁶ Ibid., 9-10.

⁵²⁷ Ibid., 10.

⁵²⁸ Ibid.

⁵²⁹ Ibid., 10-11.

⁵³⁰ Ibid., 12.

in particular through the atmosphere of religious spaces and rituals. This fact—that religion wields the greatest influence through practice and emotions, rather than reason and beliefs—is well known (and actively used) by the church. It was even acknowledged by some early Soviet atheists, Duluman notes, citing the Soviet writer Maksim Gorkii’s observation that,

Ecclesiasticism affected people in a way akin to fog and fumes (*tumanu i ugaru*). Holidays, religious processions, “miraculous” icons, christenings, weddings, funerals, and all that, with which the church influenced people’s imagination, with which it intoxicated reason—all this played a more significant role in the “extinction (*ugashenie*) of reason,” in the battle against critical thought [...] than is customarily acknowledged.⁵³¹

The emotions and practices of religious experience, Duluman concludes, are a powerful force that keeps people imprisoned within the intoxicating (and poisonous) world of religion. It not only leaves people vulnerable to various sorts of charlatanism (such as speaking in tongues, which he notes is common in the world of sectarians), but becomes the central and defining experience of one’s life.

By way of religious practice, and despite his initial skepticism, Duluman soon found himself immersed in the religious life of the seminary: “Religious practice, which wrapped every step of my life in the seminary like an octopus (*slovno sprut*), was the main reason for the intensification of my religiosity. Because of [religious practice], I began to take the absurd glitter (*nelepuiu mishuru*) that surrounded me for a necessity, for the manifestation of true life.”⁵³² Before long, Duluman’s religious life became increasingly more intense. He devoted himself fully to his studies, finishing the four-year seminary in two years. He kept a diary in which he documented the state of his religiosity, and chided himself for insufficient fervor. He actively worked on his spiritual state by forcing himself to imagine hell and eternal damnation in its very physicality. Soon, Duluman “not only believed, but lived by religion,” attending several services a day, repeatedly fasting, and “seeing in all of this the fullness and meaning of individual human life.”⁵³³ His teachers praised his fervor, and recommended the monastic life, and in 1947, Duluman was sent on to graduate education at the Moscow Theological Academy.

As a graduate student at one of the Soviet Union’s premier religious academic institutions, Duluman had access to a broader range of literature. Before long, he began to take an interest in texts critical of religion—from the literature of Aleksandr Pushkin, Mikhail Saltykov-Shchedrin, and Baron d’Holbach, to Ludwig Feuerbach and the Marxist and Marxist-Leninist atheist thinkers Friedrich Engels and Anatoly Lunacharskii. He began to familiarize himself with contemporary atheist literature and propaganda brochures. Initially, he did this with the goal of combating the enemy—the Soviet antireligious establishment—more effectively. He began to visit atheist events so that he could disprove the material and “make a fool of the atheist-lecturer” (*posadit’ lektora-bezbozhnika v kaloshu*).⁵³⁴ But soon, his readings began to reveal to him the “weak points” of religion, and to sow seeds of doubt into his religious convictions. Duluman’s “mind began to sober up.” A thousand questions plagued him and he

⁵³¹ Ibid., 13.

⁵³² Ibid., 14-15.

⁵³³ Ibid., 15.

⁵³⁴ Ibid., 16.

began to look at his religious surroundings with a “somewhat enlightened view.” His copies of Feuerbach and Engels filled with anguished marginalia, and he began to wonder whether “everything in religion is not opposed to common sense.”⁵³⁵ Yet even as he examined Biblical contradictions, he still hoped to resolve them and redeem his faith.

For the next several years, Duluman struggled with his doubts and experienced an acute spiritual crisis. He became alienated from the religious community that surrounded him at the seminary, and though he continued to participate in religious life, he found himself at a crossroads.

My doubts, called forth by the desperate desire to find truth, the true meaning of life, were quite torturous. Is the path indicated by religion and the church correct? Why does the church leave such an insignificant space for human reason? Why should I believe, limitlessly, in the teaching of the church, when there is no common sense in it? For me, all of these questions were not scholastic, but life questions—they brought me suffering.⁵³⁶

Most of Duluman’s thoughts and activities began to be directed towards finding answers to his questions about God and soothing his anxieties so as to regain his religious conviction.

In his search for true belief, Duluman even went beyond the confines of the Russian Orthodox Church, seeking out people with firm religious convictions among other confessions and even the more extreme “sects.” He shared his doubts with them, “cried, ripped out his hair, prayed, and asked them for help and advice.”⁵³⁷ He sought answers from spiritual healers and “penetrated” occultist spiritual sessions; he was not beyond seeking solace in the dark powers, reasoning that if he could confirm the existence of the devil, then God must exist, as well.⁵³⁸ Yet every day his doubts increased, and other seminarians began to sense his difference, nicknaming him “the gloomy philosopher” (*mrachnyi filosof*).

The spiritual distance between Duluman and the Russian Orthodox Church slowly increased, yet he found himself unable to break with religion for both practical and emotional reasons. Above all, Duluman observes, his disillusionment with religion did not bring with it any replacement, and he felt himself unanchored—connected neither to the religious community, nor to his peers in the socialist world beyond the seminary walls. Despite his doubts, Duluman writes that he continued to excel at his studies and to earn praise from his superiors, yet inside he felt himself apart. Interestingly, Duluman notes that he felt this “spiritual dissonance” (*dukhovnyi razlad*) especially acutely during church holidays. The joy that those around him who “genuinely believed” took in the celebrations, the way the holidays “literally transformed” them, made Duluman all too aware of his own absence of emotional response to the occasion. Even though he realized that “all of this is only [...] a hallucination, the first step to madness,”⁵³⁹ he envied those who could still find religious experience fulfilling.

Yet while it had become clear for him that he could no longer believe in or experience religion, he feared that the emptiness that filled him extended to the world beyond as well, and

⁵³⁵ Ibid., 17.

⁵³⁶ Ibid., 25.

⁵³⁷ Ibid., 25.

⁵³⁸ Ibid., 26.

⁵³⁹ Ibid., 32.

his first attempts to leave the Theological Academy were easily thwarted. As Duluman noted in his diary on 6 June 1949:

Yes, leaving is not easy ... Changing one's convictions is not like going to the bath house and changing one's clothing. After all, I do not have a firm worldview. Let me be a believer! Let me be godless! But only let this be my firm conviction, so that I would not have any doubts or scruples. Profound religiosity is madness. But let me also be mad, if only religiosity were to live within me, rather than exist only on my tongue, in phrases ... I am presently at a crossroads.⁵⁴⁰

Not yet able to leave, yet no longer able to stay, Duluman describes the next three years of his life as a transitional time in which he remained loosely anchored in religious life. Duluman describes his state during this time as akin to other contemporary believers who felt tied to religion by fear, lack of enlightenment, or simply tradition. Though spiritually he had already parted ways with religion, he completed his master's degree in theology, and was sent to Saratov as an instructor in the Theological Seminary where he earned a considerable income (3,900 rubles per month). As his own experience made evident, the believer could only depart from the shores of one worldview if he conscientiously moved towards another. Essential to the successful completion of his spiritual journey from religion to atheism was that he be actively embraced by the Soviet community, and especially by the youth.

Indeed, Duluman describes his own journey towards atheism as his "convergence" (*sblizhenie*) with Soviet life, a process that began when a certain Vsevolod Kolosnichenko, a Komsomol member from his native village and a "real atheist," reached out to him. Soon, he found himself surrounded by other Soviet youth, under whose influence he "gradually became transformed" (*preobrazhalsia*).⁵⁴¹ He praises Vsevolod's work on the electrification of Soviet villages, as well as another new friend, Galina Bokova, for enthusiastically expanding her horizons through education in evening courses. In Saratov, he continued to correspond with his "true friends," who enthusiastically described their young Soviet lives filled with meaningful labor for the good of the collective and society as a whole. Every day Duluman would read the newspaper filled with "all the new successes of the laborers of our Motherland," and feel the distance between his life at the seminary and Soviet socialist reality, which he described as a "wide road [filled with] the creative activity of the people." Gradually, his new friends helped him to "sense the breath of life and finally decide the main question: where is truth?" At last, under their welcoming influence, Duluman writes that he understood the meaning of life.

The meaning of true, unparasitic life consists in labor for the benefit of one's people. To joyously feel that your labor, let it be the most humble, the smallest, contributes to the wellbeing of the people. The world is beautiful, and when I do something that may in the smallest way make it even better, make people's lives more meaningful—is this not the highest joy?

[...]

Such a person, laborer and creator, does not need gods or miracles. He is

⁵⁴⁰ Ibid., 33-34.

⁵⁴¹ Ibid., 38.

himself a god and a miracle-worker.⁵⁴²

With this realization, Duluman broke with religion, leaving his position as an instructor in the Saratov Theological Seminary in 1952, and returning to his native village in Ukraine to work on a collective farm. He was born again into Soviet socialist reality.

According to his official narrative, Duluman quickly embraced his new Soviet life, and, more importantly, was embraced by it. He returned to finish his high school education, and joined in the numerous leisure activities enjoyed by the youth he had left behind in the village—drama circles and amateur arts troupes.⁵⁴³ Though his story, published shortly after his official break with the church, concedes that transition from the world of religion to socialist reality was not without hurdles, and notes that “certain comrades treated him cautiously, and occasionally with hostility,” his official narrative stresses that the “friendly student family helped him get on his feet.”⁵⁴⁴ In 1953, he enrolled in the Odessa Institute of Economics and became a member of the Komsomol. Soon after, he began to lecture on antireligious topics both for the Komsomol, and for the Society for the Dissemination of Political and Scientific Knowledge. In 1956, with the help of the Ukrainian Komsomol Central Committee, Duluman transferred to the Philosophy Department of the Taras Shevchenko State University in Kiev, the most prestigious university in Ukraine. Finally, with the help of his Komsomol friends, Duluman realized that he could be most useful to society if he used his own difficult experiences in order to “battle with religious prejudices” as an atheist propaganda worker.⁵⁴⁵ The biographical details of his new life occupy just a few paragraphs and present a picture of a model Soviet youth. Yet it is indicative that while he devotes the majority of his narrative to his spiritual struggles, he narrates his ‘rebirth’ into Soviet life quickly and without the emotional register characteristic of the rest of the narrative.

Duluman’s book provides a model of an official conversion narrative, yet in terms of describing the actual experience of leaving religion and becoming a professional atheist in the postwar Soviet Union, it obscures as much as it reveals. For a fuller understanding of what actually happened to Duluman and what the transition to atheist life entailed for Soviet people in general, we need to fill out the story. To begin with, Duluman’s departure from the seminary (especially his public break with religion) was, unsurprisingly, denounced, by the Russian Orthodox Church. Not only did Duluman become a cautionary tale and a *persona non grata* in the Orthodox community, he was officially excommunicated from the Russian Orthodox Church by a Patriarchal Order dated December 30, 1959.⁵⁴⁶ Moreover, as Duluman himself told me in an interview more than fifty years after the publication of his book, his transition into Soviet life, and to the educational system in particular, entailed more than the simple ascent from collective farm worker in rural Ukraine to graduate student in the Philosophy department of the republic’s best university, model Komsomol youth, and eventually professional propaganda worker. Rather, his transition was filled with obstacles that were largely the result of his religious background. Though Duluman desperately wanted to study philosophy and thereby continue his spiritual

⁵⁴² Ibid., 40.

⁵⁴³ Ibid., 41.

⁵⁴⁴ Ibid., 43.

⁵⁴⁵ Ibid.

⁵⁴⁶ Chumachenko, 177.

quest, he soon learned that the path to knowledge in the Soviet Union was not equally open to everyone, and was, in fact, practically closed to someone with his tainted biography. When he first applied to the Philosophy department of a university in Ukraine, he was pointedly told that “only Party members higher than the rank of Komsomol district secretary” were admitted to study philosophy. Certainly he, who “had been in the world of the church,” would never gain admission.⁵⁴⁷

But Duluman persisted. He went to Kiev, the capital of the republic, in order to plead his case, but again encountered the same response. Duluman was told that he should attend whatever institute would have him, but that in the capital, he “would not be accepted, since students in the Philosophy department [must be] approved by the Party Central Committee,” whereas his biography was such that the Central Committee would never approve him. Duluman returned to Odessa. He learned that the Institute of Economics still had vacancies, but his application was again rejected. This time, though, he decided to plead his case personally, first with the Rector of the Institute, then with a representative of the Ministry of Higher Education—on both of whom, he told me in our interview, he made a positive impression—and finally with the regional Party committee, where he was directed to speak with a certain Neserenko.

So I go [to the regional Party offices]. And [the rector] calls ahead, gives my name, says, “At [my] Institute he is not accepted, but he passes all his exams well... see him, speak to him, he made a positive impression on me.” So he says, alright, let him come. But to go to the regional Party committee non-member of the Party needed a special pass (*propusk*). [Neserenko] orders it for me, and I arrive, and they ask me who I am there to see. I tell them, Neserenko. They tell me, “He’s gone out.” [I ask], “What do you mean he’s gone out? He made an appointment with me. Where did he go? [...] What does he look like?” [They tell me], “He is of average height, a little heavy, wearing such-and-such suit.” So I am walking down Pushkin Street [...] and I see this person walking down the street, haughty and blasé (*valiazhno*). I catch up to him.

“Hello, are you comrade Neserenko?”

“Yes, I am comrade Neserenko.”

“And I am Duluman.”

Well, what can you do? We spoke, [and he says] “now I understand, you are alright, a collective farmer.” And so, he gave the okay so that [the Institute] accepted me.⁵⁴⁸

After their conversation, when Neserenko “understood that [Duluman was] alright, a collective farm worker,” Duluman was accepted to the Accounting Department of the Odessa Institute of Economics, and simultaneously into the Komsomol. Joining the Komsomol at this time, as it turned out, was fortuitous as it came just as the Party leadership again became interested in the religious question. In a context where familiarity with religion—as either dogma or lived experience—was in desperately short supply, a young apostate became a valuable asset. Indeed, Duluman could turn his difficult biography to his advantage. Local Party and Komsomol cells were under pressure to produce results on the religious front, and their work would be much

⁵⁴⁷ Duluman, interview, Kyïv, Ukraine, 10 February 2009.

⁵⁴⁸ Ibid.

aided if they found cadres with the potential to engage in antireligious propaganda. When it came time to write a thesis, the Komsomol directed Duluman to write about the Bible and Christianity, which they planned to publish as part of the new antireligious campaign's effort to intensify atheist propaganda. Duluman's thesis and personal story quickly earned him considerable attention in the republican Komsomol hierarchy. With his theological expertise and his familiarity with (and, more to the point, distaste for) religious life, Duluman suddenly found himself facing newly opened roads. Indeed, it was not until he embraced his role as a public atheist that things began to move smoothly.

When Duluman went to Kiev for his residency training (*praktikum*), he was called to the Central Committee of the Ukrainian Komsomol for a special meeting, where he was asked to prepare a lecture on the origins of Christianity in Rus'. Not long after, he earned the coveted approval of the Komsomol Central Committee to transfer into the Philosophy Department of Shevchenko State University, where he completed his studies in 1956-1959. At the same time, he continued to lecture and publish about religion and atheism and his own break with the church. The Soviet elite, meanwhile, was in the throes of the antireligious campaign, and Duluman's unique conversion experience came to the attention of the central Party press. In 1957, Khrushchev's son-in-law, Aleksei Adzhubei, then the chief editor of *Komsomol'skaia Pravda*, took a personal interest in Duluman's story. A correspondent was sent to interview Duluman about his break with religion, and Adzhubei relayed Duluman's story to Khrushchev personally. Cautiously, Khrushchev asked whether Duluman's story had been checked, "so we do not wind up with egg on our faces" (*chtob ne popast' vprosak*). Duluman recalls that his article, "How I Became an Atheist," was published in March 1957, after he had been sufficiently vetted and it was confirmed that he "was not lying, and was in reality like this." Soon, Duluman joined the Society for the Dissemination of Political and Scientific Knowledge (later renamed the "Knowledge" Society (*Obshchestvo "Znanie"*)), where he regularly read atheist lectures. He also became one of the first graduate students at the Soviet Union's first Department of the History and Theory of Atheism, headed by Vladimir Karlovich Tancher and founded at Shevchenko Kiev State University in 1959.⁵⁴⁹

Duluman's spiritual journey is instructive not only for its model narrative structure and for its insight into the lived experience of the journey from religion to atheism in the U.S.S.R., but also for what Duluman, as a prominent figure in the atheist movement, can tell us about the central problems in Soviet atheism. Having himself made the journey from religion to atheism, Duluman—both directly and indirectly—pointed out the numerous ways in which atheist

⁵⁴⁹ The study of religion, within the framework of scientific atheist education, was developed in Ukraine earlier than in other Soviet republics, largely due to the fact that the religious question was a more pressing matter given the quantity and diversity of Ukraine's religious population. Preceding Kiev State University's department of Atheist History and Theory by two years, in 1957 a department of Atheism appeared within the structure of the Institute of Philosophy of the Ukrainian Academy of Sciences. See Lyudmyla Filipovych and Anatoly Kolodny, "Theology and Religious Studies in Post-Communist Ukraine: Historical Sources, Modern Status, and Perspectives of Cooperation," *Religion in Eastern Europe* XXIII, no. 6 (December 2003), 1-19. Furthermore, besides having one of the first departments of Atheism in the Soviet Union, Kiev State University also produced the country's first program for a university course on scientific atheism in 1957. The *Programma kursu "Osnovi ateizmu" dlia vishchikh uchbovikh zakladiv URSR* (Kyiv: KDU, 1957), was used as the foundation for a union-wide program for a scientific atheist university-level course. The publication was revised by V. K. Tancher in 1959, 1961, and 1962, and re-issued several times. Between 1959 and 1965, 20 dissertations on scientific atheism were defended in the university's department of History and Theory of Atheism.

propaganda could more effectively pull people out of the world of religion. Drawing the reader's attention to his own spiritual vacillations, Duluman's story has the effect, first of all, of emotionally drawing the reader into his own spiritual journey, and, secondly, of broadly profiling religious believers in the Soviet Union—in order to indicate how to convert them to the path of “more actively participating in the construction of a new life.”⁵⁵⁰ Religion, Duluman argued in the late 1950s, is largely on the defensive in the face of Soviet reality, evident, above all, in the shame believers experience in Soviet society, and in the attempts of religious officials to reconcile religious dogma with scientific progress and Soviet political ideology.⁵⁵¹ Indeed, most Soviet believers, Duluman asserted, lack conviction and “doubt everything.” Their belief is fragile, founded on a premise that treats religion as a “prophylactic” measure and a kind of insurance.⁵⁵² As one of Duluman's professors at the Moscow Theological Academy described it, the contemporary Soviet believer even prayed without conviction: “Lord (if you exist) save my soul (if it exists)!”⁵⁵³ This spiritual space—filled with fear, doubt, and hope—should be the focus of Soviet atheist work, Duluman suggested.

Yet what makes Duluman's story so valuable in understanding the course of Soviet atheism is precisely the discrepancy between the official description of his conversion experience (published at the height of the antireligious campaign and reproduced throughout the Soviet era), and his later perspective on the same events, relayed in our interview. While his official publication described the community and sense of belonging that awaited him upon his break with religion, his present-day recollections reveal that, in practice, his path was more difficult, and that the community treated him, a former believer, with a considerable amount of suspicion. On the other hand, as Duluman's description of his initial turn towards religion suggests, the most effective means of drawing an individual into the fold effectively appeals to emotions and community, largely through an emphasis on practice. Yet while his description of his immersion in religious life provided detailed descriptions of the powerful emotions evoked by religious rites and collective religious experience, subjects like emotion, practice, and experience are notably absent in his discussion of his embrace of atheism. In effect, then, the discrepancies between his official description and his actual experience of becoming an atheist indicate points of weakness that Soviet atheism would have to effectively address in order to successfully achieve its goals.

Duluman's journey, both towards religion and away from it, was driven by a fervent desire to find meaning in his life, and to experience a spiritual fullness. When Orthodox Christianity ceased to fulfill his philosophical and spiritual objectives, it ceased to be a viable option for the future. Yet atheism, it seems, did not offer sufficient replacements to allow Duluman to immediately leave the church behind, and instead, he was left in a condition of acute spiritual crisis for several years. Duluman's quest was defined by his attempts to fill a spiritual space, and his experience suggests the ways in which this void could be filled, first by religion and then by atheism. When describing his initial turn to religion, Duluman repeatedly stresses the centrality of religious experience—of practice and emotions—for the persistence of his spiritual commitment to the church. In religious practices, he found “the manifestation of true life,” and

⁵⁵⁰ Ibid., 35.

⁵⁵¹ Ibid., 37.

⁵⁵² Ibid., 35-36.

⁵⁵³ Ibid., 35.

through them he “not only believed but lived by religion.”⁵⁵⁴ While his discussion of the power of religious practice is meant to unmask the means by which religion bewitches and imprisons believers, the suffering he admits to experiencing upon the loss of his religious convictions naturally begs the question of how his spiritual longing was assuaged, and what atheism offered in replacement to the ostensibly false “narcosis” of religion. With regards to atheism, Duluman’s emphasis on the embrace of the collective and the meaning given to one’s life by labor for the good of the Soviet community certainly rings a bit hollow, especially when taking into account the divergent picture painted by his own later recollections of the process as a lived experience. Yet it nevertheless brings critical attention to the spiritual spaces and questions—practice, emotions, community, and experience—that Soviet atheism had to take into account in order to become an alternative to religion.

Aleksandr Osipov’s Message to Believers

That Duluman’s attention to emotions and community is neither accidental nor insignificant is underscored by the fact that the conversion narrative of Aleksandr Osipov—perhaps the most famous defector to Soviet atheism in the movement’s history—emphasizes these same elements even more explicitly. Like Duluman, Osipov broke with religion publicly by announcing it in a letter to the newspaper *Pravda* on 6 December 1959 (for which he, too, was excommunicated from the Russian Orthodox Church).⁵⁵⁵ Also like Duluman, Osipov’s public renunciation of his own religiosity elicited an enormous response from both the religious and atheist community. The overwhelming reaction to his conversion—both positive and negative—inspired him to publish *My Response to Believers* (*Moi otvet veruiushchim*, 1960), where Osipov answered numerous letters that he received from church figures and ordinary believers, as well as from members of the Soviet collective welcoming him into the fold.⁵⁵⁶ A former Archpriest and Professor of Theology at the Leningrad Theological Academy, Osipov was also a gifted pedagogue and writer—undoubtedly, an invaluable addition to the atheist camp. For these reasons, his break with religion was sensational—as one author writes, “the state’s antireligious [cadres] began to talk about him in a way that they had never before spoken about any of those who renounced religion (*otrechentsev*).”⁵⁵⁷ Osipov published widely; gave

⁵⁵⁴ Ibid., 14-15.

⁵⁵⁵ Aleksandr Osipov, “Otkaz ot religii—edisntvenno pravel’nyi put’: Pis’mo v redaktsiiu,” *Pravda*, 6 December 1959, 4. Like Duluman, Osipov was excommunicated by Patriarchal Order on December 30, 1959: “Former Archpriest ... Osipov, former Archpriest N. Spasskii, former Priest Darmanskii, and other clerics who have publicly rejected the Lord’s name are henceforth deprived of any relations with the church ... Evgraf Duluman and all other former lay members of the Orthodox Church who have publicly rejected the Lord’s name are excommunicated from the church.” Quoted in Dmitrii Pospelovskii, *Russkaia pravoslavnaia tserkov’ v XX veke* (Moscow: Respublika, 1995), 281-282, and Chumachenko, 177. Chumachenko also cites Mikhail Shkarovskii in confirming that Osipov’s break with the church was neither sudden nor unexpected, and that in fact he had been an informant for the KGB for a number of years before publicly renouncing his faith. His June 1951 report “On Conditions in the Moscow Patriarchate” is published in Mikhail Shkarovskii, *Russkaia Pravoslavnaia Tserkov’ pri Staline i Khrushcheve: gosudarstvenno-tserkovnye otnosheniia v SSSR v 1939–1964 godakh* (Moscow: Krutitskoe patriarshee podvor’e, 1999), 281-282. Cited in Chumachenko, 218.

⁵⁵⁶ A. A. Osipov, *Moi otvet veruiushchim* (Leningrad: Lenizdat, 1960).

⁵⁵⁷ Sergei Firsov, “...Ateist i drug vash Aleksandr Osipov: Kak izvestnyi bogoslov stal iarostnym bezbozhnikom,” *NG-Religii* 20, no. 43 (27 October 1999), <http://dlib.eastview.com/browse/doc/3475700> (accessed August 2, 2010).

frequent lectures many of which were attended by thousands; appeared on the radio and was the subject of television programs.⁵⁵⁸

Aleksandr Osipov was born on 10 November 1911 in Tallinn, Estonia. Though his childhood was spent in various imperial Russian cities (Orenburg, Ivanovo-Voznesensk), the eventual break-up of his family brought him back to Estonia. In 1922, Osipov's mother moved back to Tallinn in what had by this point become "bourgeois Estonia," and young Aleksandr found himself beyond the borders of the newly-erected revolutionary state, free to pursue a religious education at the Department of Theology of Tartu University. In 1935, Osipov, having received a Master's degree in Theology, became a deacon in the Russian Orthodox Church. In the same year, he also married the daughter of the Archpriest of Tallinn. In 1936, he assumed a permanent church post, and continued to perform missionary work in jails and mental asylums, as well as teach in the Russian and Estonian gymnasias.

When the Second World War brought Estonia back within Soviet borders, Osipov assumed duties assigned to him by the Moscow Patriarchate. He was also conscripted for a brief time into the Soviet army, and then spent time in Perm before returning to Tallinn in 1944. Upon his return to Estonia, Osipov learned that his wife had taken the children and left for the West. Losing his family was devastating for Osipov. As Sergei Firsov observes, his position in the Russian Orthodox Church precluded him from re-marrying, while his newly acquired Soviet citizenship made a reunion with his wife impossible. Moreover, Osipov later learned that his wife had renounced him as a "red priest."⁵⁵⁹ Not long after, Osipov became an official informant for the Council on the Affairs of the Russian Orthodox Church. He made a career in Leningrad, where he became an instructor and an inspector of the Leningrad Theological Seminary, until his public renunciation of his faith in 1959. With his *Pravda* article, Osipov began his new life as an atheist, offering his services as a spiritual guide for the journey from religion to atheism.

While Osipov's publication is ostensibly aimed both at believers and unbelievers, it emphasizes—perhaps logically, considering Osipov's own background—the internal contradictions of religious life, as well as the spiritual experience of a believer breaking with religion. Indeed, the last of the books' three sections—"No, in our society, a person without God is not lonely!" (*Net, ne odinok u nas chelovek bez boga*)—addresses the emotional and communal experience of conversion, insisting that a believer who leaves religion for atheism will not be shunned and alone, but will encounter collectivism and the friendship of Soviet people. As Osipov writes in response to one anonymous letter, people should not fear that "those who free themselves from the narcotic of religion will be met with contempt and rejection [...] and that, in departing from one world, [they] will not find a place for [themselves] in the other, and will remain lonely, outcast, pariahs."⁵⁶⁰

Osipov likewise places considerable emphasis on the "positive" components of religion in order to draw attention to the source of its strength. The world of religion, Osipov writes, is not only the product of dark powers wielded by insincere officials. It is also filled with "genuine

Firsov's article investigates why Osipov's break with religion resonated so widely in the context of the antireligious campaign when over 200 clerics publicly renounced their faith.

⁵⁵⁸ Ibid.

⁵⁵⁹ On "red priests," see Edward E. Roslof, *Red Priests: Renovationism, Russian Orthodoxy, and Revolution, 1905-1946* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2002).

⁵⁶⁰ Osipov, *Moi otvet veruiushchim*, 18.

believers” who, for numerous reasons, find solace and community in religion.

Their misfortune is that, as a result of their upbringing or traditions in the family or their surroundings, perhaps because of trauma in their consciousness, or under the influence of trials and misfortunes that have befallen them, or a dissatisfaction with their fate—these people trustingly and naively believe that there is another world, another but no less “real” world. They believe that there, they will be able to find compensation, satisfaction in return for all of the grief and difficulties they encounter in their everyday lives. They believe that God, angels, and saints are always with them, and that, for this reason, they are not alone and lonely.⁵⁶¹

Renouncing this world for the next, they fail to see the “the live human powers, the brotherly shoulder to lean on, and the brotherly support” of the people around them. And even when they do see themselves surrounded by goodness, they attribute it to the manifestation of God’s will on earth.⁵⁶² Osipov’s narrative, then, serves to bring these good but misguided Soviet believers into the collective by revealing the falsity of religious beliefs and assuring them of the support and embrace of another community—the community of believers in Soviet socialism, of which atheism forms an inherent part—that awaits them on the other side of their conversion. He concludes the book by urging Soviet people to rely on each other in this world, rather than on mystical powers in the next: “Hold on to one another! Do not search for the mystical and fictitious ‘support from above’ in the disappointments, deaths, and illnesses that may occur along life’s path... Remember, with us a person without God is not alone!”⁵⁶³

Osipov’s idyllic picture of an atheist community waiting to embrace new converts is a problematic construct for a number of reasons, not least of which is the fact that it obscures divisions within and among atheists, imagining a unity where one did not exist. Yet what is worth noting is that, like Duluman, Osipov invests his own conversion narrative with a religious language and with explicit reference to the strategies employed by religion to effectively draw in and keep believers, thereby drawing attention, no doubt inadvertently, to the absence of these elements in Soviet ideology. Unlike the majority of Soviet atheist publications before this period, both Osipov and Duluman stress that the power of religion is not only the product of deception and exploitation, but of the many “positive” elements it offers and that keep believers emotionally invested in their own religious experience and in the religious community. Both authors also stress that religion is effective because it raises and addresses existential human questions, thus giving life meaning and fullness. While neither author offers a direct criticism of Soviet atheism—and in fact stress, as mentioned above, the positive experience of meaningful labor and of joining the socialist community—their narratives implicitly point to exactly those elements that have traditionally been points of weakness for atheism: community, experience, spirituality, and emotions.⁵⁶⁴

⁵⁶¹ Ibid., 28.

⁵⁶² Ibid., 28-29.

⁵⁶³ Ibid., 66.

⁵⁶⁴ On conversions to religion, see Olga Tchepournaya, “The Hidden Sphere of Religious Searches in the Soviet Union: Independent Religious Communities in Leningrad from the 1960s to the 1970s,” *Sociology of Religion* 64, no. 3 (Autumn, 2003): 377-388. While this chapter does not focus on conversions *to* religion, it is important to underscore the importance of the phenomenon in the late Soviet period. Olga Tchepournaya provides an insightful

Duluman and Osipov were themselves former believers, and Duluman, moreover, was a Soviet believer—a young man formed not by “old world” and pre-revolutionary society, but one who turned to religion under socialist conditions and Soviet reality. For this reason, their biographies and experiences were, of course, invaluable for the antireligious and atheist education campaign re-emerging in the late 1950s. But their insights about the strengths of religion, and, conversely, the weakness of atheism, also point to an important crossroads in the Soviet secularization project. While the majority of Soviet ideologists continued to rely largely on “administrative” methods in their battle with religion, new voices and positions began to emerge within the movement that saw individual experience as the necessary center of Soviet atheist work.

Over the course of the late Khrushchev era, Soviet atheism gained a new kind of self-awareness about its own shortcomings and the need to develop new strategies for atheist education. With the help of insights provided by defectors from the other side—and supported by the results of earlier antireligious efforts discussed in the previous chapter, as well as by the revived sociological and ethnographic studies of religion examined in this and the following chapters—Soviet atheism began to address the negative spaces left behind by antireligious propaganda. The movement also starts to take seriously the need to address the philosophical concerns and spiritual longings that kept people bound to religion, and to provide Soviet atheist answers to the existential questions that continued to be raised by Soviet citizens. Above all, it began to focus on the need to counter the vision of atheist society as an atomized collective held together by a negative definition and founded on reason as opposed to emotion. Indeed, some Soviet atheists began to realize the urgency and stakes of the above concerns for the long-term prospects of Soviet atheism.

Evgraf Duluman’s spiritual conversion from ordinary Soviet boy to fervent religious believer, and from a model seminarian to a convinced atheist was, as his narrative shows, a complicated process that lasted more than a decade. Yet it is important to emphasize that both his debut into Soviet public life as a professional atheist and his conversion narrative were produced in the midst of the late Khrushchev era antireligious campaign—arguably the most extensive and comprehensive antireligious campaign in Soviet history.⁵⁶⁵ Likewise, Aleksandr Osipov’s

analysis of the religious seeking of Soviet intellectuals in Leningrad in the 1960s and 1970s, and the subsequent emergence of new religious communities. Tchepournaya argues that, in part, this phenomenon was dependent on the relationship between the regime and the intelligentsia. While in the 1960s intellectuals were “mostly included in official attempts to reform the communist regime,” by the 1970s there was a definite parting of ways, evident in the emergence of a coherent dissident movement. Tchepournaya, 381. This general parting of ways could also be seen in the religious sphere. For most religious converts at this time, and especially for those coming from the ranks of the intelligentsia, conversion was “accompanied by disillusionment with communism and Soviet reality.” Tchepournaya, 384. As one of Tchepournaya’s respondents describes it, “A passion for Christianity appeared at the end of the sixties. That happened after a final disillusionment with the idea of the possibility of socialism as a system, an ideology, or a way of life. And religion became a way to escape the official ideology, a way to salvation....” (interview #5, 2000).” Tchepournaya, 385.

⁵⁶⁵ It should be clarified that by “most extensive,” I am referring to scope rather than brutality. The antireligious campaign of the early Soviet period was considerably more brutal in its attack on religious institutions and believers than the Khrushchev-era campaign. To get a sense of the scope of the early Soviet antireligious campaign, it is worth remembering that on the eve of the 1917 revolution, the Russian Orthodox Church owned 50,000 church buildings (and considerably more, if chapels, convent churches and institutional prayer houses are also counted). By 1939, only 200-300 Orthodox churches functioned in the entire country. Monastic life was also devastated by the campaign, with none of the 1,242 monasteries reported to have been operating in 1917, open by the early 1930s. See

decision to abandon his life as a professor of theology in order to become the Soviet Union's most public atheist must be placed in the context of the regime's new interest in the spiritual beliefs and practices of the population. Indeed, the fact that Duluman and Osipov achieved such heights was the product of a convergence between their own spiritual journeys and the party-state's mission to overcome religious survivals and build Communism in the Soviet Union.

While Duluman's conversion narrative sheds valuable light on some of the central problems that Soviet atheism would have to address in its battle for the hearts and minds of Soviet citizens, his experiences were in many ways unique in the context of the Khrushchev era. Indeed, Duluman's insights into the internal dilemmas of Soviet spiritual life and its implications for Soviet atheism should not obscure the degree to which he was the exception rather than the rule. While the regime certainly relied on existing bureaucratic cadres and the relatively limited number of so-called "old atheists"⁵⁶⁶ in the revived antireligious campaign, the intended scope of Khrushchev's new agenda meant that a great number of new atheist cadres had to be recruited and trained. Indeed, the majority of those who formed the atheist establishment in the late Soviet period—from agit-prop workers on the ground to the new cohort of "experts"—were recruited into atheist work during the Khrushchev-era antireligious campaign. Unlike Duluman, these new cadres had almost no knowledge about the religious situation in the country—short of some assumptions absorbed from ideological slogans and pronouncements—and even less practical experience with it. In effect, they built their understanding of religion and atheism, as well as their approaches to antireligious and atheist work, from the ground up. Tempered in the Khrushchev era, these cadres went on to form the cohort of experts who guided the direction of Soviet understandings of religion and the theoretical and practical developments of Soviet atheism for the rest of the Soviet period. It is crucial to understand the development and dynamics of the Khrushchev-era antireligious campaign, both because it set the parameters for antireligious and atheist work for the rest of the Soviet period, and because it was the original and formative experience of most postwar Soviet atheists.⁵⁶⁷

Sabrina Petra Ramet, *Nihil obstat: Religion, Politics, and Social Change in East-Central Europe* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1998), 231. On the early Soviet antireligious campaign, see Mikhail Ivanovich Odintsov, *Gosudarstvo i tserkov' Istoriiia vzaimootnoshenii, 1917–1938 gg* (Moscow: Znaniye, 1991); Valerii Arkadevich Alekseev, *"Shturm nebes" otmenniaetsia?: kriticheskie ocherki po istorii bor'by s religiei v SSSR* (Moscow: Rossiia molodaia, 1992); Glennys Young, *Power and the Sacred in Revolutionary Russia: Religious Activists in the Village* (University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1997); Arto Luukkanen, *The Religious Policy of the Stalinist State, A Case Study: The Central Standing Commission on Religious Questions, 1929–1938* (Helsinki: Suomen Historiallinen Seura, 1997); Daniel Peris, *Storming the Heavens: The Soviet League of the Militant Godless* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1998); William B. Husband, *"Godless Communists": Atheism and Society in Soviet Russia, 1917–1932* (DeKalb, IL: Northern Illinois University Press, 2000); Edward E. Roslof, *Red Priests: Renovationism, Russian Orthodoxy, and Revolution, 1905–1946*; Heather J. Coleman, *Russian Baptists and Spiritual Revolution, 1905–1929* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2005); Paul Froese, *The Plot to Kill God: Findings from the Soviet Experiment in Secularization* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2008).

⁵⁶⁶ The Soviet ideological establishment generally referred to cadres active in the antireligious campaign of the early Soviet period, and in the League of Militant Godless, as "old atheists." Generally, there was a considerable generational division between the so-called "old atheists" and the new cadres, both in age and in approach.

⁵⁶⁷ Anderson, *Religion, State and Politics in the Soviet Union and Successor States*, 68–102. Anderson makes a convincing case for continuity in religious policy, broadly speaking, from the Khrushchev era until Gorbachev's ascent to power. He characterizes the Brezhnev era approach as essentially that of the Khrushchev era "minus excesses"—that is, an antireligious policy that curbed administrative restrictions of religious institutions and legal persecution of believers. In his history of Soviet religious studies, the Russian sociologist Mikhail Iur'evich Smirnov likewise characterizes the 1960s and 1970s as a "vegetarian" period in the field, although he qualifies the notion of

“For us, religion and the church were an abstraction, almost unnoticeable in everyday life”

Evgraf Duluman’s path to atheist work was, as noted above, exceptional. Most people who formed the new cohort of Soviet atheists coming together in the Khrushchev era did not have a background in religion—either theoretically or practically—and had not themselves been religious. Indeed, while some found themselves in this sphere of ideological work almost by accident, many who became professional atheists recall that their interest was sparked by an unexpected encounter with religion in their youth—an encounter especially unexpected if the believer was, like themselves, young.⁵⁶⁸ The experience made an impression precisely because the young future atheist had generally assumed that, after several decades of Soviet power, religion was almost extinct, a relic of the past only found among elderly women and fated to disappear with them. Because this emerging cohort became so important to the future of religious studies and atheist work in the late Soviet period (and often after), it is worth examining their (more common) path to Soviet atheism in greater detail.

One such cadre is Remir Aleksandrovich Lopatkin, whose career, like Duluman’s, extends from the Khrushchev era to the present.⁵⁶⁹ Unlike Duluman, though, Lopatkin did not continue his public atheist work after the collapse of the Soviet Union. Rather, like a number of others involved in Soviet atheist work at the highest levels, Lopatkin, trained at the Institute of Scientific Atheism, became an academic with a career that has lasted almost five decades. Presently, he is one of Russia’s leading specialists in the sociology of religion and a professor in the Department of State-Confessional Relations at the Russian Academy of State Service, the post-Soviet successor of the Institute of Scientific Atheism of the Academy of Social Sciences.

Born in 1930 in the city of Ivanovo, Lopatkin attended grade school from 1938 to 1948 and the Pedagogical Institute from 1948 to 1952. He describes his childhood and youth as typical of the Soviet experience, and stresses the degree to which religion was a foreign concept for him growing up. “What, on the whole, did people of my generation know about religion and the church? ... [I]n my childhood and school years, we knew almost nothing about religion. It existed in some kind of very distant background, had no influence on our lives, and did not elicit any emotions.”⁵⁷⁰ His parents were both teachers and communist party members. Their decision to give their child a revolutionary name such as Remir—a combination of “revolution” and

there being a continuity in studies of religion with the pre-revolutionary period, and the Soviet period. Nevertheless, he describes the “elevation” of Russian studies of religion and the training of scientific atheist specialists in the late Khrushchev era and the Brezhnev era. Smirnov sees the creation of the Institute of Scientific Atheism at the Central Committee’s Academy of Social Sciences, in 1964, as the “apotheosis” of the “legitimation of scientific-atheist religious studies.” Mikhail Iur’evich Smirnov, “Religiovedenie v Rossii: problema samoidentifikatsii,” *Vestnik Moskovskogo universiteta. Filosofii*, no. 1 (January-February 2009): 90-106. While this dissertation qualifies the continuity thesis, there is no doubt that the Khrushchev campaign was indeed formative in the Soviet approach to religion.

⁵⁶⁸ Nikolai Mikhailovich Zakovich, interview with author, Kyiv, Ukraine, 5 February 2009.

⁵⁶⁹ My discussion of Lopatkin’s path to atheist work is based on my correspondence with him in 2009, as well as on published sources. Remir Aleksandrovich Lopatkin, personal e-mail correspondences, 30 January 2009, 15 February 2009, 26 March 2009, 17 April 2009, 14 August 2009, 4 November 2009, 5 November 2009.

⁵⁷⁰ Lopatkin, correspondence, 26 March 2009.

“world”—suggests that they were fervent believers in Communist ideology.⁵⁷¹ Lopatkin describes them, as well as the parents of the majority of his contemporaries, as “atheists or simply non-believers.”⁵⁷² Lopatkin notes that they did not celebrate religious holidays or participate in rituals, and that there were no icons in their homes, “except maybe [the homes of] grandmothers.” Other than that, his encounters with religion in childhood were confined to the presence of an “austere” old lady in a nearby house who dressed in black and chided children for playing loud games—to whom the adults referred to as “the church lady” (*bogomolka*)—and to occasional references to religion in history classes (in particular, he recalls the impression made on him by the inquisition’s burning of Giordano Bruno as a heretic). On the whole, he describes his education as “non-religious” rather than “anti-religious,” noting that rather than teachers conducting “some kind of specific conversations about the harm of religion,” the foundation of the educational program—the study of the natural and social sciences—developed in the students a materialist worldview “that, naturally, was atheist.” His continued education at the pedagogical institute gave him a strong philosophical and historical foundation, but, as he notes, “All the same, religion and the church were, for us, a certain abstraction, almost invisible in everyday life.”

Equally abstract was Lopatkin’s “understanding of the religiosity of concrete people, since there were none in my immediate surroundings.”⁵⁷³ He knew that such a “survival” existed, but for him it was the “lot of semi-literate old ladies.”⁵⁷⁴ Lopatkin’s life, on the other hand, was deeply embedded in Soviet ideals and institutions, and by his twenties he was already a professional functionary in the Komsomol. The first time Lopatkin came in contact with lived religion, in his recollection, was in 1956-1957, working as the district Komsomol secretary in Ivanovo. A young woman, a Komsomol member, had reportedly joined a Baptist community, and it was brought to his attention that she had “as they used to say then, ‘fallen into a sect’ (*popala v sektu*.)” Lopatkin was “indignant” (*vozmushchen*). He wondered, “How is it possible *in our time* [italics his] to believe in such nonsense,” and decided that he would easily, “in one stroke” (*v dva shcheta*), clarify her “misconceptions” (*zabluzhdeniia*) and “‘pull her out’ of the sect.” Yet things did not go as expected. “With the very first conversation, I experienced defeat (*poterpel krakh*): I would [speak to her] about Giordano Bruno, and she would cite the Bible, which I had never even seen, [drawing] my conclusion about it only from [Emelian] Iaroslavskii. It came to nothing.”

Lopatkin was taken aback, but persisted. He procured a Bible and topical literature to educate himself for further discussions, and began to regularly meet with the young woman and try to understand what drew her to the Baptist community. Ultimately, his individual work with the girl produced results—the young woman “left the ‘sect’ and again became a member of the Komsomol.”⁵⁷⁵ This encounter initially sparked his interest in this sphere of ideological work, and Lopatkin began to focus on religion and atheism in his Komsomol activities and in his journalistic work. In 1963, after several years of atheist work in Ivanovo, he applied for graduate study to the Philosophy department of the Academy of Social Sciences (AON), and, with the

⁵⁷¹ The practice of giving children revolutionary names was common in the early Soviet period, and especially during the ideological enthusiasm generated during the First Five-Year Plan, when Remir Lopatkin was born.

⁵⁷² Lopatkin, correspondence, 17 April 2009.

⁵⁷³ Ibid.

⁵⁷⁴ Ibid.

⁵⁷⁵ Ibid. Lopatkin notes that there were several such conversions in his Komsomol experiences, and that he also encountered Orthodox believers.

founding of the Institute of Scientific Atheism, transferred to become one of the Institute's first graduate students, and, over the course of the Soviet period, one of the Party's foremost experts on religion and atheism.

In many ways, this emerging cohort of atheist propaganda workers received on-the-job training—in the history of religion and philosophy, ethnographic and sociological methodology, and/or propaganda-agitation work. On the other hand, these cadres were also without strong mentorship, since the study of religion, as well as disciplines like sociology and ethnography more broadly, had stagnated over the course of the Stalin period and these disciplines were only beginning to reemerge at this time.⁵⁷⁶

The Conversion of Ivanteevka: From Religion to Atheism in One Soviet Town and Beyond

In April 1960, at an All-Union seminar for atheist propaganda workers in Leningrad, Shevchenko, an atheist lecturer of the Society for the Dissemination of Political and Scientific Knowledge in Moscow, related an instructive tale about the spiritual journey of Ivanteevka, a small town in the Moscow region. He told this tale in order to shed light on certain notions shared by Soviet atheists about the tenacity of religious prejudices. “Certain comrades,” he began, “reasoned that the roots of religion have been torn out, that religion is a dying survival, that all people are educated, and only go to the movies, dances, and to lectures about whether there is life on Mars.”⁵⁷⁷ Such confident assumptions, Shevchenko's tale was intended to illustrate, were both theoretically flawed and practically counter-productive.

“Imagine for yourselves a textile industry town,” Shevchenko told his audience. “Many have lost their fathers, husbands, sons on the fronts during the Great Patriotic War. The men [who remained] in the rest of the families are in Moscow, or at nearby collective farms. There are many single mothers, who have a difficult time bringing up their children.”⁵⁷⁸ The town church is filled with women, whose shadows dart back and forth among the many candles. Before Easter, lines of boys and girls form outside, sent by their grandmothers to have their Easter cakes (*kulich*) blessed. Soon, a new Orthodox priest, Father Vasilii, arrives in town. This new priest “has a pedagogical education, and is a reserve major [in the army].”⁵⁷⁹ He shows an “exceptional maneuverability” (*iskliuchitel'nuu manevrennost'*) in his capacity to “adapt to modern conditions,” and charges a “solid fee” for religious rites (sometimes as much as ten rubles). A local teacher, recently retired, decides to lead the local church organization (*tserkovnuiu dvadtsatku*). She puts her students in touch with the priest, who tells them that if they do not go to church, then that means they are “against peace, and therefore, against the

⁵⁷⁶ On the history of religious studies in Russia, and its relationship to the scientific atheist community of the Soviet period, see Mikhail Iur'evich Smirnov, “Religiovedenie v Rossii: problema samoidentifikatsii,” *Vestnik Moskovskogo universiteta. Filosofii*, no. 1 (January-February 2009): 90-106. On the history of the sociology of religion and statistical studies of religiosity, see Iu. P. Zuev, “Dinamika religioznosti v Rossii v XX veke i ee sotsiologicheskoe izuchenie,” in V. I. Garadzha, *Sotsiologiya religii* (Moscow, 1995), 187-210; and Kira V. Tsekanskaia, “Russia: Trends in Orthodox Religiosity in the Twentieth Century (Statistics and Reality),” in *Religion and Politics in Russia: A Reader*, ed. Marjorie Mandelstam Balzer (New York: M. E. Sharpe, 2010), 3-17.

⁵⁷⁷ Gosudarstvennyi arkhiv Rossiiskoi Federatsii [henceforth GARF], f. A-561, op. 1, d. 406, l. 58.

⁵⁷⁸ Ibid.

⁵⁷⁹ Ibid.

politics of Soviet power.”⁵⁸⁰ Before long, “little crosses began to sparkle on the necks on many children.” Youth begin to flock to the newly-repaired church for Christmas services, where the choir sings, a New Year’s tree is lit up, and the priest hands out gifts. Soon, the crowds of believers could not even fit in the space, and the “velvety voice” of Father Vasilii could be heard on loudspeakers outside of the church.⁵⁸¹

Of course, Shevchenko continued, “our organizations, even if belatedly, sounded the alarm.” Letters of indignant workers appeared in the regional newspaper. The Metropolitan transferred Father Vasilii to another parish, and replaced him with a “meek and manageable little old man.” But the problem could not be resolved so easily. For a month and a half after the transfer of Father Vasilii, “the fanatical idolatresses (*poklonnitsy*) of the departed [Father Vasilii], a handsome man in his prime, are picketing outside of the church, write letters everywhere demanding the return of their idol (*kumir*), and will not allow the old man to even approach the threshold. The church is closed!”⁵⁸² Yet even though the church in Ivanteevka stands closed, Shevchenko states, the town is filled with believers and “the damage has been done.” How, then, should this situation be redeemed? Where does one begin?

Shevchenko and his agit-prop comrades began with a discussion of the problem in the local Party and “Knowledge” Society organs, which considered the problem in light of the Central Committee’s 1960 resolution on the tasks of party propaganda in contemporary conditions. Local communists, the best agitators, were placed in the homes of Ivanteevka families in order to conduct “individual work.” Local clubs hosted public lectures, question and answer sessions, and an antireligious film festival. Posters with “exactly formulated topics” appeared around town, announcing lectures and debates on “crucial worldview questions” such as “The Truth About Happiness, the Meaning of Life, and the Future,” and “Does the Bible Teach Goodness?” Teachers “passionately convince[d]” believing parents to cease influencing their children, using colorful examples of when “in the name of love, parents cripple the souls of their children—people of the epoch of communism.”⁵⁸³

In evaluating his work in Ivanteevka, Shevchenko observed that one topic that repeatedly came up was the future. During his own atheist lectures, he received notes asking when the end of the world would come, and whether it was true that it would come in the year 2000; whether it was true that atomic bombs could kill every person in the world, and what kind of future lies ahead. This persistent concern with the future inspired Shevchenko to create a series of atheist lectures geared towards students that approached the topic through, among other avenues, science fiction. Instead of religion, Shevchenko, who had experience lecturing in the Moscow planetarium, presented his audience with “our future, the future of our seven-year-plan, the future being uncovered by our government through scientific foresight.”⁵⁸⁴ Instead of a future filled with fear about the Apocalypse, he offered his listeners “an emotional and impassioned truth about the future [...] a future of light, joy, [and] the daring of Man the Creator—a vision of that which, in the words of K. E. Tsiolkovskii, is ‘impossible today’ but will become ‘possible tomorrow.’”⁵⁸⁵ By the end of the campaign, Shevchenko revealed, a teacher from Ivanteevka informed him that several students managed not only to move away from religion themselves,

⁵⁸⁰ Ibid., 59.

⁵⁸¹ Ibid., 60.

⁵⁸² Ibid., 61.

⁵⁸³ Ibid., 62.

⁵⁸⁴ Ibid.

⁵⁸⁵ Ibid., 63.

but even to interest their mothers in atheism “with captivating adventures of people in space from novels about interplanetary space travel.” Under the influence of their children, the parents were reported to “reconsider the ‘heavenly firmament’ and the reality of the ‘heavenly kingdom,’ having been penetrated by respect for great Soviet science.”⁵⁸⁶

Shevchenko’s discussion of the religious revival in Ivanteevka, as well as his criticism of Soviet efforts to combat the assumptions guiding these efforts, were not entirely new. Indeed, they came in the midst of the late Khrushchev era antireligious campaign that had been activated two years prior, in 1958. What makes Shevchenko’s observations valuable, however, is the way that his approach to atheist work on a group level echoes many of the tropes introduced in the personal atheist conversion narrative of Evgraf Duluman. Like Duluman, the town of Ivanteevka finds itself moving towards religion in the aftermath of wartime loss and devastation. Most of the town’s inhabitants, like Duluman, have lost a male member of the family. Soon, they fall under the influence of a young and charismatic priest who cultivates their religious convictions and commitment by, on the one hand, denying the contradiction between religious faith and loyalty to Soviet power, and, on the other hand, creating seductive (and communal) religious experiences, such as the Christmas service where Ivanteevka inhabitants were surrounded by aesthetically pleasing choir singing, candles, a festive tree, and holiday gifts. Shevchenko stresses the material well-being of the church, noting that it had recently been repaired, and the priest, who he points out charges large fees for his services during religious rites. Importantly, Shevchenko highlights the ineffectiveness of the administrative antireligious measures initially attempted by local Soviet authorities—their attempt to replace the charismatic Father Vasiliï with a “meek and manageable little old man” only provokes active protest and a flurry of petitions from the town’s inhabitants. Indeed, it is not until local atheists unveil a comprehensive campaign focused on individual work with believers that addressed “crucial worldview questions” that they begin to see any sign of results. In particular, Shevchenko stresses the need to effectively address the fear of death and the future that were persistently expressed by the residents of Ivanteevka. Like Duluman’s narrative of his individual spiritual conversion, then, Shevchenko’s tale about the experiences in Ivanteevka allow us some insight into how an atheist agitator engaged in converting the town’s inhabitants understood their spiritual lives.

To return to Evgraf Duluman and the questions posed at the beginning of this chapter—what made Duluman’s story such a powerful narrative in the antireligious campaign, and what accounts for his enduring atheist career over the course of the late Soviet period? In light of the difficulties atheists were experiencing on the ground, proposals that put forth ways in which atheism could be improved through learning from the forms and methods used by religion did not fall on deaf ears. A cadre like Duluman had experience in the world of religion, which provided him with a real knowledge of religious history and dogma, rare access to the dark spots in the internal life of the church (as well as a reason to make these public to the broader Soviet community), as well as a unique insight into the mind of a young Soviet believer. Moreover, Duluman’s education in the theological seminary and academy had provided him with precisely the kind of training—in pedagogy, homiletics, and pastoral care—that atheists recognized to be the weak points in their own methodology. More and more, cadres noted successes that resulted from scrupulous “individual work” with believers, describing effective new forms of atheist

⁵⁸⁶ Ibid., 64.

propaganda like repeated one-on-one conversations and organized evenings of heartfelt discussions (*vechera zadushevnykh besed*).⁵⁸⁷

Atheist successes were largely measured by “conversions” like Duluman’s—cases where a believer left a religious community, abandoned religious beliefs and practices, and sometimes even joined Soviet organizations like the Komsomol or amateur arts clubs, thereby solidifying their break with the world of religion and their embrace of the Soviet community and way of life. Such conversions, as atheists’ reports made clear, could be achieved by expanding the scope and depth of an atheist’s engagement with the believer. A cadre from the Stavropol region, for instance, relayed his work with a local woman whose child had fallen ill. She wanted to take her son to a local “sorceress” (*znakharka*), but the atheist visited her and told her of a child from a neighboring village who had died as a result of homespun treatment. Yet his work did not stop with this attempt to convince her by way of argument and evidence. He followed up on the situation by coming to the woman’s home with a horse and bringing her and her son to a doctor in a nearby town. Then he continued to visit the family twenty more times until the husband and wife broke with religion. According to this cadre from Stavropol, this kind of individual work helped him convert almost 200 people in the region.⁵⁸⁸ Much as in Duluman’s case, stories of successful conversions and new methods on the local level were eagerly disseminated by central organs.

But even atheist successes, like the 200 conversions in Stavropol’ region noted above, were but a drop in the bucket. Leading atheist cadres stressed the need for reforms in approaches to believers, but there was a tension in their recommendations between an emphasis on *quantity* on the one hand, and *quality* on the other. The Soviet ideological elite wanted to capture the masses, and to produce converts, and these two objectives did not always go together. Having tried tactics that focused on quantity with little to show for them, Soviet atheists began to focus on quality. Aleksandr Petrovich Gagarin, Professor of Philosophy at Moscow State University and the chairman of the RSFSR. “Knowledge” Society’s bureau of scientific atheism, criticized atheist work as too intellectual and abstract, and noted that it appealed more to reason than to emotions.⁵⁸⁹ Yet as he outlined how these shortcomings could be addressed through new approaches, cadres were not sure how new methods, such as “individual work” with believers, looked in practice. At seminars, conferences, and training workshops, local agitators asked the

⁵⁸⁷ GARF, f. A-561, op. 1, d. 285.

⁵⁸⁸ Ibid.

⁵⁸⁹ Aleksei Petrovich Gagarin (1895-1960) was the first chair of the IPK at the Moscow State University Philosophy Department. Gagarin’s career was devoted to philosophy in the sphere of education and party work. He was one of the first atheist philosophers in the Soviet Union. In the early 1920s, he worked in the Smolensk regional Party committee (*gubkom*), and was the editor of the journal *Away with the Gods (Doloi bogov)*. He began to teach philosophy in 1925 at the Saratov Party School, and in 1928-1933 studied at the Institute of Red Professors (*Institut krasnoi professury, IKP*). In 1935, Gagarin became the chair of the Philosophy department at MIFLI. In 1939, he defended one of the first doctoral dissertations in Philosophy in the Soviet Union on the topic of “The Ideological Front of Class Wardar in Russia in 1917.” One of the opponents at his defense was Emelian Iaroslavskii, the Party secretary and the head of the League of Militant Atheists. In recollections, his colleagues at Moscow State University describe his as an “extraordinary” and even a “legendary” person. See *Vestnik Moskovskogo universiteta. Filosofii*, 7, no. 5 (1999): 87-97. On Gagarin’s career at Moscow State University, also see, *Vestnik Moskovskogo universiteta. Filosofii*, 7, no. 5 (1996): 79-94. For a more intimate portrait in the memoirs of a former colleague, see Anatolii Danilovich Kosichev, *Filosofii, Vremia, Liudi: Vospominaniia i razmyshleniia byvshego dekana filosofskogo fakul'teta MGU im. M. V. Lomonosova* (Moskva: Olma-Press, 2003), 24-27, and T. I. Oi'zerman, “Sovetskaia Filosofii v seredine 40kh-nachale 50-kh godov: Filosofskii fakul'tet MGU,” *Chelovek*, no. 2 (2007): 50-62.

atheist elite for further guidance. One regional atheist, for example, asked Gagarin to explain concretely how he envisioned a lecturer's individual work in contemporary conditions. In response, Gagarin told the audience:

I envision it very easily. I do it in the following way: I live with people and I clarify [things] for them. And you live close to people. You are a militant atheist. It is necessary to register those people who are close to us and are still religious, and to find an opportunity to conduct an individual conversation with them, without offending their feelings. [It is necessary] to win them over (*razpolozhit' k sebe*), to enter into their confidence, the same way that the priest, in his time, won them over. This work is difficult, and honorariums are not paid for it, but this work is revolutionary, and it will play an enormous role, one must only want to do it.⁵⁹⁰

Like Gagarin, many leading atheists began to point out that an atheist's work no longer stopped at the end of a lecture. In order to achieve results, cadres were encouraged to participate in the daily lives of their audience, to understand their experiences, and to address their problems.

It is worth noting that while the atheist elite called for local cadres to approach believers "the same way as the priest," and local cadres called for the atheist elite to provide them with the same training that religious cadres received in seminaries and academies (such as homiletics), atheists were uneasy about drawing direct equivalents between scientific atheism and religion. In the occasional efforts to address "bourgeois" attacks that sought to portray communism as a faith-driven ideology, and therefore itself a kind of religion, atheists eagerly dispelled such analogies, noting, as Gagarin did, that religion is constructed around the belief in supernatural powers that guide and effect the world, whereas communism puts all power in the hands of man.⁵⁹¹ Yet despite such qualifications, calls from within the atheist community to improve atheism by borrowing content and methods from religion are, nevertheless, striking.

Such an approach to atheist work was qualitatively different than the forms and methods on which Soviet cadres relied in the past, and while old methods certainly continued to be used, leading atheists increasingly—and often quite consciously—urged the atheist community to borrow the tools and strategies of their ideological opponents. Indeed, at a conference gathered to discuss reasons for the tenacity (*zhivuchest'*) of religious survivals, Gagarin characterized the "communist atheist" as a kind of spiritual guide. While "bourgeois atheists" were content to leave the individual in a precarious state of "indifference"—unanchored to any clear ideology—a communist atheist had to guide the individual who had "departed from the shores of religion" but had not yet "arrived at the shore of atheism."⁵⁹² The power of religion is pragmatic—Gagarin observed, citing the American philosopher of religion William James. It rested in the fact that, for a believer, it was easier to live and to die. The success of the atheist enterprise, presumably, depended on the ability of atheists to reverse this situation.

Conclusion

⁵⁹⁰ GARF, f. A-561, op. 1, d. 402, ll. 39-40.

⁵⁹¹ Ibid., 39-40.

⁵⁹² GARF, f. A-561, op. 1, d. 399, ll. 11-12.

In the dominant narrative of the Khrushchev-era antireligious campaign, official pronouncements projected the inevitable decline of religion, and officials aggressively pursued measures—administrative closures of spaces of worship, legal pressure on religious organizations and officials, and unrelenting enlightenment propaganda of scientific achievements—geared to bring about the inevitable even sooner. Yet, beneath these confident ideological pronouncements and policies, there existed a second narrative, produced by Soviet atheists and intended largely for ‘internal’ consumption, that lamented the problematic results of antireligious policies and criticized weak points in Soviet atheist education. In part, this divergence between the regime’s official line and the views of atheist cadres had to do with the fact that Soviet atheists, while part of the party-state’s broad network of cadres, were nevertheless a peculiar sub-category within the ideological apparatus. As such, their goals, as well as the criteria they used to measure successes and failures, were different than those of other Soviet officials charged with the administration of religion. In many ways, Council officials and local state and party representatives pursued a negative agenda through negative measures. Their task was to limit the influence of religious institutions by managing religious organizations through legal and administrative means, and their results could be measured concretely, largely by noting decreases in religious spaces and practices (such as church attendance and ritual observance). The work of atheists, on the other hand, began where antireligious measures ended. Atheist education was intended to step into the space opened up by limiting the presence of religious organizations in the public lives of communities and removing religious ideas from the private lives of individuals. As atheists slowly realized, they also had to fill this space with concrete ‘positive’ content. Moreover, atheist education was, in effect, an inherently contradictory enterprise, as atheists were charged with both studying the beliefs and practices of religious believers in the Soviet Union, and converting these believers into atheists. Consequently, the results of atheist work, and its overall effectiveness, were more difficult to measure both quantitatively and qualitatively.

Like Lopatkin, some atheist cadres recognized both that they knew very little about religion, and that the dominant official approach was flawed and would not produce the desired results. In this respect, they also increasingly recognized that, in order to be effective, their work had to focus on so-called “positive” elements. As a growing number of atheists became suspicious of the facile assumptions buoying public pronouncements, they also became aware of the degree to which the Party, and Soviet institutions more generally, were ill-equipped for the tasks they set for atheist education. For atheist cadres, this was all the more problematic since the Party-State’s objectives were to be achieved, ostensibly, through the efforts of atheists on the ground. By necessity, they recognized that Soviet atheist education lacked both theoretical clarity and practical experience, and that these short-comings manifested in unsophisticated methods, poorly trained cadres, and negligible, if not outright negative, results.

During the second half of the Khrushchev era, the Soviet atheist project, and perhaps even the Soviet ideological enterprise more generally, experienced a spiritual crisis. In many ways, the crisis of the Party-State was not unlike that experienced by Evgraf Duluman. The result of this crisis was the most concerted and articulated attempt in the country’s history to turn Soviet ideology into a religion—that is, to give it spiritual power and coherence by addressing its philosophical, emotional, aesthetic, and ritual components. While these new directions were only emerging at the beginning of the period examined in this chapter, by the end of the Khrushchev

era they became the guiding principles of Soviet atheism, institutionalized in official resolutions, as well as in the work of party, state, social, and cultural organizations. The story of the Khrushchev-era antireligious campaign, therefore, is not only the story of wanton destruction inflicted on Soviet religious institutions and believers. It is also the story of Soviet atheists' growing self-awareness and self-criticism. In their effort to produce a Soviet atheism fit to overcome and replace religion, the emerging cohort of Soviet atheists began to pay closer attention to religion itself by studying religious beliefs, practices, and experiences. In an ironic development, some began to realize that in developing Soviet atheism, they perhaps had as much to learn from religion as from the ideology of the Communist Party.

Chapter Five

Science and Religion Reconsiders Science and Religion

On 31 August 1964, Vasilii Nikiforovich Zaichikov, deputy chairman of the All-Union “Knowledge” Society (*Obshchestvo “Znanie”*), and Vladimir Andreevich Mezentsev, editor of the journal *Science and Religion* (*Nauka i religiia*), wrote to the Central Committee of the Communist Party requesting a review of their proposal to change the direction of the country’s primary atheist periodical.⁵⁹³ The authors noted that, in the five years since it began publication in 1959, the journal had “played its own positive role” in Soviet atheist education, but conceded that the time had come to address its shortcomings in order to transform the journal from a periodical geared for a narrow circle of atheist cadres into a “publication for the masses.”⁵⁹⁴ In light of new ideological demands, Zaichikov and Mezentsev wrote that *Science and Religion* had to move beyond scientific enlightenment and the critique of religion, and instead turn toward “worldly themes” (*k zhiteiskoi tematike*).

So that we do not miss the mark, the journal should answer all those questions that arise among the broad masses of Soviet people, including believers—questions to which the church provides its own answers. These are the most diverse issues of contemporary life, issues which extend far beyond the relationship of science and religion: the meaning of life, happiness and solace

⁵⁹³ Gosudarstvennyi arkhiv Rossiiskoi Federatsii [henceforth GARF], f. 9547, op. 1, d. 1371, ll. 60-62. On Zaichikov’s role in the “Knowledge” Society, and a history of the Society’s work in the 1940s-1960s, see Vasilii Nikiforovich Zaichikov, *Akademiia millionov: (O rabote Vsesoiuznogo obshchestva “Znanie”)* (Moscow: Znanie, 1967); and Vladimir Andreevich Mezentsev, *Znanie—narodu (K 25-letiiu Vsesoiuznogo obshchestva “Znanie”)* (Moscow: Znanie, 1972). Mezentsev served as the executive editor of *Science and Religion* in 1964-1968. In a recent interview, Olga Timofeevna Brushlinskaia, currently the executive editor of *Science and Religion*, describes Mezentsev as “brave and even harsh (*rezkii*) in his relations with [Party] higher-ups,” which she proposes as the reason he did not hold on to his position as editor for very long. See Mark Smirnov and Pavel Krug, “V zashchitu svobodomyслиia: Iсполnilos’ polveka zhurnalu ‘Nauka i religiia’,” *Nezavisimaia gazeta*, 21 October 2009, http://religion.ng.ru/events/2009-10-21/2_magazine.html (accessed September 7, 2010). Olga Timofeevna Brushlinskaia (b. 1934) graduated from the Department of Journalism of Moscow State University in 1956. Her career with *Science and Religion* began in 1970 as a correspondent who specialized in Islam. Starting in 1975, she headed the Islam division of the journal. In 2001, she became the journal’s executive secretary, and in 2007, its editor-in-chief. Nikolai Mitrokhin’s interview with Brushlinskaia covers her career with the journal extensively. It also provides insight into the ways the Party influenced the journal’s work, including the ideological oversight of the journal by E. I. Lisavtsev, see “‘Dva chlena redkollegii zhurnala byli rabotnikami TsK KPSS’: Beseda Nikolaia Mitrokhina s Ol’goi Timofeevnoi Brushlinskoi,” *Neprikosnovennyi zapas* 3, no. 59 (2008), <http://magazines.russ.ru/nz/2008/3/dv15-pr.html> (accessed September 9, 2010).

⁵⁹⁴ GARF, f. 9547, op. 1, d. 1371, l. 60.

(*shchast'e i uteshenie*), the moral (*npravstvennoe*) and immoral in human behavior, truth and conscience, good and evil, the upbringing of children, the maintenance of traditions, and the way to relate to various events and facts.⁵⁹⁵

Zaichikov and Mezentsev suggested that it was precisely such “moral-ethical” issues that occupied the contemporary clergy and filled the foreign religious literature and radio propaganda that infiltrated Soviet borders. To combat their influence and win a broad readership, the journal had to become a “popular philosophical journal of a kind we do not yet have.”⁵⁹⁶

The authors also noted another obstacle to the journal’s mass appeal: its “rather unattractive” exterior. They insisted that a publication of this nature should have “an attractive outward appearance, be executed on the best kind of paper using a multi-colored print” since “[a]ll foreign publications, which are published in large circulations by our ideological opponents, including church people (*tserkovnikami*), are remarkable for their very high print quality, are printed on the best paper, and have titles that disguise their intent (*zamaskirovannye nazvaniia*).”⁵⁹⁷ Above all, the authors noted that, considering the journal’s proposed change in direction, the title *Science and Religion* “was [no longer] justified” (and likewise, “did not facilitate dissemination among the masses.”)⁵⁹⁸ Instead, as possible alternatives, the authors proposed *The Light of Knowledge* (*Svet znanii*) and *Thought* (*Mysl'*).

A Parting of Ways

The issues raised by Zaichikov and Mezentsev with regards to *Science and Religion* extended beyond the logistics of the journal’s direction and title, and were in fact indicative of the broader problems faced by ideologists as they reconsidered the place of atheism in Soviet life at the end of the Khrushchev era. In part, the call for a new title for *Science and Religion* was part of a broader call for a new direction—indeed, a new foundation—for atheist work, in light of both the failures of atheist education that revealed themselves over the course of the antireligious campaign, and the transformations within religion itself, what atheists termed its “modernization.” Noting the evident disconnect between the religion described in Marxist-Leninist propaganda and the religion that cadres actually encountered on the ground, Soviet atheists observed religion’s “reconciliation” with science and its move towards philosophical and everyday concerns. And while they criticized these transformations as hypocrisy and dissimulation (*prisposoblenchestvo*), they also conceded that such adaptability on the part of religious institutions accounted for their continued pull for believers, and therefore their continued relevance in modern life. Conversely, the failure of Soviet atheism to address these philosophical, spiritual, and everyday subjects remained an obstacle to the regime’s goal of “overcoming” (*preodolenie*) religion and forging an atheistic society. In part, then, the revision

⁵⁹⁵ Ibid., 60.

⁵⁹⁶ Ibid., 61.

⁵⁹⁷ Ibid., 62. Laments about low quality work and lack of resources were typical in the Soviet printing industry of the time, as Eleonory Gilbrud’s dissertation makes clear, as were direct comparisons with the West. On Soviet attempts to create appealing domestic publications for foreign consumers as part of the Soviet cultural diplomacy effort, see Eleonory Gilbrud, “To See Paris and Die”: Western Culture in the Soviet Union, 1950s and 1960s” (Ph.D. dissertation, University of California, Berkeley, 2010): 29-35.

⁵⁹⁸ Ibid., 61.

in atheist approaches in the last years of Khrushchev's reign was also a response to the shortcomings atheists identified in their own previous efforts.⁵⁹⁹ The ideological elite began to recognize that areas in which atheism was deficient were precisely those where religion continued to thrive—a recognition that necessitated that atheism address spiritual life and move its focus into the sphere of everyday life, into the world of the family, into the home.

By the end of the Khrushchev period, the Soviet leadership had been made aware of the problems in Soviet atheist work as it had been conducted over the course of the previous decade. The intensive antireligious campaign of 1958-1964 produced a drastic reduction in the number of churches (from 13,372 functioning churches at the beginning of 1959, to 8,314 in 1963, to between 7,000 and 7,500 in 1965),⁶⁰⁰ as well as increasingly strict oversight over all aspects of religious life, from religious education to the observance of religious rites.⁶⁰¹ But, as the previous chapters make clear, what the campaign did *not* produce was the expected decline in actual religiosity. Reflecting on the campaign at an All-Union conference on atheist education some years later, I. I. Brazhnik, the deputy chairman of the Council on Religious Affairs, observed that

⁵⁹⁹ These efforts, and atheists' evaluations of them, are the subject of chapter Two and chapter Three.

⁶⁰⁰ Numerous scholars have pointed to the difficulty of arriving at precise figures for the administrative closures of religious spaces during the Khrushchev-era antireligious campaign. Nevertheless, despite the divergence of sources as well as criteria for counting, there is a broad consensus about the overall picture. The above figures (13,372 functioning churches at the beginning of 1959, to 8,314 in 1963) come from one of the most recent publications on the Soviet antireligious campaign, Kira V. Tsekhanskaia, "Russia: Trends in Orthodox Religiosity in the Twentieth Century (Statistics and Reality)," in *Religion and Politics in Russia: A Reader*, ed. Marjorie Mandelstam Balzer (New York: M. E. Sharpe, 2010), 9. Nathaniel Davis also provides figures in his detailed archival study of church closures during the Khrushchev antireligious campaign, and includes factors to keep in mind when considering the statistical picture: "Between January 1949 and December 1952 the *Zhurnal moskovskoi patriarkhii* reported no new church consecrations. The director of the Institute of Scientific Atheism, Viktor Garadzha, calculated 13,800 churches for 1950. The archive gives 13,867 for 1 January 1951, a number quite close to Garadzha's figures. In 1989, Iurii Khristoradnov, the new head of the Council on Religious Affairs, stated that there were 12,000 Orthodox churches in 1956 and 7,000 by 1965. The archive and other official sources have 13,417 and approximately 7,500 for the years in question. Khristoradnov may have been using figures for churches that were functioning, even if irregularly, while the other statistics may have been for registered Orthodox religious societies, including inactive parishes still on the council's rolls. The two ways of counting show consistent differences. Nathaniel Davis, "The Number of Orthodox Churches before and after the Khrushchev Antireligious Drive," *Slavic Review* 50, no. 3 (Autumn, 1991): 614.

⁶⁰¹ The campaign targeted religious education and monastic life. According to political scientist Sabrina Ramet, renewed pressure on the Russian Orthodox Church beginning in 1958 "abolished certain tax exemptions on monastic properties that had been introduced in 1945 [...] and called for measures to curb monastic activity. In 1959 sixty-four monasteries still functioned. The vigor of antimonastic measures reduced their number to 18 in 1965." Sabrina Petra Ramet, *Nihil obstat: Religion, Politics, and Social Change in East-Central Europe* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1998), 233. The age that candidates could apply to theological seminaries was raised from 18 to 30, and the number of seminaries was reduced. The theological seminaries closed during the Khrushchev-era campaign include Saratov, Stavropol, Minsk, Volyna (Lutsk), and Kiev. Among the monasteries closed was the Monastery of the Caves in Kiev, considered by many to be the center of Orthodox Christianity. On restrictions on religious education, see Tatiana A. Chumachenko, *Church and State in Soviet Russia: Russian Orthodoxy from World War II to the Khrushchev Years*, trans. and ed. Edward E. Roslof (Armonk, NY: M.E. Sharpe, 2002), 187-188. On monastic life, see also Tsekhanskaia, 9. Moreover, the campaign pursued measures under the slogan of "socialist legality" and in this period volunteer groups were formed at local state committees (*ispolkomy*) to oversee religious officials and believers. Finally, new regulations were introduced over the observance of religious rites, with new legal restrictions on participants, and new obligations placed on clergy to register and report all participants in religious rituals to local government and Party officials.

some administrative measures were so counterproductive that they resulted in an increase in religious practices.⁶⁰²

Here are some figures that show what the illegal, rushed (*nezakonnoe, pospeshnoe*) closure of churches has given us. In Dnepropetrovsk *oblast*, 129 Orthodox churches, or 83.5 per cent, have been closed in the last five years [1961-1966—VS], and 16.5 per cent remained. Yet in the last year, there were 17 per cent more rituals conducted in the remaining 20 churches than had been conducted in 150 [churches]. In those same five years, no churches had been closed in Vologda *oblast*, [and] ritual observance declined. We should not determine the patterns in such a linear fashion (*ne ustanavlivat' takuiu priamuiu zakonomernost'*); we understand what it means to have churches and how this facilitates ritual observance. But let the comrades from Dnepropetrovsk and Moldova explain the figures that are being presented on church closures. More than half of Moldova's Orthodox churches have been closed in the last six years (347), [and cadres] forbade the ringing of church bells, actively worked on the dissolution of the church *dvadtsatki*⁶⁰³ (which they achieved largely through falsehoods), [...] and so forth.

Nevertheless (*nesmotria na eto*), or, more exactly, despite this (*vopreki etomu*)—or, perhaps, even more exactly, because of this (*blagodaria etomu*)—the level of the population's religiosity is not declining but growing. Not long ago, we reported on this to the Party's Central Committee. In 1963, [in Moldova—VS] 31 per cent were buried according to church ritual, whereas in 1965 [the figure increased to] more than 40 per cent. The income of the Russian Orthodox Church [in Moldova—VS] in 1962 was 1 million, whereas in 1964 it was 1 million 800 thousand. [In] Tiraspol' *raion*, all churches are closed, yet in 1964, 1,000 newborns were baptized.⁶⁰⁴

In the face of results like these, the Party-State significantly curtailed administrative measures against religious institutions and believers starting in 1964.⁶⁰⁵

⁶⁰² It is worth comparing Brazhnik's open admission of atheist failures behind the closed doors of internal discussions with his frequent proclamations of successes in publications intended for the public, as well as in status reports to top state and party organs. For instance, Brazhnik's statement during the antireligious campaign that "Life has fully confirmed the correctness of the consistent and deeply scientific political approach to religion and the Church. The great work of the Party, executed over the course of socialist construction, has led to significant changes in the consciousness and psychology of Soviet people, [and] to the victory of materialist, socialist ideology." Quoted in Nina Borisovna Lamanskaia, "Gosudarstvennaia politika po otnosheniiu k religii i veruiushchim v 1954-1964 gg. (Na materialakh Krasnoiarskogo kraia)," (Dissertatsiia na soiskanie uchenoi stepeni kandidata istoricheskikh nauk, Khakasskii gosudarstvennyi universitet imeni N. F. Katanova, 2004).

⁶⁰³ "Dvadstatki" refers the governing body of local churches made up of the twenty most active congregants.

⁶⁰⁴ Rossiiskii gosudarstvennyi arkhiv sotsial'no-politicheskoi istorii-m (formerly Tsentral'nyi khraneniia dokumentov molodezhnykh organizatsii) [henceforth RGASPI-m], f. 1, op. 34, d. 130, ll. 31-32.

⁶⁰⁵ Tsekhanskaia, 10. Tsekhanskaia notes that, "The mass closures of churches came to a halt after 1964. [...] After the removal of Khrushchev, who was the main inspiration for the atheistic campaign, the new authorities suspended the open struggle with the church and turned antireligious policy in the direction of relatively gradual displacement of religious faith from people's consciousness." Likewise, John Anderson observes a reconsideration of the Party-State's approach to religion and atheism in 1964-1965. See John Anderson, *Religion, State and Politics in the Soviet Union and Successor States* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 68-75.

In many ways, the Party's new approach to religion returned to an earlier position that had been outlined in the 10 November 1954 decree, "On mistakes in the execution of atheist propaganda among the population" (*Ob oshibkakh v provedenii nauchno-ateisticheskoi propagandy sredi naseleniia*), when the antireligious campaign initiated in July 1954 had failed to produce the intended results.⁶⁰⁶ To correct what were referred to as "excesses" (*peregiby*) on the local level, the 10 November 1954 decree criticized administrative measures against religious organizations and atheist propaganda that offended believers.⁶⁰⁷ Yet, as the previous chapters show, the call to curtail "administrative excesses" created such confusion among cadres about the state's position on religion that, in effect, Soviet atheist efforts were derailed, and religion even flourished in the years immediately following the campaign (1955-1957).⁶⁰⁸ When the Khrushchev regime returned to the religious problem in 1958, it was again largely with the old arsenal of administrative measures and personal offenses. Indeed, the antireligious campaign of the late Khrushchev era did little to advance the atheist cause, except confirm the lessons learned (or, perhaps, *not* learned) in 1954.

Nevertheless, the sea change in the state's relationship to religion is deceptive, and should not be read as either the onset of a more "liberal" approach to confessional politics, nor as a rejection of the Party's atheist ambitions—although, as this dissertation argues, the state's atheist work did indeed bear such unintended fruit by the end of the Soviet era. It is worth emphasizing that while Brazhnik's review of Soviet antireligious policies is striking in its candor, such critical assessments were quite common by the mid-1960s. Cadres who criticized Soviet atheist practices were not, as some scholars have argued, dissenting voices in the Soviet ideological establishment.⁶⁰⁹ As this chapter will show, many of them were, in fact, at the very heart of that establishment. The regime's rejection of the most visible antireligious policies (such as church closures and propaganda campaigns against clergy and believers) was not a desertion of its atheist mission. The state's commitment to the fight against religion can be seen in the fact that many elements born during the Khrushchev-era campaign (such as local-level volunteer committees for oversight over violations of laws on religious cults, and stricter requirements—and hurdles—for both clergy and participants for ritual observance) largely stayed in place. If anything, then, the abandonment of administrative measures—which, by the end of the Khrushchev era, were recognized as both unpopular and ineffective—was not the rejection of the effort to forge an atheist society, but an attempt to bring the Soviet Union *closer* to that ultimate goal.

What changed by the end of the Khrushchev period was not the ends but the means. In the Breznev era, the antireligious campaign and atheist education parted ways, yet, this chapter argues, the two component parts of the Soviet secularization project did not fare equally. In

⁶⁰⁶ Central Committee resolution of 10 November 1954, "Ob oshibkakh v provedenii nauchno-ateisticheskoi propagandy sredi naseleniia." For the 7 July 1954 and 10 November 1954 resolutions, see also *Zakonodatel'stvo o religioznykh kul'takh. Sbornik materialov i dokumentov* (Moscow, 1971), 34, 40-45. The first decree, on the intensification of atheist propaganda, was not made public at the time, while the second was published in central periodicals, in *Pravda*, 11 November 1954, 2, as well as in *Komsomol'skaia Pravda* and *Trud*.

⁶⁰⁷ The course of the 1954 campaign and the mixed results produced by the state's antireligious measures are the subject of chapter Two.

⁶⁰⁸ On the revival of religiosity in 1955-1957, before the re-activation of the antireligious campaign in 1958, see Chumachenko, *Church and State in Soviet Russia*, and chapters Two and Three of this dissertation.

⁶⁰⁹ John Anderson notes such comments as "dissenting voices," but also warns that they should not be overemphasized, and that critical opinions did not truly emerge until the Gorbachev era. Anderson, 74-76.

shifting emphasis from a “negative” to a “positive” approach, the regime largely abandoned the former, and embraced the latter—which was the culmination of processes that began as early as the 1954 antireligious campaign.

That the end of the antireligious campaign did not mean the end of the campaign against religion is also evident in the Party's interest in expanding and improving atheist education, which did not decline with Khrushchev's departure, but rather intensified. The ideological elite criticized atheist education in mass and professional publications, and devoted unprecedented amounts of attention to ideology in general, and atheism in particular, at seminars, conferences, and Party Plenums (in June and November 1963).⁶¹⁰ The state also allocated significant resources to form new organizations charged with studying religion and systematizing atheist education, the most prominent being the Institute of Scientific Atheism under the Academy of Social Sciences (AON), the Party's top institution for training ideological cadres. Finally, on 2 January 1964, the Central Committee made clear that a reform of Soviet atheism was again a top state priority when it issued “On measures for strengthening the atheist education of the population” (*O meropriiatiakh po usileniiu ateisticheskogo vospitaniia naseleniia*), a resolution that directed cadres to increase the quantity and improve the quality of atheist work.⁶¹¹

Based on information about religious communities' responses to the new Party line, religious authorities seemed to understand that the Party was not abandoning the war against religion, despite the emphasis on curtailing administrative measures and policies that offended believers. In part, this was attested to by the response of religious officials to an article published in *Kommunist*, “The Formation of the Scientific Worldview and Atheist Education” (*Formirovanie nauchnogo mirovozzreniia i ateisticheskoe vospitanie*), by Leonid Fedorovich Il'ichev, one of the Party's leading voices on ideological matters during the Khrushchev era and the chair of the recently-formed Ideological Commission.⁶¹² A. Puzin, the chairman of the Council on the Affairs of Religious Cults (CARC), reported that leading representative of various confessions generally welcomed the state's abandonment of administrative measures. A prominent Old Believer remarked that he agreed with Il'ichev's point that atheist agitation should not resort to force.⁶¹³ A Catholic priest pointed out that administrative methods had only driven believers into the “underground”—away from registered religious communities and established confessions, into the world of “sects.” He remarked that a “smart priest” would never try to limit the cultural activities of a believer—attending the theater, watching television, and even dancing—while for believers who had gone underground, “nothing of the kind can exist.” He noted that “when atheists allow themselves to mock [believers] and be rude towards religion,

⁶¹⁰ See *Plenum Tsentral'nogo Komiteta Kommunisticheskoi Partii Sovetskogo Soiuz, 18-21 June 1963: Stenograficheskii otchet* (Moscow: Izdatel'stvo Politicheskoi Literatury, 1964).

⁶¹¹ “O meropriiatiakh po usileniiu ateisticheskog vospitaniia naseleniia,” *Partiinaiia zhizn'* 2 (1964). The intensification of atheist education was, as always, signaled to the broader Soviet public with a publication in *Pravda*. See “Aktivno vesti ateisticheskoe vospitanie,” *Pravda*, 2 March 1964, 2.

⁶¹² L. Il'ichev, “Formirovanie nauchnogo mirovozzreniia i ateisticheskoe vospitanie,” *Kommunist* 1 (1964): 23-46.

⁶¹³ Rossiiskii gosudarstvennyi arkhiv noveishei istorii [henceforth RGANI], f. 5, op. 55, d. 70, ll. 49-54. Information of this nature (in this case, on believer's responses to Il'ichev's article) was routinely supplied to the Council on the Affairs of Religious Cults by the KGB, and in fact, many of commissioners in both CARC and CAROC made their careers in state security organs.

believers get offended and rush to the priest in order to find solace (*uteshenie*)." Such "offended" believers, he noted, develop a "naked fanaticism" (*gol'yi fanatism*).⁶¹⁴

Yet while religious representatives approved of the "softer" line in the state's policies on religion, they also recognized that the motivating force behind the new direction was actually to create more effective antireligious measures. The procurator of the Catholic seminary in Kaunas, Lithuania, remarked that while he had hoped for a reconciliation between the Soviet state and religious institutions (a hope that had been raised by the fact that Aleksei Adzhubei, Khrushchev's son-in-law and the editor of the central state newspaper *Izvestiia*, had publicly met with Pope John XXIII), Il'ichev's article led him to draw the conclusion that such hopes were unfounded. Above all, Il'ichev's article indicated to him that atheist propaganda was not just the initiative of local officials, but was being driven and curated from the highest levels of the Party. Another Catholic priest considered the Party's revised approach to religion and atheism to be of great danger to religion, and noted that, "One can consider an entire generation buried [lost] to the church."⁶¹⁵

Nevertheless, some religious representatives dismissed the threat posed by the state's new atheist drive. A Lutheran pastor in Tallinn, Estonia remarked that the Lutheran clergy were not particularly concerned with Il'ichev's article, and that "there will be enough believers for our lifetime." An elder (*presviter*) from Ukraine was likewise unconcerned, since he believed that the article would have no effect on firm believers, and might only make an impression on those who "waiver" (*kolebliushchikhsia*). "If atheists believe in Marx and Lenin," he stated, "then believers believe in Christ. Nevertheless, [the believer] actively participates in the construction of Communism."⁶¹⁶ A Baptist preacher from Cherkassy observed that the publication would have little effect, since "belief in God is in our emotions, in our hearts."⁶¹⁷ And the chief rabbi of Odessa went so far as to state that, "If communists believed in God, then I assure you that it would be possible to build Communism not in twenty, but in three years."⁶¹⁸

The Party's return to atheism—in various meetings, publications, and resolutions—naturally sent a message to religious organizations, but the problems that the Soviet ideological elite raised in 1963-1964 were also inherently a criticism of the "Knowledge" Society, the organization responsible for coordinating the enlightenment campaign. The "Knowledge" Society wasted no time stepping up atheist measures: Zaichikov reported that, in the first quarter of 1964, the Society organized 192,454 atheist lectures, an increase from the 149,084 held in the same period of the previous year.⁶¹⁹ Atheist propaganda also became more varied, moving beyond lectures to thematic evenings, public discussions with former believers, reader's conferences, and individual work with believers. These new measures were part of the Society's

⁶¹⁴ Ibid.

⁶¹⁵ RGANI, f. 5, op. 55, d. 70, l. 52.

⁶¹⁶ Ibid., 53.

⁶¹⁷ This point, incidentally, was prominently featured in the article itself, when Il'ichev wrote that, "In atheist propaganda, we appeal primarily to man's reason [...] but we lose sight of the emotional sphere" wrote Leonid Il'ichev, head of the newly formed Ideological Commission, "Meanwhile, churchmen and sectarians aim to act upon not only, and not so much, on reason, as on man's emotions [...] We ourselves need to not only understand the meaning of the emotional factor, but to make practical use of it." Il'ichev, "Formirovanie nauchnogo mirovozzreniia i ateisticheskoe vospitanie," 41.

⁶¹⁸ RGANI, f. 5, op. 55, d. 70, l. 53.

⁶¹⁹ GARF, f. 9547, op. 1, d. 1371, ll. 45-49.

effort to expand the audience of atheist propaganda and to interest more believers by trying to address topics that they believed might be of particular concern to a religious audience. As evidence of success, Zaichikov noted that out of the 250 people that had attended an atheist lecture in Briansk (titled “Does religion get in the way of building Communism?”), 150 were Orthodox, and 45 were Baptists. The Society’s new emphasis on individual work was also bearing fruit, and Zaichikov reported that atheist agitation on the “Lenin” collective farm in Moldova had managed to bring 23 Jehovah’s Witnesses back into the Soviet fold.⁶²⁰

Zaichikov certainly intended to stress progress in the Society’s work, but from the perspective of the Party leadership, such results were unreliable as markers of overall effect, since they were both modest and episodic. What did it mean, for example, that 23 Jehovah’s Witnesses had been “converted” in Moldova, when the republic had among the highest concentrations of Jehovah’s Witness communities in the country, with over 2,000 members known to Soviet authorities?⁶²¹ How was it significant that the majority of the audience at an atheist lecture were believers, if there was no indication of whether the lecture made any impression on their religious convictions? How was the Party to put information like this in context and make sense of such reports? More importantly, how was it to make *use* of them? The ideological elite was growing impatient, and the measures taken in 1964 indicate a new era in atheist work—an era when theory was supposed to inform practice, and practice was supposed to produce results.

By the end of the Khrushchev era, the Soviet ideological establishment was in crisis, and this crisis called for reform in approaches to religion and atheism. Yet despite acknowledging the problem and responding with decrees (including a resolution on the predicament of *Science and Religion*),⁶²² the Party’s Central Committee did not (and perhaps could not) provide a solution to an issue of this nature and magnitude. The burden of resolving the dilemma of Soviet atheism fell on atheists themselves, and a revealing place to focus an analysis of their efforts is with their attempt to reform and rename their central publication.

Knowledge, Faith, Man and the World

Zaichikov’s and Mezentsev’s 1964 note was neither the first, nor the last, time that *Science and Religion* had come to the attention of the Central Committee. In April 1963, “Knowledge” Society leaders described the increasing burden of the journal’s “dual nature” (*dvoistvennoe polozhenie*) for the Party elite.⁶²³ Although *Science and Religion* began publication in 1959, the authors noted that the journal’s primary function was not yet clear. As a result, the editors were likewise uncertain of its target audience. On the one hand, the journal was intended for the mass reader, and especially religious believers; on the other, it was meant to serve as a training ground for atheist cadres. Meanwhile, the report pointed out, “It is clear that

⁶²⁰ Ibid., 45.

⁶²¹ GARF, f. 6991, op. 6, d. 95, ll. 111, 150. Moldova, along with Ukraine, had the highest concentration of Jehovah’s Witnesses, with the two republics combined having approximately the same number as the rest of the U.S.S.R. The Council on Religious Affairs reports roughly 2,300-2,500 Jehovah’s Witnesses in Moldova, and 8,000 in Ukraine, in 1967. I am grateful to Emily Baran for bringing these statistics to my attention, and helping me put them in context.

⁶²² GARF, f. 9547, op. 1, d. 1371, ll. 64-65.

⁶²³ GARF, f. 9547, op. 1, d. 1310, ll. 29-30.

each of these [audiences] has its own needs—in terms of themes, level of education, or form of delivery—and [these needs] are often absolutely incompatible. For example, a believer can only be repulsed by various methodological materials [aimed at propagandists] discussing approaches to believers [and] methods of tearing [believers] away from religion, while for the propagandist, these materials are essential.”⁶²⁴ Consequently, the journal had to make a choice about whether to be a mass or specialist publication—that is, whether its materials were intended for internal consumption (that is, for other atheists), or for the general public (and especially that segment of the population that they identified as religious).

Since the state’s coercive measures on the ground had proven to be a failure, atheists had to increasingly rely on persuasion. For the journal, this meant that in order to win the battle of worldviews, the journal had to find a way into the home—and the heart—of ordinary Soviet people. To do this, the “Knowledge” Society sought permission to turn the journal’s attention primarily to the mass reader and, as a necessary correlation, to find a “less academic” title. As potentially better titles, the authors suggested *Knowledge and Faith (Znanie i vera)*, *Life and Religion (Zhizn’ i religiia)*, or simply *Light (Svet)*.⁶²⁵

Both of the “Knowledge” Society’s attempts to rename *Science and Religion* (in 1963 and 1964) were unsuccessful, and the subject was again taken up in 1965 at a conference called to address the work of the journal.⁶²⁶ The discussion—which gathered some of the Soviet Union’s leading atheist voices, as well as representatives of party and academic institutions from regional centers—again revolved around the need to change the direction and audience of the journal, yet as the atheist establishment became ever more aware of its own lack of progress, the tenor of the debate grew more urgent. In part, this urgency was the result of the Party elite’s dissatisfaction with the journal’s ability to fulfill its ideological mission, which they increasingly defined to be the inculcation of a scientific atheist worldview, rather than the fight against religion. Mezentsev shared that, “[he] did not like hearing at the [Central Committee’s] Ideological department that we do not know how to propagandize our worldview, and to this point do very little to popularize it. [...] After all, at reader’s conferences, readers very reasonably tell us: you take away our faith, but what do you give us in return?”⁶²⁷

The question posed by Soviet readers to the atheist community—what did atheism offer in return for the religion that believers were asked to give up—again presented atheists with a difficult question, one that they had been struggling with over the course of the campaign: What is the opposite of religion? The journal’s title put forth that the force opposing religion was science, and that religion was to be fought through education and enlightenment. Atheists’ reconsideration of the title *Science and Religion*, then, was indicative of a broader rejection of the notion that science was a sufficient substitute for religious belief. Certainly, the inability of scientific enlightenment measures to bring about results confirmed that atheists had thus far missed something fundamental in their understanding of religion.⁶²⁸ But if not science, then what? The titles that the “Knowledge” Society had proposed in 1963—*Light, Knowledge and Faith*, and even *Life and Religion*—were a variation in nuance, but they still largely upheld the notion that religion was marked by darkness, irrationality, and death.

⁶²⁴ GARF, f. 9547, op. 1, d. 1310, l. 29.

⁶²⁵ Ibid.

⁶²⁶ GARF, f. 9547, op. 1, d. 1447.

⁶²⁷ Ibid., 2-3.

⁶²⁸ The realization that science was not an effective means to battle religion is the subject of chapter One of this dissertation.

Yet by 1965, some Soviet atheists began to argue that religion was not so much an intellectual or epistemological problem, as a philosophical one. Mezentsev suggested that the true opposition to religion was not science, and not even knowledge, but rather the Marxist-Leninist *worldview*. “Religion, after all, is a worldview, not a body of knowledge, [and] we need to title the journal more appropriately,” Mezentsev observed. “It is more correct to say ‘Marxism-Leninism and Religion.’” Atheism, Mezentsev put forth, was not separate, but rather a fundamental part of Marxism-Leninism: “We cannot separate the propaganda of our worldview from the general propaganda of Marxism-Leninism. [W]e must battle any philosophical current that is alien to us. We undervalue this battle for the purity of Leninism.” Mezentsev insisted that, in return for religion, “We can and we must give our views on the world, our communist worldview.”⁶²⁹ Finally, he reminded fellow atheists that “the battle is being waged along moral lines, and we must take [moral] issues to be our foundation.” As a result, he put forth several possible titles that might more accurately reflect the journal’s new mission: *Spring (Rodnik)*, *Knowledge for All (Znania dlia vsekh)*, *The Torch of Truth (Svetoch)*, *Man and the World (Chelovek i mir)*, and the slight (yet significant) variation, *The World of Man (Mir cheloveka)*.⁶³⁰

The Ticket to the Soviet Soul

For many at the conference, the turn to worldview meant a new kind of focus on the individual, and several participants responded that the titles *Man and the World*, and even more, *The World of Man*, reflected best the kind of journal *Science and Religion* needed to become. The journal’s objective, then, was to navigate between the ideological goals of the Party-State and the interests and needs of Soviet society. As a number of atheists observed, it could best serve both of these objectives if it became a forum for the various concerns of Soviet people—concerns that ranged from everyday morality to the questions about the meaning of life and death. In order to do this, it had to devote attention not so much to individual’s *exterior* surroundings (to economics, politics, or social relations, reflected in the title *Man and the World*), but to a person’s *interior* life, to *The World of Man*.

A. T. Moskalenko, a researcher at the Siberian division of the Soviet Academy of Sciences, observed that in bringing attention to Soviet people’s spiritual lives, the journal would be addressing the primary deficiency of Soviet atheism.

The title *The World of Man* is good. There is a world of man, but we ignored it for many years. Believers say that we are only interested in international issues, [that] we do not look into a person’s soul, [that] man’s soul has never interested [us].

I can bring an example: a woman comes to the party *obkom* [regional party committee—VS], asks for help, and is refused. Prior to this, the woman already went to all the sects, but was nowhere able to find the truth, and thought she might find it at the *obkom* of the party. But even there no one helped her. And now a person does not even know where to seek truth.

[...] We sometimes do not understand the worries of our Soviet person, and do not take them into account. As a result, [we have] such examples as when a person

⁶²⁹ GARF, f. 9547, op. 1, d. 1447, ll. 2-3.

⁶³⁰ Ibid.

worked at an enterprise for 20-30 years, [and then] retires, falls ill, and before death asks for a priest. Having been a party member for a long time, [he] hands back his party card and joins a sect. And we are afraid to say that we have such defects (*iz'iany*). Let us also try to remember the subjective worries of man. We speak too often about objective [conditions] and forget the subjective worries.⁶³¹

Moskalenko's observation seemed to be that Soviet atheism—or, perhaps more accurately, Soviet atheists—failed people at two levels: in everyday life, as local organs failed to address people's grievances (leaving the Soviet woman in his story to continue her search for help with the sects); and in a much more fundamental way, as when an exemplary worker, a long-time party member, asks for a priest before death, or even “hands back his party card (“ticket,” in Russian) and joins a sect.” Considering the stakes of the Soviet atheist enterprise, Moskalenko's outlining the problem in such Dostoevskian terms, whether or not it was intentional, is profoundly indicative: just as Ivan Karamazov's “handing back his ticket” was a rejection of the irreconcilable contradictions of religion, the long-time party member's “handing back his ticket” at the end of life was, implicitly, a rejection of Soviet ideology. Along with Moskalenko, then, some atheists were beginning to make the argument that at the center of their project was not even just a *philosophical* problem, but a *spiritual* one—that atheism had to find a way into the Soviet soul.

I. K. Panchin, chair of the Department of Atheism at the Moscow Food Industry Institute, agreed that Soviet atheism had thus far failed to address the spiritual concerns of Soviet people—or, using Moskalenko's Marxist-Leninist terminology, their “subjective worries.”⁶³² Panchin observed that, over the course of the Khrushchev-era antireligious campaign, atheists never moved beyond “the tradition of the 20s and 30s,” and continued to “divide people into atheists and believers.” Such an approach was “incorrect, because there still exists a broad spectrum for religion.” It was also incorrect, he observed, because, in addressing the issue of spiritual life, atheists were late-comers to the ideological battlefield. Soviet cadres were raising worldview issues “for the first time,” whereas religious organizations “have long since occupied themselves with these questions.” Panchin warned that, “those who pose the question wind up answering it.”⁶³³ “Here's what worries me,” Panchin lamented, “Even if we have cadres and strength in the sphere of natural sciences, we still have not been successful with Marxism-Leninism because there was not enough attention given to this question. This is a very difficult and very important problem.”⁶³⁴ When believers asked what atheists offered “in exchange for religion,” Panchin observed that, “We provide either scientific statistics or philosophy, and other than this we give nothing.” Like Mezentsev and Moskalenko, then, Panchin implied that statistics and philosophy were insufficient, that atheists needed to offer believers something else alongside knowledge (either philosophical or scientific), something that Panchin identified as “Marxism-Leninism, our humanistic worldview.” Yet Panchin's observations naturally raises the question: what does Marxist-Leninist humanism look like? How is it different than other kinds of humanism, even bourgeois humanism?

Even when atheists posed more probing questions, the answers remained vague and indeed

⁶³¹ Ibid., 10-11.

⁶³² Ibid., 13.

⁶³³ Ibid.

⁶³⁴ Ibid., 14.

raised further questions. A. F. Okulov, the director of the recently-formed Institute of Scientific Atheism of the Academy of Social Sciences, addressed the problem that the peculiar nature of atheist humanism posed for the journal:

Will we move away from atheism or not? How should we understand this? If we approach this from the point of view of the title, then it seems that the journal will move away from it; if from the point of view of the contents, than, conversely, the journal will move towards man.

Recently in England I talked to a priest regarding the activities of the modern church. This, in essence, is not the church in our previous understanding, but rather a large ideological institution. [...] We spoke to a very educated preacher who said that the main thing in their work is *not* to prove the existence of the Most High; the main thing is the issue of human relations. [...] Human relations—this is the main thing!

The church played on this even before. And we need to legitimize that attention to the problem of human relations on Earth as a very important question.⁶³⁵

Like others, Okulov supported the title *The World of Man* as part of the broader effort to turn *Science and Religion* into “a journal dedicated to human beings and human relations.”⁶³⁶ In this, he stressed that atheists had profoundly misunderstood the essence of religion in modern conditions. In effect, he argued that atheists were trying to hit a moving target—that they fought the religion described in Marxist texts, rather than the actually-existing religion that attracted modern believers by addressing their spiritual concerns. A miscalculation of this nature had the most serious consequences for the Soviet battle against religion. “I looked at the West through the eyes of an atheist,” Okulov remarked, “and I think that we conduct most of our atheist work to no effect (*v pustuiu*).”⁶³⁷

Considering that, at its foundation, the Soviet project was about humanizing social relations and redeeming the individual from alienation, the nature of the dilemma that occupied Soviet ideologists—both the failure of atheism to address the soul-searching and everyday concerns of Soviet people, as well as the proposal to remedy the situation by turning to human relations and spiritual life—is ironic. It was the earthly redemption offered by Marxism that was supposed to eliminate the individual’s need for religion, since Soviet ideology offered citizens a vision of a society so humane that it would make religion redundant. Yet in the mid-1960s, even as the model “Soviet person” prepared to celebrate the country’s fiftieth anniversary, real Soviet people continued to turn to religion—a fact that inherently pointed to persistent problems in Soviet life.

Arguably, part of the problem had to do with the kinds of categories Soviet ideologists continued to rely on to analyze their subject. As social scientists—even if of a particular kind—they were constrained by the “laws of development” (*zakonomernosti*) prophesied by Marxism-Leninism. As P. I. Sumarev, a professor of Philosophy at the Institute of Railroad Transport (*Institute zheleznodorozhnogo transporta*), put it:

⁶³⁵ Ibid., 16.

⁶³⁶ Ibid., 17.

⁶³⁷ Ibid., 16.

The World of Man is indeed a more fitting title that answers to the current demands of our [“Knowledge”] Society. But such a thing as “man” in general does not exist. Rather, there are concrete human beings, toward whom we will address ourselves.

We often discuss believers, but we forget that, in our society, the believer does not exist in isolation. If his surroundings march in step with life, then it will be easier to tear him away from religion and to educate him in the spirit of our communist morality.⁶³⁸

Sumarev’s observations implied that the shortcomings of Soviet atheism were indicative of Soviet deficiencies in general; perhaps, even, that they were a direct consequence of them. As long as the local *obkom* continued to fail the woman in Moskalenko’s testimony—to miss the opportunity to offer her the truth and assistance for which she searched—religion would remain an obstacle to the desired convergence of Soviet citizens and Soviet ideology. At the final hour, even the most exemplary Soviet person might still “hand back his ticket.”

A Careful Reform: *Science and Religion* and the Problem of Audience

The “Knowledge” Society’s conference on *Science and Religion* was, in many ways, a referendum on Soviet atheist education as it had been conducted through the Khrushchev era. Two important conclusions emerged from the discussion: first, that Soviet atheism, as practiced thus far, had missed the mark; and second, that attention needed to be redirected to the spiritual life of the individual. Yet while Soviet ideologists generally supported the new direction proposed for atheist work, important questions remained: how would the journal deliver the new message, and at whom was this message to be directed? *Science and Religion* was again faced with the predicament of its “dual nature”—a predicament that was largely concentrated around the question of audience. The nature of the problem, as Aleksandr Pavlovich Kurantov, a researcher at the Institute of Scientific Atheism, pointed out, was that in trying to reach both the atheist cadre and the mass reader simultaneously, the journal was actually losing both audiences: “The initial idea, that *Science and Religion* should address both the mass reader and the specialist has failed (*provalilas*). Many believers turn away from our journal because there [is] a lot of material directed at lecturers. We need to devote our attention to the masses. Maybe in the future we should think about adding methodological supplements for lecturers.”⁶³⁹ In light of new demands, the journal had to make a choice about whether to preach to the atheist choir or to attempt to attract converts.

Part of the problem, atheists realized, was that even if they turned to the masses, a significant portion of this audience continued to remain out of reach. Okulov observed that “even in such large cities as Voronezh, many people do not read newspapers, do not listen to the radio, do not even go to the movies.”⁶⁴⁰ Moreover, he pointed out that there were 23 million people in the RSFSR who had the lowest level of education. “What do newspapers do for these people in the spiritual sense (*v dukhovnykh otnosheniakh*)?” Okulov asked, and declared that, “If we could

⁶³⁸ Ibid., 30.

⁶³⁹ Ibid., 28.

⁶⁴⁰ Ibid., 17.

find some journal that would reach these people, that would be good.”⁶⁴¹ M. M. Grigorian, a senior researcher at the Institute of Philosophy at the Soviet Academy of Sciences and the author of the foremost textbook on scientific atheism, concurred that it was essential for atheists to find a way into the lives of these “23 million barely literate people.”⁶⁴² He insisted that, in order to help the atheist cause, the journal had to become more accessible, and warned fellow atheists away from the idea that this change in the journal’s direction was a betrayal of their mission: “We need to confirm our understanding of the world with a popular, entertaining language, so that [it becomes] another spiritual support. This is the primary direction of atheism. We should not see this as a departure from the problem of atheism.” For this reason, he suggested that the title *The Torch of Truth* (*Svetoch*) “would kill the journal, since to the majority of the people this is incomprehensible.” Grigorian also reminded those gathered that, “If we were able to tear away this mass from religion, this would decide our main problem.”⁶⁴³

On the one hand, then, atheists agreed that the success of their mission hinged on their ability to reach the masses, and they criticized the journal for presenting atheism in a manner that was ineffective in part because it was inaccessible. On the other hand, they also worried that in catering to popular demand, they would compromise both the ideological purity and the intellectual quality of the journal’s content. “I fear that we will move away from our immediate (*neposredstvennye*) problems,” Moskalenko observed. “We will attract a wider readership with an arsenal of methods, but the battle against religion in contemporary conditions was and will be the main goal, and we cannot forget this.” He insisted that, “Reform (*perestroika*) must be done very carefully.”⁶⁴⁴

Even as cadres acknowledged that, in turning the journal into a popular publication, they would have to change the kind of material included as well as the language and presentation, many still expressed discomfort with the prospect of straying from customary approaches. D. M. Ugrinovich, the Chair of the Philosophy Department at Moscow State University, observed that the proposed change of course would make *Science and Religion* the first publication to take up popular spiritual concerns, and as such, the journal had no traditions on which to build. He noted that the “Knowledge” Society’s other periodical, *Science and Life* (*Nauka i zhizn’*), could reference a long tradition of popular science publications, and he attributed the journal’s success to its effective use of language that was both scientific and accessible to the masses. The social sciences, meanwhile, had yet to find a common language with ordinary Soviet citizens. Like Moskalenko, Ugrinovich worried that in trying to attract a mass readership with entertaining and sensational material, the journal would stray from its ideological agenda. “Why was it necessary to publish A[gatha] Christie’s ‘White Horse,’” he asked, “This is some kind of foreign body (*inorodnoe telo*) in our journal.”⁶⁴⁵ The tension between popular demand and ideological purity lay at the heart of many Soviet cultural enterprises, and, in this respect, Ugrinovich’s views on renaming the journal are also indicative. He agreed that “without a doubt” the journal’s title needed to be changed, but argued against *The Light of Truth*, calling for something “more modest” (such as *Man and the World*, or *XX Century*).⁶⁴⁶ What became clear was that, in trying

⁶⁴¹ Ibid.

⁶⁴² Ibid., 23-24. M. M. Grigorian, *Kurs lektsii po istorii ateizma* (Moscow, 1970). Grigorian also later worked at the Institute of Scientific Atheism.

⁶⁴³ Ibid.

⁶⁴⁴ Ibid., 10.

⁶⁴⁵ Ibid., 5-6.

⁶⁴⁶ Ibid., 7.

to bridge the gap between ideology and popular appeal with a worldview publication, Soviet atheists were entering uncharted territory.

The problem of reforming *Science and Religion* into a popular worldview periodical presented Soviet atheists with another worry—namely, that in trying to attract the masses, they would lose the journal’s actual audience, atheist cadres. V. M. Chertikhin, the editor of the atheist section of Politizdat publishers, outlined the conflicting directions suggested by the journal’s two audiences:

There is another danger that we need to overcome. You will seek a wider readership, but there is the impression that in concerning ourselves with this wider reader, trying to interest him, we might forget about the level of scientific propaganda, which might decline because we will be less concerned with the qualified reader. We need to think about creating a separate section for the more prepared reader, otherwise there will be little benefit from the journal.⁶⁴⁷

This problem went beyond the potential betrayal of the journal’s most loyal readers, atheist cadres. For this relatively small cohort, which was engaged in an atheist campaign in the largest country in the world, *Science and Religion* was one of the very few sources, indeed often the only source, for atheist content and methodology. As P. I. Sumarev observed, “Atheist propaganda is complicated. It is conducted in universities and amongst believers in Houses of Culture [and] reading huts, but there is no one center, and we do not know what is going on elsewhere.”⁶⁴⁸ Considering the nature of their task, the continued absence of a “home” for Soviet atheism, a place that could serve as a coordinating center for atheist theory and methodology, was a grievous oversight.

Institutional decentralization—or, perhaps more precisely, disorganization—in Soviet atheist work was not a new problem.⁶⁴⁹ Indeed, the journal itself was originated—when it was first discussed in 1954—as a means of addressing this problem (although equally indicative of the scope of disorganization is the fact that *Science and Religion* did not actually begin publication until 1959). When the Soviet leadership became interested in religion during the Khrushchev era, they had also tried to address the problem by transferring lecture functions from the Ministry of Culture to the All-Union “Knowledge” Society. Among other things, this transfer, which included the oversight of Soviet planetaria, was intended to turn the Moscow Planetarium into the coordinating center of atheist work.⁶⁵⁰ Finally, in 1964, the Party also founded the Institute of Scientific Atheism, and charged the Institute with centralizing and systematizing atheist education efforts. But in the mid-1960s, both the Moscow Planetarium and the Institute of Scientific Atheism were at relatively early stages of coordinating atheist work on

⁶⁴⁷ Ibid., 9.

⁶⁴⁸ Ibid., 30.

⁶⁴⁹ As Daniel Peris argues, bureaucratism plagued the atheist movement from inception. See Daniel Peris, *Storming the Heavens: the Soviet League of the Militant Godless* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1998).

⁶⁵⁰ Chapter One of this dissertation discusses atheist work of Soviet planetaria, including the effort of the Moscow Planetarium to serve as a coordinating center for atheist education. On the transfer of Soviet planetaria from the Ministry of Culture to the “Knowledge” Society, see GARF, f. 9547, op. 1, d. 1429 and Tsentral’nyi arkhiv goroda Moskvy [henceforth, TsAGM], f. 709, op. 1, d. 177.

a union-wide level, and the reality was that the activities of these institutions, both located in Moscow, remained out of reach for most local cadres.

In the new ideological terrain emerging at the end of the Khrushchev era, a unified system of atheist education was even more necessary than before. When the Party had *again* returned to the issue of atheist education, it had signaled that previous practices were no longer sufficient or appropriate. Faced again with the problem of religion, atheist cadres recognized that they needed new approaches. When taken in tandem, these two trends made a centralized forum not just necessary but indispensable. The Soviet Union's top Party, CAROC and CARC, and "Knowledge" Society organs consistently received complaints about the lack of systematic training, as well as the dearth of atheist material in rural areas and on the peripheries. Cadres asked for the latest news about successful atheist approaches in other regions, as well as lecture materials and program suggestions for atheist events.⁶⁵¹ Without a doubt, then, even with its relatively-modest publication figures, *Science and Religion* was still the most widely accessible atheist forum in the Soviet Union.⁶⁵²

The prospect of losing *Science and Religion* as a central forum for atheist work was also troubling for another reason. The change in the state's approach to religion meant that relying on old methods could lead one astray, and going astray could have serious consequences. Soviet atheists had understood the gravity of the situation when Alla Trubnikova, a prominent journalist whose antireligious writing had been widely published (including in *Science and Religion*), was denounced for the militant position expressed in her writing, as well as for her journalistic methods, which included "penetrating" religious communities. In her effort to provide Soviet society an insider's view of religious life, Trubnikova had entered a convent to write *With a Cross Around Her Neck* (*S krestom na shee*), and joined a sect to write *Journeys to the Thirteenth Century* (*Komandirovki v trinadtsatyi vek*).⁶⁵³ Over the course of the Khrushchev-era antireligious campaign, such methods were not uncommon. Indeed, in a context where the state's renewed administrative pressure on monasteries reduced their numbers from sixty-four in 1959, to eighteen in 1965, Trubnikova's going beyond the call, so to speak, would have been welcomed.⁶⁵⁴ Yet, as noted earlier, a new ambivalence about using such methods in antireligious work had emerged by the end of the campaign. Trubnikova's breed of investigative journalism fell out of favor—evident in, among other things, the fact that, in June 1964, the Council for the Affairs of Religious Cults organized a conference to discuss violations of believers' rights⁶⁵⁵ --

⁶⁵¹ The archives of the "Knowledge" Society at the union, republic, and city level are filled with requests of this nature during the Khrushchev era and increasingly after, as are the archives of the Institute of Scientific Atheism, after its founding in 1964. Sonja Luehrmann's dissertation provides an excellent analysis of communications between local and central atheist cadres and methodological training on the periphery. See Sonja Christine Luehrmann, "Forms and Methods: Teaching Atheism and Religion in the Mari Republic, Russian Federation," (Ph.D. dissertation, University of Michigan, 2009).

⁶⁵² Olga Timofeevna Brushlinskaia, interview with author, Moscow, Russia, 7 December 2008.

⁶⁵³ Alla Trubnikova's work was not confined to exposing religious communities. She also pretended to be a "parasite (*tuneiadka*)" in order to write *Koroli snimaiut tabel'*, and became an inspector of a juvenile police facility for *Svoi chelovek v bolon'e*. Yet it was her antireligious work that made Trubnikova a negative example among Soviet atheists. See Alla Iakovlevna Trubnikova, *S krestom na shee: reportazh iz monastyr'ia* (Moscow: Molodaia gvardiia, 1963), and *Komandirovka v 13 vek* (Moscow: Sovetskii pisatel', 1965).

⁶⁵⁴ As Sabrina Ramet notes, KGB employed to "infiltrate religious institutions, and [authorities] routinely endeavored to entice or intimidate seminarians and priests into collaboration." See Ramet, 234.

⁶⁵⁵ *Ibid.*

and with this change in attitude, practices that had been officially condemned yet tacitly accepted were now rejected for offending the feelings of believers. Before long, Trubnikova came to be cited by those engaged in antireligious work as a negative example, and the official criticism of Trubnikova was used as evidence that the state had changed course and abandoned old methods.

While Trubnikova's approach to religion and atheism had clearly fallen out of favor, there was little clarity about how to conduct atheist work in the new context of the Brezhnev era. While some at the "Knowledge" Society conference criticized Trubnikova—I. K. Panchin, for instance, stated that Trubnikova was "much too experienced a journalist to allow such mistakes," and that "the goal of the journal was to educate (*vospityvat*) our state and party workers [...] to conduct a battle against the sectarians, [but] to remember that a sectarian is also a human being"⁶⁵⁶—others recognized that it was easier to make an example of Trubnikova, than to clearly articulate a new way forward. Consequently, some participants were ambivalent both about denouncing Trubnikova, and about the prospect of losing their place as the journal's intended audience. Chertikhin lamented that "atheists have no forum for conversation, no place to discuss their problems, of which there are many." He observed that it was "right" to "excise" (*vysech*) Trubnikova, but asked "where were we to educate her?"⁶⁵⁷ Okulov noted that atheists had not fully exploited the "enormous army" of Soviet journals—*Novyi mir*, *Oktiabr*, *Moscow*, and others—"[as a forum for] exchange of atheist opinions," but suggested that perhaps they should create "a separate journal for atheists."⁶⁵⁸ The atheist community recognized that the Party-State's new approach to religion created more, not less, of a need for a journal for atheist cadres.

"Help us make sense of things"

A forum for Soviet atheists was not only necessary as a space to re-educate cadres about new approaches, but also to reconsider the nature of atheist education and its place in Soviet society. Many atheists recognized that mistakes were made "not only by Trubnikova" and were indeed endemic.⁶⁵⁹ Iurii Stel'makov, a graduate student at Moscow State University's Department of Atheism and a representative of the Komsomol Propaganda department, underscored that Trubnikova was only the symptom of a much deeper ailment.⁶⁶⁰

Alla Trubnikova is not a unique phenomenon, but an expression of a tendency that exists at the local level. We have a type of atheist-propagandizer who works on the level of contradictions. We have one atheist lecturer, a former worker of the KGB, who looks at even the most ordinary Baptist as an enemy. [...] We tend to look at believers as politically unreliable, dangerous individuals. In these conditions, no atheist work is possible. This is how the slogan "Religion is our ideological enemy" (*Religiia nash ideinyi vrag*) was understood. After [such atheist measures]

⁶⁵⁶ GARF, f. 9547, op. 1, d. 1447, ll. 14-15.

⁶⁵⁷ Ibid., 8-9.

⁶⁵⁸ Ibid., 17.

⁶⁵⁹ Ibid., 11-12.

⁶⁶⁰ Stel'makov's observations at the conference were informed both by his studies in Moscow State University Department of Atheism and by his work at the Komsomol, which focused on youth religiosity. In the mid-1960s, he provided reports on the subject for the Komsomol Central Committee. See RGASPI-m, f. 1, op. 32, d. 1198, ll. 2-20.

believers would say, we accept communism, but not this form of communism.⁶⁶¹

Stel'makov urged the journal to move beyond simple contradictions and denunciations. "There are, in the journal, some things that are not badly written," he observed, "but they suffer from a superficial approach." As a negative example, Stel'makov reminded atheists of the standard formula used to explain religiosity: "A person falls on hard times (*popal v bedu*) and is dragged into a sect." For Stel'makov, this was "a harmful primitivism, which has become commonplace in our literature." He observed that, rather than being manipulated by devious clergy, "a person must [first] develop such a need, and then [...] the person is not dragged in, but himself joins a sect." In general, Stel'makov concluded that atheist propaganda was "conducted very primitively," using "elementary contradictions [...] in the spirit of—since cosmonauts have gone to space, then there is no God, since [they] did not see him there, and so forth."⁶⁶²

Stel'makov's suggested that, rather than denounce contradictions, Soviet ideologists would be better served by embracing them:

In the first issue of the journal there is an good (*udachnoe*) letter that says, "The Bible is as is contradictory as life itself." This is good, because it reflects the imperfection (*nesovershenstvo*) of human reason. And this is the point often made by progressive believers. In response to all of our arguments about contradictions, they just laugh, because they know that it is all written by imperfect human reason. For this reason some believers say that the cosmonaut was constrained by the walls of his spaceship and could not see god, and further say that god is in my heart, or in infinity.⁶⁶³

Stel'makov argued that the true danger of such "primitive" atheism was that it repelled precisely those audiences for whom it was intended, and especially believers and the youth, and noted that the educated youth especially "see in atheism a relatively primitive teaching."⁶⁶⁴ He put forward that young people were the key to the success of the atheist mission. He insisted that the youth should be the primary target of atheist propaganda, since "the issue is not just in squeezing out religion from the minds of believers, but to prevent its spread." In order to better target young audiences, he suggested that atheists should attract "young strength" to atheist work, "because for now everything is done in a very narrow fashion (*priamolineino*)." At the end of the day, he observed, "we try to replace the truth of life with the truth of facts."⁶⁶⁵ If Soviet atheism could succeed with the youth, Stel'makov concluded, "then we will finally expel religion from out

⁶⁶¹ GARF, f. 9547, op. 1, d. 1447, l. 19. It is important to note that in describing the shortcomings of Soviet atheism, Stel'makov often specified that they were *especially* problematic on the local level. The notion that overzealous regional cadres misread signs from the center and therefore committed "excesses" (*peregiby*) was a common trope in atheists' evaluations of their work, and extended beyond antireligious policies to center-periphery relations in general.

⁶⁶² GARF, f. 9547, op. 1, d. 1447, ll. 19-20. The argument that space conquests were an effective tool in atheist propaganda that would produce scientific materialist worldviews was often cited, in archival materials and especially in my own formal and informal interviews, as emblematic of crude and ineffective atheist propaganda. Evgraf Duluman, interview with author, Kyiv, Ukraine, 10 February 2009, and Olga Brushlinskaia, interview with author, Moscow, Russia, 7 December 2008.

⁶⁶³ GARF, f. 9547, op. 1, d. 1447, l. 20.

⁶⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, 21.

⁶⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, 22.

society.”⁶⁶⁶

As a member of the Komsomol’s central propaganda organs, Stel’makov was aware of the latest approaches to the atheist education of youth. Starting in the late 1950s, the Komsomol had begun to exert considerable effort in improving atheist work by studying youth religiosity and evaluating atheist practices around the country. To do this, the Komsomol had mobilized not only cadres and specialists, but even ordinary Soviet people whom it tried to engage in a dialogue about religion and atheism. Through atheist courses, clubs, and even amateur arts groups, the Komsomol brought atheist education to children and youth in schools, institutes, and universities. It also mobilized efforts to train young cadres to collect material on Soviet religiosity and expand atheist education on the local level.⁶⁶⁷ In 1961, for instance, *Komsomol’skaia Pravda* formed an atheist department that coordinated the publication of more than 250 articles on the subject over the next five years. The newspaper also organized a forum on religion and atheism, titled “Help us make sense of things” (*Pomogite nam razobrat’sia*), where readers were encouraged to write in with their questions and experiences.⁶⁶⁸

In light of the importance generally assigned to the successful inculcation of scientific atheism among the youth, Stel’makov’s words did not fall on deaf ears. Other conference participants added to Stel’makov’s observations, pointing to problematic areas in atheist work that prevented success with the youth, and with the population more broadly. A. V. Mel’nikova, an historian, highlighted the intimate link between religion and culture, challenging atheists to focus not just on enlightenment and morality, but also on traditions, aesthetic issues, and other areas that affect the emotions. “Right now the Jesuits are researching how religion has always been the primary force that formed national culture. Everything created by man East and West is presented by our enemies as the achievement of religion, as proof of its high and influential place in the history of humanity,” Mel’nikova warned. “We need to oppose this with something.”⁶⁶⁹ She observed that “religion uses everything to defend itself,” and insisted that Soviet atheism had to break the connection between religion and culture. To attract readers, the journal had to cater to the emerging interest in the history of spiritual culture with material on such things as tourism to sacred places and architectural monuments.⁶⁷⁰

But the danger of presenting religious material on the pages of *Science and Religion* meant that the journal had to figure out a way to marginalize the role of religion in the country’s cultural and spiritual history. In order to make atheist work more effective in practice, the atheist establishment also had to figure out a way to involve the creative intelligentsia—writers, artists, musicians—who, as P. I. Sumarev observed, continued to “stand on the sidelines” of the atheist project.⁶⁷¹ Yet, on the whole, P. I. Sumarev had a damning estimation of the state of atheist work and was pessimistic about its prospects of winning over religious believers. “The problem with atheist propaganda is that we have absolutely desiccated it,” he observed. “It is impoverished in the emotional sense, whereas a believer lives by his emotions.”⁶⁷² He urged atheists to work on the “emotional intensity (*nasychshennost’*)” of atheist propaganda.

⁶⁶⁶ Ibid.

⁶⁶⁷ On Komsomol atheist education efforts, see RGASPI-m, f. 1, op. 32, d. 1198; RGASPI-m, f. 1, op. 32, d. 1199; RGASPI-m, f. 1, op. 34, d. 108; and RGASPI-m, f. 1, op. 34, d. 129.

⁶⁶⁸ RGASPI, f. 606, op. 4, d. 52.

⁶⁶⁹ GARF, f. 9547, op. 1, d. 1447, l. 26.

⁶⁷⁰ Ibid.

⁶⁷¹ Ibid., 30.

⁶⁷² Ibid.

The discussion about the direction, audience, and title of *Science and Religion* was emblematic of broader shifts in the nature of the Soviet atheist project taking place in the mid-1960s. Numerous participants criticized the negative approach of atheist propaganda, and argued for a less narrow understanding of what constituted scientific atheism. Emblematic of this new direction in the atheist mission were the titles proposed as alternatives to Science and Religion—titles that emphasized spiritual and emotional life, such as *Man and the World* (*Chelovek i mir*) and *The World of Man* (*Mir cheloveka*). Leading Soviet atheists also began to suggest that perhaps their audience was interested not so much in clear answers to important life questions, as in the opportunity to engage with these questions. Finally, some atheists proposed that despite the bright prospects offered by communist construction, the inner world of Soviet people continued to be filled with contradictions and difficulties. As B. Mar'ianov, the journal's executive secretary, noted at a meeting at the Institute of Scientific Atheism, more needed to be written about “the tragedy of the spiritual world.”⁶⁷³ If atheists wanted to win the population to their cause, they could not ignore such revelations.

Conclusion

Science and Religion played a unique role in the Soviet atheist project. As the most widely read publication on religion and atheism in the Soviet Union, the journal acted as an intermediary between, on the one hand, the Party leadership and atheist theorists, who oversaw its work, and, on the other, local-level atheist cadres and ordinary Soviet believers, who constituted the majority of its audience.⁶⁷⁴ Over the course of its long career spanning late Soviet and post-Soviet period, *Science and Religion*, as Margerie Mandelstam Balzer observes, “underwent an ironic metamorphosis, from a pillar of antireligious propaganda emphasizing science to an icon of religious revitalization.”⁶⁷⁵ Originally conceived as a crucial component of the state's atheist propaganda apparatus when it began publication in 1959, the journal transformed, by the Gorbachev era, into a critical source for religious and spiritual content, indeed, into a quiet defender of believer's rights and freedom of conscience. By the end of the Soviet period, *Science and Religion* was one of the most widely read journals in the country.⁶⁷⁶ In the post-Soviet era, the journal's editors have actively encouraged religion in general, and Russian Orthodoxy in particular, through publications on religious history and traditions aimed at a popular audience.⁶⁷⁷

⁶⁷³ RGASPI, f. 606, op. 4, d. 52, l. 91. B. Mar'ianov went on to become the deputy editor of Science and Religion, and published on the subject of socialist rituals. See B. Marianov, ed. *Prazdniki, obriady, traditsii*, 2nd edition (Moscow: Molodaia gvardiia, 1979).

⁶⁷⁴ For an insight into the ways in which the journal's work was influenced by the Party, see “Dva chlena redkollegii zhurnala byli rabotnikami TsK KPSS”: Beseda Nikolaia Mitrokhina s Ol'goi Timofeevnoi Brushlinskoi,” *Neprikosnovennyi zapas* 3, no. 59 (2008), <http://magazines.russ.ru/nz/2008/3/dv15-pr.html> (accessed September 9, 2010).

⁶⁷⁵ Balzer, I. For example, see Kira V. Tsekhanskaia, “The Icon in the Home: The Home Begins with the Icon,” in *Religion and Politics in Russia: A Reader*, ed. Marjorie Mandelstam Balzer (New York: M. E. Sharpe, 2010), 18-30.

⁶⁷⁶ See Mark Smirnov and Pavel Krug, “V zashchitu svobodomyслиia: Iсполnilos' polveka zhurnalu ‘Nauka i religiiia’,” *Nezavisimaia gazeta*, 21 October 2009, http://religion.ng.ru/events/2009-10-21/2_magazine.html (accessed September 7, 2010).

⁶⁷⁷ Balzer, I. Also Brushlinskaia, interview, Moscow, Russia, 7 December 2008.

This chapter argues that the transformation of *Science and Religion* has its origins in the mid-1960s, and that the discussions about the journal's title capture the nature of the bigger dilemma faced by Soviet scientific atheism—the need to offer Soviet people positive, even spiritual, content. As B. A. Grigorian, the journal's deputy editor, told the country's atheist elite at a 1964 all-union conference on atheist propaganda, the journal began to concentrate on the so-called “neutral reader” in the early 1960s, and these readers wrote to the journal and criticized its negative approach. In response, Grigorian relayed, the *Science and Religion* now pledged to devote significantly more time to issues like worldview, morality, everyday life (*byt*), and ritual life, “that is, to show the constructive work (*sozidatel'niuiu rabotu*) and positive foundations—scientific, historical, philosophical—that can fill the vacuums that form as a result of a person's liberation from religious conceptions and beliefs.”⁶⁷⁸ Yet in focusing on positive, “emotionally saturated” content to fill these “vacuums,” the journal recognized that it had no precedent or foundation on which to build, and some proposed that atheists needed to adopt ideas from their ideological opponents. For example, Grigorian observed that an organization like the Jehovah's Witnesses produced visually striking material that affected the “emotional frame of mind” of the reader, and relayed that for its issue about the meaning of life, *Science and Religion* was trying something analogous. The cover of the issue, he proposed, would show the front door of an average city house early in the morning, from which emerges a middle-aged man. Above him, there would be a sign: “When you leave the house, think about what you need to do today,” and then, below, another sign, “When you return home, think about what you did over the course of the day.” At the bottom would be a third sign: “Think about the meaning of life!”⁶⁷⁹ While *Science and Religion* had largely served the propaganda purpose for which it was created during its first years of publication, providing a forum for the regime's antireligious campaign, by the end of the Khrushchev era the journal, like scientific atheism more broadly, began to reconsider certain initial positions. Soviet atheists began to question whether enlightenment propaganda and criticism of religion were the best way to capture the attention, and the hearts, of Soviet people. As a result, qualitatively new elements appeared in their discussions and approaches, and these new elements eventually made their way onto the pages of the *Science and Religion*.

As this chapter shows, the issues brought up by Soviet atheists with regards to *Science and Religion* in the mid-1960s went beyond the narrow problem of finding a better title or look for the publication. The discussion that emerged—about the significance and place of the individual in society, about the need to address spiritual concerns and the value of emotional forms and content—had an impact on the course of Soviet atheism as a whole. Studies of Soviet religiosity revealed a transformed “modernized” religion, and made clear the flaws in simply opposing it with science and portraying it as a politically reactionary force. The interest of ordinary people in addressing spiritual concerns, moreover, directed the journal to shift its focus accordingly. By the 1970s, Anatolii Semenovich Ivanov, the journal's editor-in-chief during most of the Brezhnev era (1968-1982), saw the exposition of “the moral content of atheism” to be among the journal's most important functions.⁶⁸⁰

⁶⁷⁸ RGASPI, f. 606, op. 4, d. 14, ll. 1-7.

⁶⁷⁹ Ibid., 7.

⁶⁸⁰ A. S. Ivanov, “Zhurnal ‘Nauka i religiia’—vazhnoe zveno v ateisticheskom vospitanii,” *Gosudarstvo, religiia, tserkov' v Rossii i za rubezhom* (2009), http://religio.rags.ru/journal/anthology3/a3_26/.pdf (accessed on September 9, 2010). Originally published in *Voprosy nauchnogo ateizma* 11 (1971): 9-28. Anatolii Semenovich Ivanov, the executive editor of *Science and Religion* from 1968-1982, had worked in the apparatus of the Party Central Committee prior to coming to the journal. “The work [of the journal] is indivisible from the broader process of the

Man—his place in the world, the meaning of his existence, the purpose of his life—stands in the center of the battle of religion and atheism on moral issues. These “eternal questions” have always concerned people, and continue to worry them, regardless of whether or not they believe in God. Religion offers a person a certain life program (*zhiznennuiu programmu*), in which it indicates how a person is to build his relationships with others and with society in different spheres of individual and social life, departing from the acknowledgement of constant divine interventions into his thoughts and affairs.⁶⁸¹

It was up to *Science and Religion*, therefore, to show Soviet readers “the vitality (*zhiznennost*) of communist moral norms, the greatness of the moral world of the Soviet person,” and the journal began to devote attention to worldview issues, publishing theoretical material and organizing reader’s forums around questions like, “The Meaning of Life.”⁶⁸²

To be sure, the journal continued to devote a great deal of attention to scientific enlightenment and the criticism of religion, with rubrics such as “Nature and Reason” (*Priroda i razum*), “Scientific Horizons” (*Gorizonty nauki*), “Theology and Science” (*Teologiya i nauka*), and “Inside Scientific Laboratories” (*V nauchnykh laboratoriiakh*), as well as numerous articles devoted to scientific discoveries and the “scientific technological revolution” appearing throughout the Soviet period. The journal also devoted considerable effort to the cultivation of a scientific “dialectic of cognition” (*dialektika poznaniia*), and of course it continued to include counter-propaganda directed at religious positions.⁶⁸³ Nevertheless, the journal’s new engagement with worldview questions, which emerged in the mid-1960s and became critical by the decade’s end, dramatically altered the nature of its work and, arguably, the course of scientific atheism. From this point on, *Science and Religion* had to perform two functions, neither of which was simple, and that did not coexist easily. The journal’s ideological function was, on the one hand, to show the “harm” that religion brought to society and individuals, and, on the other hand, to provide positive content and reveal the meaning of life from an atheist position—yet, as atheists complained, and even Ivanov acknowledged, both religion’s harm and atheism’s purpose were a matter of dispute.⁶⁸⁴

In part, this was evident in the fact that atheism had a difficult time mobilizing creative power for the cause, and when charged with the task of providing captivating content, the journal yet again appealed to the intelligentsia. Ivanov wrote that the journal hoped “for scholars, writers, journalists, propagandists, teachers to ‘become infected’ (*zaboleli*) with these issues, for interesting articles to come from their pens (*iz-pod ikh pera*),” yet, on the whole, the creative

development of atheism in the country; it was the reflection [of atheist work], and at the same time was one its component parts (*zven'ev*). The successes that resulted from the efforts of scholars in working out atheist theory elevated the quality of the journal’s materials. The journal’s raising (*postanovka*) of the most important issues in atheist theory and practice helped raise the level on which these issues were worked out.” Ivanov, 345.

⁶⁸¹ Ibid., 348.

⁶⁸² Ibid., 349. In 1975, for instance, the journal devoted three separate issues to the question of life’s meaning, and had sections of every issue on the subject.

⁶⁸³ Ibid.

⁶⁸⁴ With the explosion in Soviet sociological studies of religiosity in the late 1960s, the journal also began to examine reasons for the persistence of religiosity the Soviet Union and the transformations of modern religious consciousness, though the inherent danger of such material kept a great deal of it off the journal’s pages.

intelligentsia was not forthcoming in providing *Science and Religion*, and scientific atheism in general, with captivating material.⁶⁸⁵ On the contrary, even those who had initially participated in the atheist project, had largely abandoned the cause by the end of the 1960s. In this regard, the fate of the writer Vladimir Tendriakov is revealing: while Tendriakov had been a “trump card” for Soviet atheists during the Khrushchev-era antireligious campaign, by the end of the 1960s he had become an apostate. His 1969 story, “Apostolic mission” (*Apostol’skaia komandirovka*), had a protagonist who, though himself a scientist, did not explicitly reject religion, and instead questioned the morality of atheist education itself.⁶⁸⁶ An internal Central Committee report, “On flawed estimations of religion and atheism in certain works of literature and art” (*Ob oshibochnykh otsenkakh religii i ateizma v nekotorykh proizvedeniakh literatury i isskustva*), complained that in Tendriakov’s story, “Atheists are portrayed as unattractive people (*maloprivlekatel’nyimi*) [and] the hero’s conversion (*obrashchenie*) to religion looks more convincing than his return to atheism.”⁶⁸⁷ Tendriakov and *Science and Religion*, which had published the story, were loudly criticized by Party organs and in the Soviet press for this “unmilitant” and ambivalent position.⁶⁸⁸

But the Central Committee report also noted that Tendriakov’s turn away from atheism was part of a broader turn towards religion as an inherent part of Russian culture and history.⁶⁸⁹ The leadership observed an increased demand for religious literature (including Russian religious philosophy), a revived interest in tourism to places with historical and religious relevance for the country’s history, and an “uncritical” view of religion in certain works of contemporary literature, like Vera Panova’s *Skazanie o feodosii* (1967) and Vladimir Soloukhin’s *Rodnaia krasota* and *Pis’mo iz russkogo muzeia* (1967).⁶⁹⁰ Indeed, Soloukhin went so far as to call atheists “iconoclasts” in a Soviet publication.⁶⁹¹ Soviet people, including an important part of the intelligentsia, were embracing nationalism, perhaps as a way to fill the spiritual void observed by atheists. “In certain circles,” the report stated, “it is becoming ‘fashionable’ (*modnym*), a sign of good form (*khoroshego tona*) to have an icon in one’s apartment [...], to glorify (*vozvelichat*) the ‘historical accomplishments’ of the church, and the ‘moral merits’ (*dostoinstva*) of religion, and, conversely, to express ironic and even distaste (*nepriaznoe otnoshenie*) towards atheism.”⁶⁹²

In its effort to provide positive content, the journal also attempted to direct the public interest in national spiritual culture into more innocuous channels, through rubrics like “The Holies of our Motherland” (*Sviatyni nashei rodiny*). Ivanov pointed to the necessity of researching the “spiritual values of the past, in order to free everything historically and aesthetically valuable of its religious wrapping (*obolochki*).”⁶⁹³ It was crucial to figure out how to draw a distinction between religion as unscientific worldview, and religion as an inherent part of cultural history because, as Ivanov acknowledged, “the interest of Soviet people, and

⁶⁸⁵ Ivanov, 349.

⁶⁸⁶ Vladimir Tendriakov, “Apostol’skaia komandirovka,” *Nauka i religii* 8-10 (1969).

⁶⁸⁷ RGASPI, f. 606, op. 4, d. 98, ll. 9-21.

⁶⁸⁸ Olga Brushlinskaia discusses the Party reaction to the Tendriakov article her interview with Smirnov and Krug, “V zashchitu svobodomyслиia.”

⁶⁸⁹ On the revival of nationalism as a form of protest among a segment of the intelligentsia dissident movement, see Vladislav Zubok, *Zhivago’s Children: The Last Russian Intelligentsia* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2009), 226-269.

⁶⁹⁰ On Soloukhin’s nationalism, see Zubok, 244-245, 251-252.

⁶⁹¹ RGASPI, f. 606, op. 4, d. 98, l. 3.

⁶⁹² *Ibid.*, 1.

⁶⁹³ Ivanov, 350.

especially the youth, [in these subjects] has grown sharply,” and the journal needed to “give people the right orientation on these far from simple questions.”⁶⁹⁴ Yet while atheists recognized that critiquing the role of religion in a nation’s spiritual culture presented understandable complications, what was even more difficult was revealing *atheism’s* role in spiritual culture, especially since, as Ivanov acknowledged, “such issues were insufficiently worked out even in theory.”⁶⁹⁵

The new direction in the work of *Science and Religion* also had an unintended consequence. On the journal’s pages, readers learned about the history of religion; about sacred spaces and places; and about the significance and proper execution of religious rites. Moreover, for many, *Science and Religion* was, ironically, the only place where they encountered sacred texts, and readers were known to cut these excerpts from the journal’s pages.⁶⁹⁶ *Science and Religion* was also the first Soviet mass publication to print conversations with believers, and in this way it also served as a space for a dialogue of sorts—though, of course, this dialogue was limited by the fact that the opposing sides were not equal on Soviet ideological terrain. Nevertheless, for the unbelievers among the journal’s readers, the printed conversations with believers offered rare access to religious voices, and perhaps even some insight into the lives. In effect, then, by offering readers religious content and engaging them in debates about spiritual life, the journal kept religion in Soviet public life.⁶⁹⁷

But equally important is the fact that *Science and Religion* became a vehicle for the sentimental education of atheists themselves. In their effort to improve atheist work, the magazine’s writers and employees educated themselves in religious history and the legal status of religion and believers in the Soviet Union and abroad.⁶⁹⁸ In order to serve as a forum for successful atheist methods, the journal also opened up dialogue with its readers by publishing letters with accompanying discussions, organizing reader’s conferences, and attending atheist congresses and seminars where the staff of *Science and Religion* could exchange opinions and experiences with Party leadership, atheist scholars, and ordinary cadres. Interestingly, by the 1970s, the journal’s staff did not even necessarily see themselves as part of the atheist establishment. Of course, the fine line between covering religious material and allowing religious propaganda onto the pages of an official Soviet publication often placed these journalists in a precarious position, and some were criticized for presenting religion in an insufficiently critical light. Nevertheless, reflecting on her long career with *Science and Religion*, Olga Timofeevna Brushlinskaia, the journal’s current editor-in-chief, notes that, “This was not the *Militant Atheist* of Emelian Iaroslavskii’s time. Of course we defended the advantages of the scientific approach (*nauchnogo podkhoda*). But in comparison with the customary Soviet agitprop, this was a true breakthrough (*proryv*).”⁶⁹⁹

The frequent exposure of *Science and Religion* writers to the lives of ordinary believers also offered them the opportunity to act as intermediaries between believers and the Party, and even to expose violations of believer’s rights in order to defend the freedom of conscience legally guaranteed to Soviet citizens.⁷⁰⁰ Eventually, their encounters and experiences with Soviet

⁶⁹⁴ Ibid.

⁶⁹⁵ Ibid., 351.

⁶⁹⁶ Smirnov and Krug, “V zashchitu svobodomyслиi.”

⁶⁹⁷ Brushlinskaia, interview, Moscow, Russia, 7 December 2008.

⁶⁹⁸ Smirnov and Krug, “V zashchitu svobodomyслиi.”

⁶⁹⁹ Ibid.

⁷⁰⁰ Ibid. and Brushlinskaia, interview, Moscow, Russia, 7 December 2008.

believers undermined their conviction in the atheist mission itself. “We would ask atheist propagandists back then whether they knew what they were fighting against,” Brushlinskaia recalls. “Oftentimes they did not even have the necessary understanding about the lives of believers. [...] And besides this, you have to be certain that the believer, who becomes an atheist thanks to you, will be happier for it.”⁷⁰¹ As atheists navigated the evolving landscape of Soviet belief over the course of the late Soviet period, *Science and Religion* journalists continued to search for positive content in an effort to “not to leave [the] reader spiritually empty (*dukhovno pustym*).”⁷⁰² Yet perhaps the underlying problem of Soviet atheism is indicated by the fact that, even after all of the discussions, the title of *Science and Religion* ultimately stayed the same.⁷⁰³ Though the journal serves an entirely different role, indeed maybe even the opposite role, in contemporary Russia, it has kept its title to this day.⁷⁰⁴

⁷⁰¹ Smirnov and Krug, “V zashchitu svobodomyshlia.”

⁷⁰² Ibid.

⁷⁰³ Ibid. In today’s Russia, Brushlinskaia sees the journal to be a space for dialogue and discussion: “The ‘and’ in the title *Science and Religion* no longer indicates an opposition.”

⁷⁰⁴ The fact that the dilemma faced by *Science and Religion* is indicative of broader issues is also evident in the fact that the Ukrainian atheist journal *Militant Atheist (Voivnichy ateist)*, founded in 1961, was ultimately renamed *Man and the World (Liudina i svit)* in 1965.

Chapter 6

The Institute of Scientific Atheism Studies Soviet Religiosity

The Institute of Scientific Atheism (INA) of the Party Central Committee's Academy of Social Sciences (AON) (*Institut nauchnogo ateizma pri Akademii obshchestvennykh nauk pri TsK KPSS*) was the most visible result of the attempt to fill the ideological vacuum created by the Khrushchev-era antireligious campaign (1958-1964). Founded by the 2 January 1964 Party Central Committee resolution "On measures for strengthening the atheist education of the population" (*O meropriiatiakh po usileniiu ateisticheskogo vospitaniia naseleniia*), the Institute's primary tasks were to centralize atheist work in the country by developing methodology for future research, and to coordinate atheist education on a union-wide level with local organs.⁷⁰⁵ The Institute was expected to address deficiencies in atheist education that ranged from the narrowness of its application (in a number of republics atheist education was basically nonexistent), to its focus on the history of religion as opposed to the contemporary "battle with religious ideology." Atheist Soviet education, the ideological establishment began to realize, needed to address modernized religious institutions and believers, since, in contemporary conditions, most religious organizations did not oppose scientific progress and many believers did not believe in an anthropomorphic God.⁷⁰⁶ Most problematically, there remained an alarming disconnect between theory and practice, and research and policy.⁷⁰⁷ Without central guidance, local-level atheist cadres remained ignorant of experiences outside their area. As a result, they often had to reinvent the wheel at every stage of their work.

In order to address such organizational problems, the Institute had to solve several theoretical problems and find answers to questions that were as much psychological and philosophical, as administrative. To begin with, experts had to uncover and demystify "real" Soviet religiosity—they had to figure out what people were thinking and feeling on the ground in order to explain the continued existence of religion in socialist conditions and the dynamics of contemporary religiosity. Yet how was religion to be defined? What criteria should be used to

⁷⁰⁵ "O meropriiatiakh po usileniiu ateisticheskogo vospitaniia naseleniia," *Partiinaiia zhizn'*, no. 2 (1964).

⁷⁰⁶ Rossiiskii gosudarstvennyi arkhiv sotsial'no-politicheskoi istorii [henceforth RGASPI], f. 606, op. 4, d. 14, ll. 62-67. Such new approaches to religion and believers were the result of observations made in early sociological and ethnographic research of religiosity. For example, A. S. Onishchenko, a prominent atheist from Ukraine, reported that fieldwork in the republic revealed that religious belief had "modernized" and that few continued to believe in an antropomorphic god. Onishchenko declined to be interviewed in March 2009.

⁷⁰⁷ *Ibid.*, 59. For example, an atheist cadre from Tallinn, Estonia lamented that the lack of organization in Estonian atheist education meant that while there were atheists conducting interesting work in the republic, most of it never received scholarly analysis and never reached publication.

measure and evaluate belief (or its absence)? How was the effect of atheist education to be measured? These and other questions still needed answers. Secondly, atheists had to figure out what constituted success—that is, to determine what it was that they wanted people to believe. Who were the “ideal” Soviet atheists? What were their values—the component parts of their worldview? What replaced their religious beliefs? Did they observe religious holidays and participate in rituals? And if so, should these be replaced with civic, socialist alternatives? What would such socialist holidays and rituals look like? What answers did atheism provide to existential questions—about happiness and fulfillment, the problem of evil, or the meaning of life and death? How could atheism offer solace in difficult times? And who would bring this atheist solace to local communities? Finally, the Institute's cadres had to figure out how to move from the “real” to the “ideal”—that is, to understand ethnographic and sociological data gathered in the field and apply it in ideological work in order to transform the undisciplined masses into model Soviet citizens.

A Home for Soviet Atheism

The leadership of the Institute was decided over the course of 1964. Iurii Pavlovich Frantsev (1903-1969, philosopher and historian of religion, member of the Soviet Academy of Sciences, and Rector of the AON) proposed Aleksandr Fedorovich Okulov (1908-1993) for the position of director, and Pavel Konstantinovich Kurochkin (1925-1981) and Lev Nikolaevich Mitrokhin (1930-2005) as deputy directors. A short time later, another candidacy was added: V. I. Evdokimov (1923-1969), who until then worked in the Party Central Committee.⁷⁰⁸ Considering the significance of the Institute for the future of Soviet policy on religion, as well as its role in the development of the Religious Studies in the Soviet and post-Soviet periods, it is worth examining the official biographies of Okulov, Kurochkin, Mitrokhin, and Evdokimov in greater detail.

⁷⁰⁸ RGASPI f. 606, op. 2, d. 25. After completing my research in the archives of the Institute (and publishing some of my findings in *Neprikosnovennyi zapas*), I came across an article on the history of the Institute of Scientific Atheism by one of its former researchers, Iu. P. Zuev. Zuev's article largely confirmed my findings, but they also corrected and sometimes supplemented them, for which I am grateful. Iu. P. Zuev, “Institut nauchnogo ateizma (1964-1991),” *Voprosy religii i religiovedeniia. Antologiiia otechestvennogo religiovedeniia* 1 (2009): 9-34. http://religio.rags.ru/journal/anthology1/a1_1.pdf (last accessed September 18, 2010). For the complete overview of the Institute of Scientific Atheism-Institute of Religious Studies, see *Voprosy religii i religiovedeniia. Antologiiia otechestvennogo religiovedeniia* 1-4 (2009): <http://religio.rags.ru/journal/archive.php> (last accessed September 18, 2010). On the history of Soviet religious studies more broadly, see M. M. Shakhnovich, “Otechestvennoe religiovedenie 20-80-x godov XX veka: Ot kakogo nasledstva my otkazyvaemsia,” in ed. M. M. Shakhnovich, *Ocherki po istorii religiovedeniia* (SPb, 2006), 181-197. On sociological studies of religion, including the work of the Institute, see Iu. P. Zuev, “Dinamika religioznosti v Rossii v XX veke i ee sotsiologicheskoe izuchenie,” in V. I. Garadzha, *Sotsiologiiia religii* (Moscow, 1995), 187-210. In his history of Soviet religious studies, the Russian sociologist Mikhail Iur'evich Smirnov likewise characterizes the 1960s and 1970s as a “vegetarian” period in the field, although he qualifies the notion of there being a continuity in studies of religion with the pre-revolutionary period, and the Soviet period. Nevertheless, he describes the “elevation” of Russian studies of religion and the training of scientific atheist specialists in the late Khrushchev era and the Brezhnev era. Smirnov sees the creation of the Institute of Scientific Atheism at the Central Committee's Academy of Social Sciences, in 1964, as the “apotheosis” of the “legitimation of scientific-atheist religious studies.” Mikhail Iur'evich Smirnov, “Religiovedenie v Rossii: problema samoidentifikatsii,” *Vestnik Moskovskogo universiteta: Filosofiiia*, no. 1 (January-February 2009): 90-106.

The choice of Okulov, an AON insider, to lead the newly formed Institute is less than surprising. At the time of his appointment, Okulov—who began as a logger in the Kirov region in the late 1920s, but quickly moved into the sphere of cultural enlightenment and Party work—was, at the time of his appointment, the deputy director of the Institute of Philosophy of the Soviet Academy of Sciences, a position he had held from 1951. He had also joined the faculty of the AON around the same time. By education, Okulov was a journalist (he attended the Moscow School of Journalism from 1934-1937), but, based on his professional biography, his editorial skills were most often applied in the sphere of ideology. Besides extensive Party propaganda work over the course of the 1930s and 1940s, Okulov had been the editor of the journal *Problems of Philosophy (Voprosy filosofii)* between 1959 and 1960. This made him a reliable political choice to be not only the director of the Institute, but also the editor of the Institute's journal, *Problems of Scientific Atheism (Voprosy nauchnogo ateizma)*.⁷⁰⁹ For several decades, Aleksandr Okulov was the ideological filter of the country's central atheist institution and publication.

The proposed candidates for deputy director—Kurochkin, Mitrokhin, and Evdokimov—were members of a younger generation whose studies and ideological training took place in the postwar period. Kurochkin became a Party member in 1946, after serving in the Soviet Army (1938-1945) and beginning his studies at the Novgorod and Leningrad Party schools (1945-1951). His education at Leningrad State University took a more academic direction, and in 1959 he became a graduate student in the AON Philosophy Department, where he, like Okulov, received a teaching position upon graduation. His studies in the ten years before becoming deputy director of the Institute focused on anti-religious propaganda, and he had, by 1964, already published eight works on religion and atheism. Finally, what likely recommended him for the post was his active position on the Methodological Council for the Propaganda of Scientific Atheism of the “Knowledge” Society, the Soviet Union’s primary mass enlightenment organization that, until the founding of the Institute of Scientific Atheism, coordinated most atheist work in the country. As one of the Institute’s two deputy directors, Kurochkin oversaw scholarly research. Evdokimov, meanwhile, became the deputy director in charge of the practical aspects of atheist work.⁷¹⁰

Of the three nominations, Mitrokhin was the one not chosen for the post. He was also the one whose career was made predominantly as an academic. Mitrokhin received his degree in 1953 from the Department of Philosophy at Moscow State University, where he continued as a graduate student until 1956. From 1957 to 1958, Mitrokhin worked for *Literaturnaia gazeta*, and in 1958 he joined the Institute of Philosophy of the Academy of Sciences as a junior researcher in the sector of scientific atheism. Of the nominees, Mitrokhin also seems to have had the most ambivalent relationship with atheism and its propaganda. In his own recollections decades later, he describes his initial involvement in atheist propaganda, as a lecturer for the “Knowledge” Society, as the result of financial difficulties after the arrest of his father in 1950, while the choice to work in scientific atheism at the Institute of Philosophy he ascribes to the influence of Aleksandr Il'ich Klivanov (1910-1984), a prominent scholar of religion with whom Mitrokhin

⁷⁰⁹ RGASPI f. 606, op. 2, d. 25.

⁷¹⁰ Zuev, “Institut nauchnogo ateizma (1964-1991),” 9. V. I. Evdokimov was a candidate in Philosophy, and at the time of his untimely death in 1969, was completing work on conceptions of religion in socialist society. See V. I. Evdokimov, “Utopicheskii sotsializm o religii v ‘ideal’nom obshchestve,” *Voprosy nauchnogo ateizma* 12 (1971): 167-196.

conducted fieldwork and co-authored several articles. His experiences with these field expeditions, as well as his familiarity with contemporary reform movements (or what was then referred to as “sectarianism”), made him a fairly rare commodity in a country where sociological study of religion had been practically dormant over the course of the previous two decades. Finally, as a candidate, Mitrokhin had the weakest Party record. He joined the Party in 1961, the same year he left the Institute of Philosophy to work in the Komsomol as the Deputy Chief of the Propaganda-Agitation Department. There, for two years, Mitrokhin reported on the religious situation in the country, especially among youth and sectarians.⁷¹¹

Archival sources do not provide a definitive answer about why Mitrokhin's candidacy for the post of deputy director was not approved—though it is possible to speculate that his Party experience may have been deemed insufficient, and the fact that he returned to the Institute of Philosophy, after his time in the Komsomol, to work in the sector of Western Philosophy may have also played a part. Mitrokhin's own rejection of the post is also not out of the question, as his later writings and interviews reveal his ambivalence on the subject of atheist education, despite his close professional and scholarly ties with this field throughout his life. Indeed, in an interview given towards the end of his life, Mitrokhin largely avoided direct discussion of scientific atheism, and when asked directly about his specialization, he answered simply that he “did not consider [him]self to be a 'scientific atheist' but a philosopher of religion.”⁷¹²

In the atheist mobilization of the mid-1960s, the Institute had several important roles. First, it had to direct research on religion and atheism and to coordinate it on both the union-wide and local levels; second, it had to provide cadres with the highest level of training, with the goal that some of the Institute's graduate students would conduct field research and, in the process, train cadres on the local level; and third, it needed to systematize atheist work by coordinating conferences and seminars to give local cadres the opportunity to learn about current research and receive the latest training methods. In order to conduct its work, the Institute was initially allotted thirteen employees who were transferred from Party organs and academic and research institutions, including the Department of Atheism at Moscow State University,⁷¹³ and the Institute of Philosophy, Institute of History, and Institute of Ethnography of the Soviet Academy of Sciences.⁷¹⁴ To coordinate the direction of research and atheist education, the Institute formed a Scientific Council (*Uchennyi sovet*) that reported to the Party's Central Committee and, in turn, received ideological directives from the Party.⁷¹⁵

⁷¹¹ Mitrokhin's Komsomol work concentrated on religion and atheism, and in the early 1960s, he provided the Komsomol Central Committee with numerous reports on youth religiosity and sectarianism. For example, see Rossiiskii gosudarstvennyi arkhiv sotsial'no-politicheskoi istorii-m (formerly Tsentr khraneniia dokumentov molodezhnykh organizatsii) [henceforth RGASPI-m], f. 1, op. 32, d. 1111 and RGASPI-m, f. 1, op. 32, d. 1150.

⁷¹² In general, Mitrokhin's discussion of atheist work, and especially his estrangement from his own participation in this project in his early work, is revealing. See L. N. Mitrokhin, “O vremeni i o sebe,” *Voprosy filosofii* 6 (1995). On Mitrokhin's candidacy for the Institute, see RGASPI, f. 606, op. 2, d. 25.

⁷¹³ Rossiiskii gosudarstvennyi arkhiv noveishei istorii [henceforth RGANI], f. 5, op. 55, d. 70. “On measures for strengthening scientific research in the sphere of atheism” (*o merakh po usileniiu nauchno-issledovatel'skoi raboty v oblasti ateizma*). According to material in the Central Committee archives, many of these institutions, and Moscow State University in particular, were less than enthusiastic about losing their atheist specialists.

⁷¹⁴ Zuev, “Institut nauchnogo ateizma (1964-1991),” 9.

⁷¹⁵ RGASPI, f. 606, op. 4, d. 1. For example, in the first year of its existence, the Institute of Scientific Atheism took part in several topical conferences coordinated by the Party Central Committee: in Leningrad, on the improvement

Alongside other functions, the Institute of Scientific Atheism also managed publications on religion and atheism through several avenues. These included “Informational Bulletins,” which were restricted-access publications largely intended for internal use,⁷¹⁶ as well as a professional journal, *Problems of Scientific Atheism (Voprosy nauchnogo ateizma)*, which, based on its higher publication figures (around 20,000), was intended for a broader audience.⁷¹⁷ After the drawn-out reforms of the popular journal *Science and Religion*, *Problems of Scientific Atheism* became the central publication for professional atheists. As a central forum for Soviet atheism, *Problems of Scientific Atheism* also took over the functions of other publications, such as *Problems of the History of Religion and Atheism (Voprosy istorii religii i ateizma)* of the Institute of History of the Soviet Academy of Sciences, and the annual publication (*ezhegodnik*) of the Leningrad Museum of the History of Religion and Atheism.⁷¹⁸ Starting in 1975, the Institute also provided cadres with access to scholarship on religion and atheism published abroad with its series “Issues of religion and atheism abroad” (*Problemy religii i ateizma za rubezhom*). Although access to this publication was restricted—the series was categorized “For official use only” (*DSP*, or *Dlia sluzhebного pol'zovaniia*)—it did offer researchers and graduate students rare access to foreign scholarships on theology and religion. Finally, alongside publications intended for specialists, the Institute also sought to make available to the general public an education in the history of the atheist movement by publishing classics of atheism and free-thinking in its “Scientific Atheist Library” (*Nauchno-ateisticheskaia biblioteka*).⁷¹⁹

The Institute likewise sought to set up professional connections abroad. In large part, these were with foreign atheist organizations, many of which—thought not all—were in “fraternal” socialist countries. Likewise, the Institute sought to expand its academic contacts with sociologists, ethnographers, and philosophers who focused on religion. Naturally, the Institute had closer contacts with similar establishments within the socialist bloc, such as the Institute of Scientific Atheism of the Czechoslovak Academy of Sciences, the Department of Confessional Politics and Religious Studies of the Highest School of Social Sciences in Poland, with the atheist sector of the Institute of Philosophy of the Bulgarian Academy of Sciences, with the Institute of Philosophy of the Hungarian Academy of Sciences, and the Institute of Philosophy of the Academy of Social Sciences under the Party Central Committee in East Germany.⁷²⁰ Indeed, atheist research and work in Bulgaria had provided an early model for the Institute's own activities. Finally, alongside visits to foreign conferences and institutions, the Institute also coordinated congresses for foreign scholars at home,⁷²¹ and hosted graduate students from

of organization and content of atheist work; in Kiev, on work among believers in rural areas; and in Riga, on work among Catholics and Lutherans in the Baltic republics.

⁷¹⁶ The Institute's “Informational Bulletins” were published between 1968 and 1990, with four to six issues annually.

⁷¹⁷ RGASPI, f. 606, op. 4, d. 192, ll. 118-121. *Voprosy nauchnogo ateizma* began publication in 1966, and was published twice a year until 1989 in around 20,000 copies. Zuev, 10.

⁷¹⁸ On the work of the Institute of History and the Leningrad Museum of the History of Religion and Atheism, including their publications, during the Khrushchev-era antireligious campaign, see Joan Delaney Grossman, “Khrushchev's antireligious policy and the campaign of 1954,” *Europe-Asia Studies* 24, no. 3 (January 1973): 374-386.

⁷¹⁹ Zuev, 12.

⁷²⁰ *Ibid.*, 31.

⁷²¹ *Ibid.* One of the culminations of international efforts was the 1975 symposium for scholars of socialist countries, held in Moscow, on “Atheism and religion in the contemporary battle of ideas” (*Ateizm i religiiia v sovremennoi*

socialist countries.⁷²² But the Institute also sought to establish relations beyond the socialist bloc, and not only with atheists. It wanted to connect with scholars in the capitalist world, and sought to re-establish relations with the World Union of Freethinkers after Soviet atheists had broken contact with the Union during the Second World War.⁷²³

On the ground, the call to connect research and policy, ideology and reality, and theory and practice propelled the creation of “local bases” (*opornye punkty*) that would operate as regional centers for both cadre training and sociological research. Their primary objective was to study religiosity in the area in order to recommend policies that would increase the effect of atheist work conducted by local Party and Komsomol organs, as well as educational, social and cultural organizations.⁷²⁴ Each local base was run by a council that received directives from both regional Party organs and the Institute, and in turn reported back to them with results.⁷²⁵ The Institute would then disseminate the activities of each local base across the country by coordinating seminars and conferences and publishing research findings in internal reports, bulletins, and academic publications, access to most of which was restricted to professional atheist cadres. Within two years, the Institute had established forty local bases across the Soviet Union, many of which were in major urban centers, as well as in areas with especially high concentrations of religious communities.⁷²⁶ In the RSFSR, these included Moscow and Moscow region, Vladimir, Gorky, Penza, Perm, Vologda, Voronezh, Vologda, Ivanovo, Kazan', Krasnodar, Briansk, Chuvashiia, Dagestan, Mordovia, Orel, Novgorod, Pskov, Riazan',

bor'be ideii), organized by the Institute in coordination with the Academy of Sciences, the AON, and the Ministry of Education.

⁷²² Ibid., 32. There were thirty candidate-level and two doctoral-level dissertations defended at the Institute by foreign students.

⁷²³ RGASPI, f. 606, op. 4, d. 1, ll. 1-30. The World Union of Freethinkers was founded in 1880, and Soviet atheists had had contact with it until the Second World War. It is likely that Soviet atheists lost contact with the Union in part because of the more limited opportunities for foreign contacts during the war, but also because atheism was no longer a priority. After peaking during the anti-religious campaigns of Stalin's “cultural revolution” of the First Five-Year Plan, antireligious measures began to decline, and by the 1940s, the state had ceased much of its administrative campaign against religion, as well as atheist enlightenment, disbanding the League of Militant Atheists and closing atheist publication houses in 1941. Sociological and ethnographic studies of religion in the Soviet Union were also brought to a halt, and were not revived until the late 1950s. On the reversal of the Soviet position towards the Russian Orthodox Church during the Second World War, see M. V. Shkarovskii, *Russkaia pravoslavnaia tserkov' i sovetskoe gosudarstvo v 1943-1964 godakh: ot 'premiriia' k novoi voine* (St. Petersburg: DEAN + ADIA-M, 1995); S. Merritt Miner, *Stalin's Holy War: Religion, Nationalism and Alliance Politics 1941-1945* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2003); and Davis, *The Long Walk to Church: A Contemporary History of Russian Orthodoxy*. For an overview of Soviet studies of religion in the early Soviet period, see Kira V. Tsekhanskaia, “Russia: Trends in Orthodox Religiosity in the Twentieth Century (Statistics and Reality),” in *Religion and Politics in Russia: A Reader*, ed. Marjorie Mandelstam Balzer (New York: M. E. Sharpe, 2010), 3-17.

⁷²⁴ Local bases were founded at local organizations concerned with research and atheist education: departments of Atheism or Philosophy at local higher education institutions, atheist sectors at republic branches of the Academy of Sciences and the “Knowledge” Society, laboratories for sociological research, Houses of Atheism, or Party organs.

⁷²⁵ Zuev, 20. Zuev describes the work of the *opornye punkty* in the following manner: “The *opornye punkty* provided, on the one hand, the professional influence of the institute over local cadres, and on the other, served as the source of sociological information for [the institute]” (Zuev, 19-20). The work of the local bases seems to have taken quite a bit of time to systematize, and does not seem to have been well-coordinated until the 1970s. Zuev notes that local bases only received central methodological guidance in 1984, when the Institute provided them with “Typological methodology for the study of manifestations of religion and the state of atheist education in the city, district, and labor collective.”

⁷²⁶ RGASPI, f. 606, op. 4, d. 119. l. 192. By 1974, there were forty seven.

Stavropol', Tomsk, Cheliabinsk, Checheno-Ingushetiia, and Iaroslavl', among others. In Ukraine, bases were founded in Kyiv, Ivano-Frankivsk, Dnepropetrovsk, Odessa, and Uzhgorod, and in Belarus there were bases in Minsk and Brest. Finally, the Institute coordinated research with bases in Kazakhstan; Uzbekistan; Georgia; Tadzhikistan; Kyrgyztan; the Baltics (Lithuania, Latvia, and Estonia) and Karelia.

Besides serving as one of the country's top research centers on religion, one of the most important functions of the Institute was to train top-level atheist cadres in its graduate program. In selecting applicants, the Institute followed the practices of the AON, and graduate students were mainly accepted from top party organs on the regional level (*obkom*, *kraikom*), large cities (*gorkom* level), and republic-level Party Central Committees.⁷²⁷ The work of the Institute's graduate students was curated, in part, by the Party Central Committee, and students were directed to research topics of particular interest to ideological work—such as the psychology of believers, trends in religious ritual observance, or the process of secularization in Soviet conditions.⁷²⁸ In gathering material for their dissertation, many students served as coordinators of research projects around the country, often through the local bases.⁷²⁹

To get a fuller picture of the way that the Institute's early work was coordinated and then used in union-wide ideological policies, consider the experience of one of the Institute's first graduate students, Nikolai Mikhailovich Zakovich.⁷³⁰ Accepted into the first class of the Institute's graduate program, Zakovich was the only student from Ukraine, the republic with the highest number of religious believers in the Soviet Union.⁷³¹ Prior to his studies at the Institute, Zakovich had coordinated lecture work at the Komsomol committee (*obkom*) of his native Ivano-Frankivsk. He then went on to head the lecture department of the Philosophy section of the House of Political Enlightenment (*Dom politprosveshcheniia*). When the Komsomol wanted to send him to the republic's Highest Party School (*Vysshaia partiinaia shkola*), he declined

⁷²⁷ Zuev, 30.

⁷²⁸ Ibid. That the Party directed the work of the Institute's graduate students is confirmed also by my interviews and correspondences with Institute graduates, as well as by Zuev, who writes that students were typically assigned a topic of study when they were accepted into the graduate program. Zuev provides several examples of research topics, "the process of secularization of mass consciousness in Soviet society", "freedom of conscience as a subject of historical and philosophical research", "religion as a cultural phenomenon". Furthermore, upon completing their studies, the Institute's graduate students were placed by the Cadre Department of the Central Committee. Zuev writes that a "considerable part" of INA graduates eventually wound up in academic work, but in my research, I found that a great deal of them wound up in Party work, especially those that came from republics. Over the course of the Institute's existence, 120 students completed its graduate program, and there were 200 candidate-level and 40 doctoral-level dissertations defended at the Institute.

⁷²⁹ My interviews and correspondences with Remir Aleksandrovich Lopatkin and Nikolai Mikhailovich Zakovich, two of the Institute's first graduate students, confirm my observation that Institute cadres served as coordinators of atheist research on the local-level. Interestingly, cadres were oftentimes sent to their native land to conduct and coordinate research, presumably because of their familiarity with local conditions, as well as their level of access to local organs and the population. Remir Aleksandrovich Lopatkin, personal e-mail correspondences, 30 January 2009, 15 February 2009, 26 March 2009, 17 April 2009, 14 August 2009, 4 November 2009, 5 November 2009. Nikolai Mikhailovich Zakovich, interview, Kyiv, Ukraine, 5 February 2009.

⁷³⁰ Presently, Zakovich is a professor of philosophy at the Department of Culturology, formerly the department of Scientific Atheism, at the Dragamanov Pedagogical University in Kyiv, Ukraine.

⁷³¹ According to the archives, there were 14 graduate students in the Institute's three year program in the 1964-1965 academic year (six in the first year, six in the second, and two in the third). In 1965-1966, the Institute had ten new incoming students. RGASPI, f. 606, op. 4, d. 4, ll. 16-29.

because he did not want to make a career in the Party, yet when the opportunity came up to promote his candidacy for the Academy of Social Sciences in Moscow, he agreed to go.

Interestingly, prior to his graduate studies, Zakovich did not have a particular interest in religion, nor an extensive background in atheist work. His experience with antireligious agitation began early, when he was recruited in secondary school to meet with Jehovah's Witnesses and convince them to vote in the elections, but his antireligious agitation was episodic. As Zakovich recalls, "I knew about religion from election to election" (*ot vyborov do vyborov*). It is possible to conjecture that, even with his limited experience and interest in antireligious work, Zakovich was chosen for the program because of his familiarity with Ivano-Frankivsk, which would interest the Party because the region had among the highest concentrations of religious communities in Ukraine, the republic that accounted for much of the religiosity in the country as a whole. Presumably, of course, he also had an excellent record with his local Komsomol organs.

When he arrived in Moscow, Zakovich and the two other graduate students in his cohort—Petr Petrovich Kampars, a geographer from Latvia, and Ashbulatov, an historian from Tashkent—met with V. I. Stepanov of the Central Committee's department of Ideology to discuss plans for their studies and research. In our interview, Zakovich described the process of arriving at his dissertation topic in the following manner:

We were forced ... I wanted to write about "Natural History and Religion" (*Prirodovedenie i religiiia*), this was closer to my interests [Zakovich's background was in physics—VS] ... but the head of the Central Committee department was Stepanov at that point, and he forced us ... See, the thing is, before [we arrived], they had gathered a whole meter of various reports on rituals, a meter wide and a meter high, and they said to us "We would like for you three graduate students to analyze all of this, and write a book on rituals. If you find that rituals are necessary, write that they are necessary. If you find that they are not, write that they are not."⁷³²

The result of their efforts was *Sovetskaia grazhdanskaia obriadnost'*, the first systematic analysis of the philosophical and practical dimensions of the Soviet attempts to inculcate civic rituals that began in the late 1950s.⁷³³

"We have to figure out where we lost people"

By the end of the Khrushchev period, Soviet atheists seemed to agree that atheist work was entering a new era, and that the inherent danger of antireligious propaganda as it had been conducted over the course of the campaign was that it left an ideological "vacuum"—an empty space between belief and unbelief. The purpose of the Institute was to figure out a way that

⁷³² Zakovich, interview, Kyiv, Ukraine, 5 February 2009.

⁷³³ The dissertation, which was turned into a monograph, reviewed previous work on the subject, and analyzed ethnographic and statistical materials, much of which came from Kampars' native Baltic region, and Zakovich's Ivano-Frankivsk. See P. P. Kampars and N. M. Zakovich, *Sovetskaia grazhdanskaia obriadnost'* (Moscow: Nauka, 1967). In our interview, Zakovich also clarified that Ashbulatov had dropped out of the project because of family circumstances, when the earthquake that destroyed Tashkent on April 26, 1966, forced him to return to Uzbekistan. Zakovich, interview, Kyiv, Ukraine, 5 February 2009.

Soviet ideology in general, and atheism in particular, could fill this void. In November 1964, shortly after the founding of the Institute, the Scientific Council gathered to take stock of the state of the field. Iurii Frantsev, the Rector of the AON, reminded cadres that, whereas before atheism focused primarily on exposing the reactionary political role of religion, their current objective was to “go much deeper, to touch on all sides and all levels of social consciousness where religion might make a nest” (*gde mozhet gnezditsia religiia*).⁷³⁴ The modernization of religion posed a challenge to the atheist project—a challenge that enlightenment measures had not been able to meet. As an example of the position to which atheists had to produce an adequate response, Frantsev shared an excerpt from the writings of a Catholic philosopher from West Germany. Science, the philosopher put forth, only offers mankind fragments (*oskolki, otryvki*) of reality, rather than a full (*tseľ'niuiu*) worldview (*kartinu mira*). Yet mankind searches for wholeness, and people try to fill gaps in real knowledge with the help of wishful, willful thinking (*pri pomoshchi pozhelanii, volevoi mysli*). “For believers,” Frantsev quoted the philosopher, “the situation is much better than for unbelievers, because a believer can overcome the fragmentation (*razorvannost'*) of modern knowledge, of modern science.”⁷³⁵

Comrades, if one is to translate this into the language of materialists, atheists, warriors against such religious conceptions, then this strategic line means something along these lines: the clerical crowd (*popovshchina*) is trying to fill the empty spaces in knowledge, in science, is trying to rush (*ustremit'sia*) into empty spaces, to fill these holes, these blank spots (*belye piatna*), of which there are ever fewer, in order to create a distorted (*izvrashchennuiu*) religious worldview. We do not yet know if there is life on Mars. But this does not prevent us from saying that no devil, no miracle, no supernatural power is hiding in ignorance (*v neznanii*). This conviction is given to us by the scientific materialist worldview.⁷³⁶

Atheists acknowledged that most people did not have an atheist worldview, and part of their task was to figure out how to approach this audience in order to inculcate materialist convictions.

One of the earliest avenues through which they had attempted to do this beginning in the Khrushchev era was through the popular journal *Science and Religion (Nauka i religiia)*.⁷³⁷ At the meeting of the Institute's Scientific Council, B. A. Grigorian, the journal's deputy editor, shared that, in response to the ideological objectives set forth at the 22nd Party Congress, the journal had tried to reach the “neutral” reader (who did not necessarily subscribe to a religious or an atheist worldview). He reported that, in letters to the editor, readers often wrote that the journal provided a great deal of criticism of religion, but very little about what atheism had to offer to the believer and the waiverer (*kolebaitushegosia*). In light of this, the journal decided to devote much more space to “positive” materials that explained worldview issues, from communist morality, to new socialist everyday life (*byt*) and socialist civic rituals—“that is, to show the kind of constructive work (*sozidatel'niuiu rabotu*) and positive foundations—scientific,

⁷³⁴ RGASPI, f. 606, op. 4, d. 10, l. 4.

⁷³⁵ RGASPI, f. 606, op. 4, d. 14, ll. 4-5.

⁷³⁶ Ibid., 5-6.

⁷³⁷ For an analysis of discussions about the direction of *Science and Religion*, see chapter Five of this dissertation.

historical, philosophical—that could fill the vacuums (*vakuumy*) that form as a result of the individual’s liberation from religious conceptions and beliefs.”⁷³⁸

In order to figure out the “positive” content of socialist atheism, the Institute had to re-address the problem of scientific atheism as a subject: to reconsider what exactly constituted atheism, and to understand how atheism related to other fields of knowledge, such as philosophy, history, theology, and religious studies.⁷³⁹ Atheists also had to figure out what made socialist atheism distinct—and not only from the religious worldview, but also from the bourgeois atheism of their ideological opponents. At the heart of the problem was the paradoxical situation that a great deal of research on atheism consisted of the study of its opposite—religion. For what *was* atheism, if not just the absence of religion? Was it the criticism of religion, a constituent part of Marxist-Leninist philosophy, or an independent scholarly discipline? Such questions demanded clarification both conceptually and methodologically.

Inevitably, such questions came up when the Institute gathered to discuss the subject of “scientific atheism” in higher education.⁷⁴⁰ It was revealing, for example, that while scientific atheism had recently been re-introduced into the university curriculum, there was little agreement about which department was its proper home. Nor was there consensus about the exact content of the coursework. Should the course focus on the history of religion through a critical lens, trace the development of unbelief in philosophical thought, or examine how scientific advancements undermined religious conceptions of the world? The answer to the question of how to categorize scientific atheism would then determine who would serve as the best instructors: historians, philosophers, or scientists. Since the course had not been taught in higher education institutions for some time, no instructors had been trained in scientific atheism, which meant that a great number of instructors for the new course had to be drafted from other disciplines. As a result, few felt at home in the subject, and resisted explicitly engaging in atheist propaganda. Defending themselves from party criticism, some instructors, especially those in the sciences, argued that their disciplines inherently presented students with a scientific materialist worldview and were therefore a natural part of atheist education—an argument that went back to the early Soviet period, when the question of whether education should be *anti-religious*, or simply *unreligious*, was first raised.⁷⁴¹

In their attempt to work out a positive foundation for atheism, many atheists logically criticized most definitions for emphasizing “negative” components. In pointing to the importance of figuring out a positive definition for atheism, Nikolai Ivanovich Gubanov, for example, drew an analogy between the terms “atheism” and “communism”, noting that, as a category,

⁷³⁸ RGASPI, f. 606, op. 4, d. 14, l. 7.

⁷³⁹ In part, this meant a review of published literature that would allow young cadres to take stock of academic work that had been done in religion and atheism over the course of the Soviet period.

⁷⁴⁰ RGASPI, f. 606, op. 4, d. 12.

⁷⁴¹ On teachers in the sciences resisting atheist education in the Khrushchev era, see Michael Froggatt, “Renouncing dogma, teaching utopia: Science in schools under Khrushchev,” *The Dilemmas of De-Stalinization: Negotiating Cultural and Social Change in the Khrushchev Era*, ed. Polly Jones (New York: Routledge, 2006), 250-267. For an overview of atheism in Soviet education, see Larry E. Holmes, “Fear No Evil: Schools and Religion in Soviet Russia, 1917-1941,” in Sabrina Petra Ramet, ed., *Religious Policy in the Soviet Union* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 131-136. In the archives, I found that the intelligentsia’s unwillingness to engage with antireligious propaganda in the classroom is a frequent criticism.

“communism” would suffer if it were only defined as the rejection of private property and the opposite of capitalism (though, it should be noted, Gubanov did not go on to give a “positive” definition of communism).⁷⁴² Yet M. M. Grigorian, a philosopher and the author of the primary textbook on atheism, “Foundations of Scientific Atheism”,⁷⁴³ proposed that the very essence of atheism was negative, since it was founded in criticism. “It seems to me,” he noted, “that we can speak of a certain critical spirit, a negative spirit, if you will, of our atheism as a science.”⁷⁴⁴ Indeed, Grigorian argued that “There is not one part, not one point in Marxism, which does not carry a critical character, that does not have, in some form or another, in your terms, a 'negative' form.”⁷⁴⁵

But others pointed out that emphasizing the critical spirit had not been effective in transforming Soviet people's worldviews, and that much of this had to do with the role that religion played in individual and social psychology. I. M. Kichanova, a researcher at the Institute, argued that the problem of atheism was a “humanist” problem—that it came down to “determining ways to fill that need that forces a person to appeal for help not to social organizations, but to otherworldly powers (*nezemnym, potustoronnim silam*).” As a form of socialist humanism, atheism had to “create a harmonious spiritual world, which does not need to appeal to otherworldly powers.”⁷⁴⁶ For this reason, I. A. Galitskaia, a young researcher at the Institute, argued that atheism was not an independent discipline, but a facet of philosophy.⁷⁴⁷ Galitskaia agreed that the origins of atheism were in the rejection of religion, but argued that the time had come to “broaden” it to include “issues connected to human personality (*lichnost'iu cheloveka*), man’s relationship to life and to himself—that is, those problems on which religion grows.”⁷⁴⁸ Galitskaia observed that, in Soviet philosophy, almost no research had been done on the subject of human personality. A person was looked at as “either the subject or the object of cognition—that is, as the carrier of productive power (*nositel' proizvodstvennykh sil*)—but was not examined as a holistic personality (*lichnost' v tselom*), as had been done by Renaissance philosophy.” Because the individual had stayed on the margins of Soviet philosophical concerns, related issues—happiness, suffering, the meaning of life, and death—had also been relegated to the periphery. “With us,” Galitskaia remarked, “the tacit assumption is that a person should not suffer, that under Communism there will be no suffering.” Instead, Soviet ethics preferred to focus on the opposite category: happiness. The results, Galitskaia observed, were often comical, since “in reality it is funny to insist that a person will not always suffer for one reason or another. And religion uses this wonderfully and has managed to provide man with solace.” Religion,

⁷⁴² RGASPI, f. 606, op. 4, d. 12, l. 12.

⁷⁴³ See M. M. Grigorian, *Kurs lektsii po istorii ateizma* (Moscow, 1970). Grigorian also later worked at the Institute of Scientific Atheism.

⁷⁴⁴ RGASPI, f. 606, op. 4, d. 12, ll. 16-17.

⁷⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 17.

⁷⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 28.

⁷⁴⁷ I. A. Galitskaia’s scholarly interests focused on atheism and religion in youth education, and like a number of other researchers at the Institute, her work in this field has continued into the post-Soviet period. See, I. A. Galitskaia, ed. *Molodezh' i ateizm* (Moscow: Mysl', 1971), as well as numerous publications on religion in secular education in today’s Russia, I. A. Galitskaia and I. V. Metlik, “Izuchenie religii v svetskoi shkole i problema vospitaniia veroterpimosti,” *Obrazovanie* 6 (2003): 23-42; I. A. Galitskaia, I. V. Metlik, A. Iu. Solov'ev, “Religiia v obuchenii i vospitanii shkol'nikov: Moskovskii region,” *Nauchnye trudy Gosudarstvennogo nauchno-issledovatel'skogo instituta sem'i i vospitaniia Rossiiskoi akademii obrazovaniia i Mintruda Rossii*, vol. 1 (Moscow: Gos. NII sem'i i vospitaniia, 1999).

⁷⁴⁸ RGASPI, f. 606, op. 4, d. 12, l. 35.

unlike atheism, was able to offer solace in the face of trouble, grief, and especially death. This was especially evident if one examined the issue of immortality. Certainly dialectical materialism put forth that man is mortal, Galitskaia noted, “But what kind of solace is there, when they say that you are mortal, but matter is eternal?” In Soviet philosophy, such issues had remained “completely unexamined,” Galitskaia reiterated, whereas religion “blossoms (*rastsvetaet*) on them.”⁷⁴⁹ She concluded that the subject matter of atheism was “not exactly philosophy, but maybe philosophical-ethical or psychological issues—those issues that concerned man and his attitude towards life (*otnosheniem k zhizni*).”

Although Galitskaia did not use the term, her observations indicate that the “vacuum” in the fabric of Soviet ideology was spiritual—the search for personal meaning, the need for solace in the face of troubles. “Perhaps atheist education will consist in the education of a personality which will not seek personal meaning in religion,” Galitskaia concluded.⁷⁵⁰ If one considered atheism in such a light, then figuring out how to fill this empty space was not just a “scholastic” concern, but a practical one. As the director of the Institute, A. F. Okulov, put it: “In studying atheist work, we have to look at the degree to which our spiritual life is fulfilling (*naskol'ko bogata nasha dukhovnaia zhizn'*), which parts of our ideological work function [and] which wheels are broken. We have to figure out where we lost people.”⁷⁵¹

“Obstacles along the path of Soviet life”

Galitskaia's and Okulov's observations pointed to the fact that Soviet atheism was not a theoretical issue that remained within the confines of academic discussions, but a problem with practical application and real consequences. The Institute took stock of atheist work, outlined the shortcomings in previous practices, and set about defining the agenda for the future of atheist education. In order to coordinate theory and practice on a union-wide level, the Institute formed topical research groups (*problemnye gruppy*) that brought together senior INA researchers, graduate students, and external scholars. The Institute's research teams investigated broadly defined categories pertinent to atheist education: (1) “The character and degree of the religiosity of Soviet believers” (*Stepen' i kharakter religioznosti veruiushchikh v SSSR*); (2) “Features of the battle between science and religion in contemporary conditions” (*Osobennosti bor'by nauki i religii v sovremennykh usloviakh*); (3) “Moral progress and religion” (*Nravstvennyi progress i religii*); (4) “Tendencies in the development of religious ideology and organizations in capitalist countries” (*Tendentsii v razvitiu religioznoi ideologii i organizatsiakh v kapitalisticheskikh stranakh*); (5) “Preconditions for and paths towards fully overcoming religion” (*Predposylki i puti polnogo preodoleniia religii*); (6) “The effectiveness of various forms of atheist education” (*Effektivnost' razlichnykh form ateisticheskogo vospitaniia*), later renamed “Forms and methods of atheist propaganda” (*Formy i metody ateisticheskoi propagandy*); (7) “The atheist education of the emerging generation” (*Ateisticheskoe vospitanie podrastaiushchego pokoleniia*); and “Bourgeois atheism and free-thought at the present stage” (*Burzhuaiznyi ateizm i svobodomyслиe na sovremennom etape*), added a year later, in 1965.⁷⁵²

⁷⁴⁹ RGASPI, f. 606, op. 4, d. 12, ll. 35-36.

⁷⁵⁰ Ibid., 36.

⁷⁵¹ RGASPI, f. 606, op. 4, d. 19, l. 80.

⁷⁵² RGASPI, f. 606, op. 4, d. 1, ll. 3-8. On later changes and additions, see RGASPI, f. 606, op. 4, d. 4, ll. 18-19.

The Institute's early field research investigated the general activities of religious organizations and the religiosity of believers in specific localities,⁷⁵³ as well as inquiry-driven questions like modern believers' conceptions of God and social relations (1964-1965), reasons for the observance of religious rituals (1964), the nature of religious emotions (1964), the emotional influence of religious rituals (1964), and the reasons people broke with religious belief (1964).⁷⁵⁴ Above all, cadres discussed the fact that secularization did not seem to be following the expected pattern. To make sense of this, atheists had to get a fuller picture of actually-existing religiosity. They had to mobilize forces for sociological fieldwork to gather concrete material, refine methods in order to properly analyze findings, and reconsider categories in order to get a better understanding of why religion persisted in socialist conditions.

The most revealing and interesting work of the Institute took place at the numerous conferences, congresses and seminars organized to make sense of data gathered in the field, and a closer look at these debates sheds light on the reality researchers encountered on the ground. One of the first steps the Institute took to address the Party's call for more systematic research was to organize an all-union conference on sociological methodology, "Methods and results of concrete research of religious survivals," convened in November 1964.⁷⁵⁵ In a comprehensive effort to evaluate early findings and set the course for future research, representatives from the Institute, AON, and Party organs—as well as researchers and propaganda workers from across the country—exchanged their experiences in the field. The tone, set by Iurii Frantsev, the Rector of the AON, emphasized the importance of exact goals and clear questions. Atheists should focus "not on how believers imagine God, with a mustache and beard or without them, but instead on the role that believers attribute to supernatural powers in human life [and] in the life of contemporary society."⁷⁵⁶ Frantsev proposed that researchers narrow their scope in favor of quality and depth, and insisted that it was impossible to understand religion without examining it in a broader context.

The main task that I would set [...] for sociological analysis of contemporary religiosity [could be] described with words borrowed from the remarkable preface of V. I. Lenin to his immortal work *Materialism and Empirio-Criticism*. There, Lenin says that he set for himself the goal to discover what tripped people up. And so we need to find out what a person stumbles on as he walks along the Soviet path of life, what stones we need to remove from his path, what holes we need to fill, so that he would not stumble. This is what it means to create scientifically founded methods for our propaganda work. I believe that concrete research, and conversations in particular, are the best method for this.⁷⁵⁷

The ideal analysis, therefore, would illuminate why a believer needed to turn to religion in modern conditions, and what atheists could do to change this.

⁷⁵³ For the Institute's research on religious life in Vladimir region in 1964-1965, see RGASPI, f. 606, op. 4, d. 126.

⁷⁵⁴ RGASPI, f. 606, op. 4, d. 133; RGASPI, f. 606, op. 4, d. 135; RGASPI, f. 606, op. 4, d. 148; RGASPI, f. 606, op. 4, d. 173; RGASPI, f. 606, op. 4, d. 176; RGASPI, f. 606, op. 4, d. 179.

⁷⁵⁵ RGASPI, f. 606, op. 4, d. 18 and RGASPI, f. 606, op. 4, d. 19.

⁷⁵⁶ RGASPI, f. 606, op. 4, d. 18, l. 6.

⁷⁵⁷ Ibid., 11.

A. F. Okulov noted that, in recent years, substantial work had been done on learning about the religiosity of the population. The Institute of History, Institute of Ethnography, and Institute of Philosophy of the Soviet Academy of Sciences in Moscow had organized expeditions around the country, as had the atheist sectors of the Institute of Philosophy of the Ukrainian Academy of Sciences and the Institute of Philosophy and Law in Kazakhstan. Graduate students at departments of the History and Theory of Atheism at major universities, Moscow State University and Kiev State University among them, had also participated in the effort to gather data.⁷⁵⁸ Already in the mid-1960s, their findings had appeared in monographs and specialist publications, such as *Voprosy filosofii* and *Sovetskaia etnografiia*. “All of this shows revitalization, a turn to the concrete study of the state of religiosity and atheist work,” observed Okulov.⁷⁵⁹ Yet despite the evident intensification of atheists’ efforts, Okulov insisted that “the general picture of the population’s religiosity in our country remains, as before, unclear.” Atheist work continued to be unsystematic, and there was little research into the effect of atheist propaganda on believers.⁷⁶⁰ The time had come to “bring clarity” to the picture, and one the first—and, perhaps one of the most important—projects the Institute attempted was to create a map of Soviet religiosity.

To put together such a map, the Institute directed research on several directions: (1) the size and make-up of religious communities among different confessions, as well as the dynamics of their religious life and their organizational structure; (2) the ways in which religiosity manifested itself among different groups of people, broken down by age, gender, and socio-economic categories; (3) the contemporary forms of religiosity among different confessional communities, and especially the meaning they attributed to ritual life; and (4) the evolution of modern mass religious consciousness and the ways in which religious conceptions were intertwined with scientific information. Okulov urged researchers to pay particular attention to the various *transformations* that took place in the religious worldview, to the relationships between such transformations, and to the character and degree of changes in various religious conceptions. When religious worldviews transformed under the pressure of modernity, what died off and what remained—he asked—and did those elements that remained transform to assume new functions?

A number of conference participants noted that, in order to make sociological research more useful to atheist work, cadres had to place believers in context—to become familiar with them on an individual basis, as well as in their communities, both on the macro and the micro level.⁷⁶¹ Frantsev, for instance, urged researchers to focus on the psychology of believer and proposed that interviews were a more effective method than surveys.⁷⁶² Another researcher suggested that, rather than interviewing believers about religion directly, it was much more

⁷⁵⁸ RGASPI, f. 606, op. 4, d. 19, l. 76. Some of the earliest sociological research on Soviet religiosity took place in 1959-1961. A group at the Institute of History of the Soviet Academy of Sciences, under the guidance of A. I. Klibanov, conducted research expeditions to study the religious life of sectarians in Tambov, Lipetsk, and Voronezh regions. Likewise, a group of graduate students from Moscow State University's department of scientific atheism (including I. N. Iablokov, N. P. Alekseev, and T. G. Gaidurova) conducted research expeditions to study religiosity in Orel region. Zuev, 19.

⁷⁵⁹ RGASPI, f. 606, op. 4, d. 19, l. 76.

⁷⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, 77.

⁷⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 30-37.

⁷⁶² RGASPI, f. 606, op. 4, d. 18, ll. 7, 9.

effective to ask questions about belief “among other things” (*mezhdū prochem*), in the midst of general questions about the person's life.⁷⁶³

Yet looking at religiosity in a broader context revealed an uncomfortably messy situation that defied clear categories and made it more, rather than less, difficult to make conclusions about the origins and nature of religious belief. N. P. Alekseev, a researcher who studied religious behavior among the rural population on three collective farms in Orel region, stated that the religious views of modern collective farm workers were “very simplified”: their religiosity seemed to be more the product of custom and tradition than of any sophisticated religious conceptions and convictions. The modern collective farm worker was religious because “this is how he was brought up by his mother”—“the elders believed and we believe” was Alekseev's summary of this attitude. Moreover, Alekseev reported that the vast majority—more than 90 per cent—had icons in their homes, and that 87 per cent of those surveyed—both believers and unbelievers—took part in religious rituals.⁷⁶⁴ In some regions, 60 per cent baptised their children, in others 30-40 per cent. One of the reasons behind such high statistics, Alekseev proposed, was that the clergy, even after the introduction of “extraordinary” legal measures (*chrezvychnykh zakonov*), continued to “make money on the side” (*zanimat'sia levymi zarabotkami*) by performing rituals. For instance, ten children would be brought from the collective farm for baptism, but only one form would be registered. Many children were baptized by “homegrown” priests that would “go around the collective farm in the summer and baptize all the children.” Indeed, baptisms and other rites continued to be ubiquitous, despite the fact that many of the participants, according to Alekseev, were not believers.⁷⁶⁵

By way of explanation, Alekseev foregrounded the force of public opinion and social psychology. Many unbelievers, he put forth, did not find it “disgraceful” to participate in religious rituals because they lived in a social collective and therefore had to “have a place” within the community. Perhaps such an unbeliever was unhappy with this situation, but he had to “reckon with the opinion of his mother [and] mother-in-law.”⁷⁶⁶ V. B. Ol'shanskii, of the Institute of Philosophy, agreed that researchers had to pay attention to social psychology, since one could not make sense of data on ritual observance without taking into account the role of group dynamics. The pressure of the collective, Ol'shanskii argued, was among the most important factors motivating people's decisions and behavior, especially in the sphere of religion.⁷⁶⁷ L. N. Mitrokhin observed that cadres also had to study the theologies of different confessions, since “a person often expresses his views according to the canons of his religion [and] if you do not know these canons, then naturally your conclusions will not have any scientific value.”⁷⁶⁸

Finally, Okulov also pointed to the need to determine the practical effect of sociological research and atheist work. “We cannot isolate atheism from the whole of the spiritual life of our society,” Okulov insisted, “And in general, we are speaking about the practical applicability of our research.”⁷⁶⁹ He insisted, moreover, that the quality of atheist work depended on the quality of cadres, and that the quality of cadres still left much to be desired. He recommended that

⁷⁶³ Ibid., 14.

⁷⁶⁴ RGASPI, f. 606, op. 4, d. 37, l. 47.

⁷⁶⁵ RGASPI, f. 606, op. 4, d. 18, l. 24.

⁷⁶⁶ Ibid., 23-24.

⁷⁶⁷ RGASPI, f. 606, op. 4, d. 19, ll. 58-66.

⁷⁶⁸ Ibid., 28.

⁷⁶⁹ Ibid., 78.

atheists coordinate their research with psychologists, philologists, sociologists and philosophers, and likewise urged academics to become more involved in atheist education. It was time, Okulov concluded, to “bring an end to the situation, where atheist work takes the back seat (*schitaiut vtorym planom*) [and] where it is considered the lot of defective people (*udel ushcherbnykh liudei*).”⁷⁷⁰

Mapping Soviet Religiosity

The inherent tensions between the descriptive (research) and prescriptive (policy) functions of the Institute—between alarm about the present stage of ideological work that precipitated the call for reform, and a cautionary, paternalistic approach to change—became increasingly apparent. Arguably, these tensions were symptomatic of the broader contradictions in the Soviet approach to religion and atheist education. The creation of institutions and cadres dedicated to, on the one hand, studying the population's religiosity and, on the other hand, conducting atheist propaganda on the ground and measuring its effectiveness meant that, in effect, cadres were being asked to provide an accurate picture of Soviet believers and to simultaneously make these believers into atheists. Since what, or who, they were expected to find on the ground was, in many ways, determined *a priori*, atheist researchers were caught between revealing a “concrete, real reality” drastically at odds with Soviet ideological pronouncements and creating the mythical “reality” that should have been, according to ideological predictions, the one they found. Since no academic discipline was independent of ideological imperatives, an external force always determined the parameters of scholarship.⁷⁷¹

And yet, despite these limitations, things did not stay the same. Although the new cohort of atheists certainly spun their wheels, their efforts did produce changes, and sociological research and atheist work developed over time. How, then, was the terrain between the state's ideological aspirations and concrete reality navigated by the institutions charged with the task of transforming Soviet beliefs and practices? What questions interested them, and what findings did they consider significant? How did change come about, and what did it produce? How did cadres determine and evaluate successes and failures? And how did their findings shape their future approaches and their understanding of atheism's role in the broader cosmos of Soviet ideology?

After two years, the Institute evaluated developments in atheist education in light of intensified efforts in a report compiled for the Central Committee.⁷⁷² While by no means

⁷⁷⁰ Ibid., 85.

⁷⁷¹ As Lev Nikolaevich Mitrokhin put it in a 1997 publication, scientific atheism was a “scholastically thematized system of dominating conceptions about the paths for 'constructing' a new society and the requirements which citizens had to fulfill under it. And various 'measures achieved', facts, and numbers were presented only in that form in which they could confirm and concretize the declared pseudo-reality. Naturally, this entire construction did not give in to any kind of modernization.” L. N. Mitrokhin, *Moi filosofskie sobesedniki* (Sankt-Peterburg: Izdatel'stvo Russkoi Khristianskoi Gumanitarnoi Akademii, 2005), 1842.

⁷⁷² RGASPI, f. 606, op. 2, d. 25, ll. 62-87. There are obvious problems with using Soviet statistics, even when these were internal and not intended for mass consumption. Laws that required religious rituals like baptisms to be registered, for instance, could be circumvented in a number of ways—before specific laws were introduced explicitly requiring parental permission from both parents for the christening of a child, children could be registered by relatives, sometimes without the consent, or even the knowledge, of the parents (or the lack of consent or knowledge could be used by parents as a pretext in order to avoid political and/or professional repercussions). Even

comprehensive, a brief overview of the data provides insight into atheists' own estimate of their progress. Perhaps unsurprisingly, the report began on an optimistic note. Religiosity was reported to be on the decline; the majority of the Soviet population had “freed itself from religious views, beliefs and traditions.” Even those who had “not yet broken with religion” experienced an erosion in their religious commitments, evident in the growing “indifference to issues of dogma” and the “increasingly formal and episodic” participation in religious holidays and rituals. The Party's educational work was purported to have weakened the ties between believers and religious organizations and reduced “the reproduction of religion in new generations.”⁷⁷³ Yet after the perfunctory nod to progress, better data on Soviet religiosity only underscored the grim picture that had led to the intensification of atheist work in the first place. Statistics put the religiosity of urban residents at 15-20 per cent, and rural residents at 30-35 per cent; in the Baltics, Central Asia, Moldova, western parts of Ukraine and Belarus, and several regions of the Caucasus, the per centage was considerably higher. Especially worrisome was the steady growth of sects and the fact that religion still seemed to have considerable influence on the youth. In 1965 alone, nearly three million young people were present at Orthodox christenings; in Latvian and Lithuanian cathedrals more than 20,000 young people were confirmed annually.⁷⁷⁴

Levels of ritual observance in general remained “very high”, and some areas even showed growth. According to statistics provided by the Council on Religious Affairs, 23.8 per cent of newborns in RSFSR were baptized in 1965; in several regions, the per centage was higher than in 1964. In Ukraine, the number of baptisms increased from 48.9 per cent in 1964 to 51.5 per cent in 1965; in Moldova, from 46.5 per cent to 57.5 per cent. The number of religious funerals was increasing almost everywhere: in the RSFSR, the amount increased from 57.1 per cent in 1964 to 58.4 per cent in 1965. In many regions the figures were even higher—66 per cent in the Moscow region, 75.9 per cent in the city of Leningrad, nearly 90 per cent in Lugansk region. In many rural areas, 80-90 per cent of the residents had icons in their homes.⁷⁷⁵ Figures for 1966, once they came in, were no more encouraging.⁷⁷⁶ The report also devoted considerable attention to the dangerous shift of religious institutions to this-worldly affairs. As before, “survivals” remained an obstacle in communist construction, especially in the social-ideological sphere: “Laying claim to the role of the sole authority in questions of worldview and morality, religion disorients believers, misinterprets their actual needs, and seeks to give them a false, illusory satisfaction. [...] Interpreting [worldly affairs] from the position of religious values, they

when parents did have knowledge and give consent, children could be christened in another region (a rather common practice, based on both my own informal conversations with former Soviet citizens and formal statistics of the Council on Religious Affairs), or a priest could perform several baptisms at once, while only registering one of them. On the other hand, it is important to note that these closed official statistics are already remarkably high, considering that, with all the possible ways of averting detection when performing religious rituals, they only partially reflect the situation, and the real statistics are likely higher.

⁷⁷³ Ibid., 62-63.

⁷⁷⁴ Ibid., 64. In many regions, people under the age of thirty comprised more than 10 per cent of believers.

⁷⁷⁵ Ibid.

⁷⁷⁶ Ibid., 166-167. While the percentage of baptisms in the RSFSR dropped slightly (22.9 per cent), it grew in Ukraine (to 60 per cent) and stayed the same in Moldova (57.3 per cent). In some regions of the RSFSR, the report revealed that “the percentage of baptisms is considerably higher than the republic median, and grows year to year”. The number of funerary rituals likewise remained uncomfortably high: 68.1 per cent in Leningrad region, 68.6 per cent in Kirov region, and above 80 per cent in Belgorod and Ternopol' regions in Ukraine.

provide false orientation for people's labor and personal lives.”⁷⁷⁷ The Institute's report was not entirely pessimistic and did cite some instances of success. Ideological work had become “more grounded in science, more thought-out, goal-oriented and effective,” the training of cadres showed improvement, and increased use of sociological research resulted in policies that took into account local variations.⁷⁷⁸ But on the whole, from the perspective of the ideological elite, the composite picture was grim and naturally begged the question of whether the January 1964 decree had produced any tangible results.

The Institute laid the majority of blame on local Party organizations, which were accused of conducting atheist work in an erratic, irregular manner (*kampaneitski*). Many local organizations did not even have cadres specifically assigned to this branch of ideological work, and in those places where such cadres existed, they were sometimes “insufficiently competent in questions of religion and atheism.”⁷⁷⁹ Ideological workers were accused of having an indifferent, even conciliatory attitude towards religion, evident in the “not infrequent instances, when Party and Komsomol members not only avoid conducting atheist work, but themselves baptize their children, have icons in their homes, and observe religious holidays [...] undermining with this the prestige of the communist and creating an incorrect representation of the Party's relationship to religion.”⁷⁸⁰ Such facts made it imperative to “expose all channels by which religious conceptions are reproduced, to clarify how and why the need for religion arises [...] what abnormalities exist in the individual's connection to society, and where exactly appeals to God produce their effect.” The need to shift focus from purely “enlightenment” policies was again confirmed, as was the necessity of a differentiated approach to believers based on their age, profession, level of education, gender, social status, ethnic group, and, of course, confession.⁷⁸¹ Further, the data gathered in the field again underscored the need to analyze emotional and psychological factors,⁷⁸² and pointed out that atheist propaganda continued to fall short in issues like morality and philosophy: “As a result, many urgent questions of human existence—on the meaning of life, on life values, on man's calling, on happiness, and others—have been and continue to be [...] under the monopoly of theologians.”⁷⁸³

The self-criticism of atheist cadres was, in some ways, a ritualistic exercise that had a long history in the Communist Party. But to acknowledge it as being part of a tradition is not to say that it was either insincere or ineffective. By the late 1960s, cadre training was becoming more systematic, both within the Institute of Scientific Atheism, and beyond it. The Moscow regional Party committee (*obkom*), for example, organized two-year courses for atheist propagandists, with seminars that covered topics like sociological studies of religiosity, methods for individual work with believers, and the inculcation of new socialist rituals.⁷⁸⁴ Students watched films on atheism, astronomy, and scientific discoveries; had personal methodological consultations with prominent atheists at the Institute of Scientific Atheism, the Council on

⁷⁷⁷ Ibid., 66-67.

⁷⁷⁸ Ibid., 68-71.

⁷⁷⁹ Ibid., 73.

⁷⁸⁰ Ibid., 74. Part of the explanation for the passivity of local cadres was characterized as a reaction against “subjective administrative excesses” (*administrativno-sub'ektivnye peregiby*) in atheist work.

⁷⁸¹ Ibid., 81.

⁷⁸² Ibid., 78.

⁷⁸³ Ibid., 85-86.

⁷⁸⁴ RGASPI, f. 606, op. 4, d. 37, ll. 15-25.

Religious Affairs, and the journal *Science and Religion*; and even visited the recently-opened Palaces of Weddings in Moscow in order to observe new socialist rituals.⁷⁸⁵ Alongside more systematic training, atheists also had access to more comprehensive information about the local religious situation. By the mid-1960s, most Party committees received regular reports about the activities of religious communities in their area, including information about church profits and ritual participation.⁷⁸⁶ But perhaps the most striking development within the atheist camp was that both the atheist elite and local cadres began to express dissatisfaction with the ritualistic recitation of statistics and episodic successes. For example, at a Party conference for atheist cadres, the chairperson, E. K. Ligachev, interrupted the representative from Ivanovo when she began the customary summary of ritual activity in the region, and urged her and all participants to spend less time on statistics, and more on the mechanics of their work, so that others could take away something practical from the exchange.⁷⁸⁷

In particular, atheists sought to gain useful methods for working with different segments of the population that they identified as particularly important to the course of atheist work, such as women, youth, and even the elderly. Some proposed that the fate of religion hinged on work with women, since they were considered to make up the majority of believers. Moreover, besides themselves being “carriers” of religion, women were also considered to be the primary vehicles for the transmission of religion to future generations—as mothers and grandmothers who educated children in religious traditions, introduced them to the church, and insisted on the observance of religious rites at crucial moments in the life-cycle. Some proposed that women could be drawn into atheist work with lectures that covered topics thought to be of particular interest to women, specifically aimed at their interests, such as “the meaning of a woman's happiness” or bringing up children. S. N. Kurshakov, an “old atheist” and a member of the Gorky House of Scientific Atheism (*Dom nauchnogo ateizma*), reported that to target women, who made up 80 per cent of believers in the city, the female activists of the House of Culture had organized a “Housewives Club” (*Klub Domokhoziaek*), cozily named “Over a cup of tea” (*Za chashkoi chaia*).⁷⁸⁸ The atheist component of the club's work was disguised within a broader emphasis on the cultivation of more cultured and enlightened leisure time. Using a folksy language, the invitation asked women to come to a “gathering over a cup of tea” (*na vstrechu za chashkoi chaia*), during which they would be asked about their opinion on how to better organize their leisure time, and “what [they] might like to know about life in the world” (*chto khotelos' by vam znat' o zhizni na belom svete*). Socialist rituals and holidays were likewise considered a good path to female religiosity, since women seemed to be responsible for the continued observance of religious rites, and marriages and baptisms in particular.⁷⁸⁹ For this reason, maternity wards and family consultation centers were proposed as good spaces for atheist education. Doctors, moreover, were considered especially effective propaganda cadres, since they could clarify for women the health risks that baptism presented to a newborn.⁷⁹⁰ Indeed, the health risk of baptism

⁷⁸⁵ Ibid., 23-25.

⁷⁸⁶ Ibid., 15. This was definitely the case in Moscow, and seems to have been practiced more broadly.

⁷⁸⁷ Ibid., 9-12.

⁷⁸⁸ RGASPI, f. 606, op. 4, d. 68, ll. 80-82.

⁷⁸⁹ RGASPI, f. 606, op. 4, d. 37, ll. 9-10. In Ivanovo region, new socialist holidays were cited as especially successful as a form of atheist work targeting women, and were becoming a major part of the work of the Party's women's councils (*soviets*).

⁷⁹⁰ Ibid., 108.

was a common trope in antireligious propaganda targeting church rituals, and in the effort to promote new socialist birth rites as ritual alternatives.

In their effort to find the sources of religiosity, atheists also began to focus on a new target: the elderly. Previously, the conventional wisdom among atheists had been that the elderly were the reason that religion continued to exist under socialism, but that, as the older generations passed on, religion would “die out” with them. For this reason, atheists had generally left the elderly outside the sphere of atheist education and had focused largely on the youth. Yet sociological research on religiosity introduced unexpected findings revealing that the elderly were an important category for atheist work. To begin with, Evgraf Duluman reported that research by Ukrainian atheists showed that the elderly did not factor largely in the country's high levels of religion, and that in fact many believers were actually relatively young—that is, individuals often born after 1917, and mostly educated under Soviet power.⁷⁹¹ Duluman considered this to be a failure of the Soviet school system, and proposed that, in order to figure out how religion was transmitted to the youth, teachers had to familiarize themselves with the family lives of their students by regularly visiting their homes.⁷⁹² But Duluman's observation about youth religiosity naturally raised the question of its source, and this led atheists to the elderly. The older generation, it turned out, had a significant influence on the upbringing of the youth, since most parents worked and left young children with grandparents. Atheist cadres around the country reported that grandparents were responsible for the youth's exposure to the church and its rituals, since grandparents brought children to church services. Grandparents also often insisted on baptisms, sometimes even as a precondition for childcare, and sometimes even refuse to bring up unbaptised grandchildren. For example, V. G. Pivovarov, an INA researcher who conducted sociological studies in Gorky, argued that “the main reason for the execution of the ritual was the refusal of others to care for an unbaptised child.”⁷⁹³ In general, the Gorky study turned up unexpected findings.⁷⁹⁴ In their survey of 3,000 people at a prominent factory, researchers found that only eight per cent of those who baptised their children identified as believers; that only eight people were illiterate; and that the majority were exemplary laborers (*udarniki*). But surveys also showed that more than 75 per cent did not have access to regular childcare, and had to rely on friends, relatives, and, most of all, grandparents.⁷⁹⁵

In the face of such findings, atheists observed that they had been mistaken in having left the elderly out of their educational efforts. Rather, some insisted that even the elderly deserved their attention. Abdrashitov, a member of the Orenburg division of the “Knowledge” Society, told the story of how a local cadre had conducted individual work with a certain Biktashev, a 78-year-old Muslim man who was going blind. As the man lost his vision, the agitator visited him and read aloud books about scientific progress and medicine, “thereby slowly shaking his belief until [he] had adopted a scientific-atheist worldview.” Abdrashitov underscored that atheists had to “fight for every person, to conduct work with old men and women who are still under the influence of religion.”⁷⁹⁶ The Soviet Union was a family, he put forth, and “every member of our

⁷⁹¹ RGASPI, f. 606, op. 4, d. 30, ll. 33-38.

⁷⁹² Ibid.

⁷⁹³ RGASPI, f. 606, op. 4, d. 56, l. 103.

⁷⁹⁴ Ibid., 96. Pivovarov reported that in 1963, 47.3 per cent of newborns were baptised in the region, a number that was ten times higher than the amount of religious marriages (though not unique in terms of the number of baptisms recorded in other areas).

⁷⁹⁵ Ibid., 102-103.

⁷⁹⁶ RGASPI, f. 606, op. 4, d. 40, ll. 93-96.

Soviet family, if he lives in the family of a believer, must work with members of his own family, whether it is his father, mother, or other members of his family, who are, to any degree, believers.”⁷⁹⁷

Atheist work targeting the elderly was also part of a broader trend of turning attention to the home as the central locus of religiosity.⁷⁹⁸ Indeed, by the late 1960s, as atheists fought to contain religious practices, and rituals above all, by diminishing the spaces in which they could legally be conducted, the elderly were seen as an unregulated repository of religious traditions. At an all-union conference that the Institute held for the directors of Houses of Atheism, for instance, an atheist from the town of Dariia in Kazakhstan relayed that their “sore spot” (*bol'noi vopros*) were religious pilgrimages on which “the older generation leads children.”

In our district there is a collective farm called “Thirty Years of October,” where I would go to conduct lectures. Returning from the field, I see that people have gathered in one of the huts. The deputy chair of the farm’s cultural department and the deputy secretary of the Party organization. We walk into this hut and see old folks, women, and small children are sitting in two rows facing each other, drinking wine and eating fatty meats. This was one the 15-16 of June. I walk in, greet everyone, I am brought a plate of meat. A good wine is served. I ask: what is the occasion for the feast? Who is buried here? As always on such occasions, the answer is that no one knows anything. I say to one old man: Old man, we forgive you these religious prejudices, but why did you bring the youth here, the machine operators? You probably do not know who this was, this Arab conqueror in whose honor you drink and eat. You probably do not know where your old man is buried. You would better go to the graves of your parents, this no one forbids you. But why do you go to a cemetery that is unknown to you?

They say: this is our custom. And we say to them: we know that this is your custom, but you should not teach the youth. You have lived your lives in vain, but you should not teach this to the youth.”⁷⁹⁹

The role of the elderly in perpetuating local customs and religious traditions pointed to the influence and authority that the older generation still exercised, in particular in the sphere of spiritual life. Indeed, M. K. Tepliakov, the leader of the Institute's local base (*oporny punkt*) in Voronezh, argued that the primary mechanism by which religion was disseminated was the “authoritarian family,” and especially grandparents, who, “using affection as a hook” (*na prieme laskovosti*), introduced religion into children's lives.⁸⁰⁰ The root of the problem, Tepliakov put forth, was that the elderly were oftentimes socially isolated; even those who had once been exemplary workers weakened their ties with the labor collective once they retired. Tepliakov relayed the success of Voronezh Party organs, which addressed this situation by organizing an “elderly club” (*klub pozhilykh*), thereby making it into “a kind of helper to the party in deciding many issues.” Authorities—the director of the collective farm or the secretary of the party

⁷⁹⁷ Ibid., 97.

⁷⁹⁸ Tamara Dragadze, “The domestication of religion under Soviet communism,” in *Socialism: Ideals, Ideologies, and Local Practice*, ed. C. M. Hann. (London: Routledge, 1993), 148-156.

⁷⁹⁹ RGASPI, f. 606, op. 4, d. 68, ll. 104-106.

⁸⁰⁰ RGASPI, f. 606, op. 4, d. 72, ll. 42-45.

committee—would visit with the club in order to seek advice (*sovetovat'sia*) on local affairs, and “the old folks would be very pleased” that their opinions were taken into account. In particular, Tepliakov noted, “it was important to neutralize the religious influence that the elderly had on children in the family—this was the minimum—but the main thing was to win the old folks over to our side, so that they would contribute to atheist education in the schools.” Such work, Tepliakov concluded, was effective: “I don't want to speak about results, because then you might say that I am bragging, but I must tell you that such a club led to the disintegration of a religious community in Shapovnikov. Seventeen people stopped working in the church *dvadsatka*, and the church has been taken off registration by the Council on Religious Affairs.”⁸⁰¹

Experiences with new approaches like clubs for housewives and the elderly revealed that atheists had to find inroads into the spiritual worlds of Soviet people, which oftentimes meant becoming familiar with the practices of local communities and the emotional lives of their individual members. In Gorky, atheists had used such an approach to effectively target local Muslim youth. Kurshakov, the representative of the Gorky House of Atheism, recounted how local cadres had become aware of meetings that, for eight years, had been taking place every Sunday, where hundreds of young Tatar men and women gathered to socialize. When atheists “went to the people” to determine the reason for these meetings, they learned that they were an informal dating forum. “We do not have a special Tatar club in our city,” Kurshakov explained, “but these youth need to socialize, to pick out wives and husbands, to get to know each other.”⁸⁰² Local atheists approached the youth and offered them a space where they could continue to gather, but under the guidance of local party and atheist cadres who would channel their leisure time into more appropriate channels. Local cadres organized evenings where Tatar youth could dance to traditional Tatar music, as well as more contemporary songs. But such evenings also had another purpose: they gave atheist cadres the opportunity to conduct individual discussions where they criticized the Koran and modern Islam—although, Kurshakov warned, it was important to avoid “frontal attacks” (*lobovykh momentov*).⁸⁰³ In this way, atheists had brought local Tatar youth from unregulated street gatherings under the rain and snow, to the Soviet club, where they could “impart” (*privivat'*) Soviet culture. And through the youth, Kurshakov concluded, atheists could “get to Muslim families, and old bearded men and honorable old ladies now attend our events.”⁸⁰⁴

Finding a Way Into the Family

Over the course of the mid-late 1960s, the information gathered around the country by researchers and atheist cadres, much of which was coordinated by the Institute of Scientific Atheism, produced a rough map of religion in the Soviet Union. Although this map was certainly incomplete, and even flawed in a number of ways, it did provide Soviet atheists with an unprecedented amount of material—both quantitative and qualitative—about Soviet religiosity. Atheist education in Party work had likewise become more systematic. Party organizations had better-trained cadres; more information on the local religious landscape coming from the

⁸⁰¹ Ibid., 45.

⁸⁰² RGASPI, f. 606, op. 4, d. 68, l. 91.

⁸⁰³ Ibid.

⁸⁰⁴ Ibid.

Institute's local bases as well as the local representative of the Council of Religious Affairs; and official councils set up to concentrate on atheist work, which had been organized in most party cells (on republic, regional, city, and even district level). In light of this, the Institute began to examine sociological findings in greater detail, looking at what data revealed about religious dynamics, and how sociological findings could be used in ideological work. The Institute's local base in Perm, which it considered to be exemplary and a model for atheist work, demonstrates how sociological studies informed atheist practices on the ground.

Relative to other areas, Perm *oblast'* was considered to have among the highest levels of religiosity in the country, as well as a confessionally diverse religious landscape. In 1968, Perm *oblast'* had 41 registered Orthodox churches, 4 Old Believer communities, 4 Baptist communities, 2 mosques, 1 synagogue, and 50 unregistered (illegal) sects.⁸⁰⁵ On major religious holidays, church attendance in the region reached 25,000, and gatherings of sectarian communities had 3,000-4,000 attendees. The Khrushchev-era antireligious campaign had left its mark on religious life in the region. The number of Orthodox churches, for instance, had decreased from 73 in 1957, to 41 in 1968. Over the course of the last decade, Party organs and, later, the Institute's local base, had trained new cadres, increased lecture propaganda, organized atheist clubs, celebrated Atheist Days, opened Palaces of Weddings, and put considerable effort into disseminating new socialist rituals. As a result, party officials noted a considerable decrease in religious rituals: while almost 50 per cent of newborns had been baptised in 1957 (31,660 of 61,641), by 1966 the number had been reduced to 21 per cent (10,509 of 50,420). Likewise, the number of religious marriages fell considerably, from 14 per cent in 1957 (3,262 of 23,583) to just over two per cent in 1966 (662 of 25,491).⁸⁰⁶ Nevertheless, as elsewhere, Perm atheists conceded that even with the state's administrative resources on their side, the decade had not produced significant decreases in religiosity. One detail is particularly telling: the region had over 2,000 atheist cadres, and only 200 religious officials, yet the 200 religious officials gave over 10,000 sermons annually, while the number of atheist lectures was 5,000, just half.⁸⁰⁷

But statistics were not the only thing that worried atheists in Perm. Sociological research had also revealed that there seemed to be little correlation between economic markers and levels of religiosity, which meant that atheist education had to not only assist the presumed course of development, but to actually produce it.⁸⁰⁸ To get to the source of religiosity, atheist work had to target “those specific forms in which religiosity was preserved”—above all, religious rituals.⁸⁰⁹ Sociologists observed that believers were particularly attracted to religion by the emotional effect of religious practices, and that rituals provide religion “not only with a base of support, but with well-known dissemination.” Researchers therefore proposed that atheism should “create effective means to counterpose this, to block this channel of religious influence.”⁸¹⁰ Above all, the local base reported that what worried them most was the influence of religious rituals on the youth.

The clergy (*tserkovniki*) and sectarians are using every means to intensify their influence on the youth. This is evident, in part, in the relatively high per centage of

⁸⁰⁵ RGASPI, f. 606, op. 4, d. 72, l. 21.

⁸⁰⁶ Ibid., 18.

⁸⁰⁷ Ibid., 20.

⁸⁰⁸ Ibid., 11.

⁸⁰⁹ Ibid., 14.

⁸¹⁰ Ibid., 15.

baptisms. Of course unbelievers also, in many instances, take part in religious rituals. For example, sociological research shows that in the churches of Perm, five out of six times the reasons for baptisms are circumstances that have no connection to religion. In one instance—not wanting to break with family traditions, in another—grandmothers made the baptism of the child a precondition for childcare.

In this sense, taking part in religious rituals does not always tell us about a person's religiosity. But of course we cannot close our eyes to the fact that a significant part of the population still takes part in [religious] rituals.

We also have instances where icons are tolerated in the home. In some places one can even encounter them in the families of communists, Komsomol members, teachers, agricultural specialists. All of this is evidence of the significant difficulty of atheist work.⁸¹¹

Even a model a model of successful atheist work, like Gorky, revealed many problems and few reasons to be confident that atheist approaches were effective. This became evident as the Komsomol Central Committee began to evaluate local measures to address youth religiosity and atheist education. A. P. Volkov, the Gorky representative of the Council on Religious Affairs, reported that a survey of the region revealed troubling findings. In some districts, 100 per cent of Muslim boys had been circumcised, “regardless of the social origins of the parents, or their circumstances.”⁸¹² The region had nineteen districts without functioning churches, Volkov noted, “but it is hard to believe that there is no religion there. Someone hears confessions (*ispoveduet*). People come to Vetluga from all corners, to take a look at the priest, to pray.”⁸¹³ Meanwhile, the Gorky House of Atheism that was often praised in Party meetings, Volkov reminded the Komsomol leadership, was “little bigger than this room.” Furthermore, besides the generally high numbers of baptisms, hundreds of families baptized older, school-age children. From all this Volkov drew a crucial conclusion: that the church was an “adaptable (*gibkii*) mechanism” that had “changed its approach” (*perestroilas*) and had “gone into the sphere of the family” (*ushla v sem'iu*), which meant that “work in the family” should be the central issue in atheist education. Atheists had to find out, for instance, “what induced (*pobudilo*) people to get married in the church, to baptize older children.” Until atheists “penetrated into the world of the family” (*vlezli v sem'iu*), Volkov concluded, “it would be difficult to do anything at all.”⁸¹⁴

Stemakov, an atheist cadre from Gorky, reported that sociological studies in Gorky generally region revealed findings that “significantly differe[ed] from traditional understandings”. This was especially the case in studies of religious ritual that surveyed the socio-economic and cultural markers of those who took part in rituals, as well as their motives for ritual participation. One survey showed that most adults bringing children to be baptised in the Orthodox church were young (68 per cent were between 16-45) and highly skilled laborers (66.2 per cent).⁸¹⁵ Surveys of Catholic and Muslim ritual observance showed analogous results. The majority of the time, the reasons provided for baptising children had less to do with

⁸¹¹ Ibid., 21.

⁸¹² RGASPI-m, f. 1, op. 34, d. 108, l. 30.

⁸¹³ Ibid., 34-38.

⁸¹⁴ Ibid.

⁸¹⁵ RGASPI-m, f. 1, op. 34, d. 129, l. 8.

articulated beliefs, and more to do with satisfying the wishes of friends and relatives and observing the norms of the local community. There was the notion, research showed, that baptism was “an ancient Russian ritual that one should observe” so as not to be “worse than others” (*khuzhe liudei*).⁸¹⁶ Even more surprising was that the majority of these young workers (60 per cent) had attended socialist birth rituals prior to baptising their children, and yet still did not understand the “harm” of participation religious rites, which showed “the absence of any worldview barrier whatsoever against religious ideology and ritual observance.”⁸¹⁷ The result of this, as Stemakov complained, was that it was unclear what atheists “must grab first, what they must target” (*za chto prezhde vsego ukhvatitsia, po chemu prezhde vsego bit'*).⁸¹⁸

Soviet atheists faced a peculiar predicament. On the one hand, cadres noted that the future of atheist work “depended on the convictions of the youth,”⁸¹⁹ and that, while it was “difficult to reform (*ispravit'*)” the elderly, the youth needed to be “saved.”⁸²⁰ On the other hand, youth religiosity, as atheist work in Gorky and elsewhere revealed, was produced in the family. “The youth goes [to church], takes part in rituals. Some kind of connection with the church exists. If grandmother comes from the village, she tries to get to the church with the grandchildren.”⁸²¹ Stemakov observed that perhaps youth participation in religious rituals was less “proof of the popularity (*rasprostrannosti*) of religion, but, to a greater degree, what 'mom and dad want' (*mama-papa veliat*),”⁸²² but he suggested that it still pointed to an absence of ideological conviction. If the convictions of the youth were the “cardinal issue” in atheist work, Stemakov saw little reason for complacency. “We cannot seriously speak about changing people's minds (*pereubezhdeniia*), these are exceptionally rare occurrences.” The reason for this, Stemakov suggested, was that for an “ordinary person”, religion was, above all, an emotion, “and if this emotion has been formed, it is very difficult to replace it.”⁸²³ But Stemakov also pointed to an even more troubling implication of youth religiosity, suggesting that perhaps for the youth, religion was “a form of scepticism [...] a vacuum that is formed out of disillusionment with our ideological values.”⁸²⁴

The data that Soviet atheists gathered in sociological studies confirmed a number of earlier fears, and revealed several new ones. Although atheists now had more and better information, the information seemed to contradict customary assumptions, and only underscored the need for a revision of their conceptual framework. Increasingly, it became apparent that there was a disconnect between what research studied, and what atheists actually wanted to know. Sociological investigations conducted over the course of the 1960s studied people's social, political, and cultural conditions; where and how often they went to church; how familiar they were with the history and theology of their faith; what they thought of their local religious community and of the priest; how much of their income they gave to the church, and how much

⁸¹⁶ Ibid., 12.

⁸¹⁷ Ibid., 13.

⁸¹⁸ RGASPI-m, f. 1, op. 34, d. 108, l. 28.

⁸¹⁹ RGASPI-m, f. 1, op. 34, d. 108, l. 14.

⁸²⁰ Ibid., 28.

⁸²¹ Ibid., 14.

⁸²² Ibid., 28.

⁸²³ Ibid., 14.

⁸²⁴ Ibid., 14.

they spent on religious items; and whether they observed rituals, and if so, which ones.⁸²⁵ But what atheists sought to find out were the motivations behind retained beliefs and contradictory behaviors, the significance that these had in a person's spiritual life, and the ways that atheism could learn to satisfy such needs. More and more often, it was suggested that atheism had to narrow its focus to what they referred to as the “microsphere”: the world of local communities and especially families. As Evdokimov stated, “The primary direction of all of our work [is] gradually decreasing the reproduction of religiosity in the family to zero.”⁸²⁶ Moreover, the results of atheist measures seemed to point to the fact that this “microsphere” was above all influenced by local customs, cultural traditions, and family rituals, and could not be accessed through lectures and other measures that appealed to reason. Spiritual life, some atheists began to suggest, had to be approached through emotions. As Tepliakov observed of sociological findings in Voronezh, even when subjects did not believe in the Biblical origins of the world, the psychological and emotional side of their life still “belonged to religion”—a religion that was imagined as a spiritual rising above the everyday. “This is how [we can] explain the mobility (*podvizhnost'*), disorderliness (*khaotichnost'*, *netematizirovannost'*), [and] indistinctness (*smutnost'*) of most believers' religious consciousness.”⁸²⁷ Atheists had to turn their attention to the interior worlds of ordinary Soviet people—a project that many acknowledged was tremendously difficult, because the content that filled these worlds was inherently mercurial, difficult to categorize, and, more often than not, left unarticulated.

“If everyone is a savage, then I too am a savage”

Reality, as sociological research revealed, rarely bends to the criteria demanded by analysts. Atheist cadres recognized that in order to make sense of religion, they had to re-examine their assumptions and reconsider their categories. Where, for example, did a collective farm worker who described himself as an unbeliever but participated in religious rituals fall on the spectrum between belief and unbelief? Without figuring out a language to speak about the contradictory religiosity that actually existed on the ground, successful atheist work was impossible. Therefore, efforts to create a typology of believers continued to occupy a central place in the work of the Institute. Conferences and seminars were filled with questions and proposals, but also with disagreements and general frustration. What, to begin with, was the relationship between religious consciousness and religious behavior—between belief and practice? As R. G. Boltanov pointed out, the categories themselves are murky: “Data [...] shows that, as a very rough approximation (*v samom priblizhenii*), a first group of people identify themselves as believers and observe rituals, a second group identify themselves as believers but *do not* observe rituals, [while] a third group identify themselves as unbelievers but *do* observe rituals.”⁸²⁸ V. A. Cherniak, a researcher from the Institute of Philosophy in the Kazakhstan Academy of Sciences, questioned the degree to which researchers had the tools to measure spiritual life and worldviews,⁸²⁹ while A. F. Iarygin, an atheist agitator, asked whether atheist

⁸²⁵ RGASPI, f. 606, op. 4, d. 56, l. 67-68.

⁸²⁶ RGASPI-m, f. 1, op. 34, d. 129, l. 22.

⁸²⁷ RGASPI, f. 606, op. 4, d. 56, l. 71.

⁸²⁸ RGASPI, f. 606, op. 4, d. 80, l. 39.

⁸²⁹ *Ibid.*, 7.

work should privilege theory or practical action. How, for instance, could the criteria they come up with in an academic conference be applied in atheist education? He described his own experience trying to convince two women, one Baptist and the other Orthodox, to abandon their religious practices and beliefs. After a year, he reported, the Orthodox woman abandoned her beliefs and no longer “felt sin before God,” while the Baptist woman continued to doubt. He put the question to the participants: How should this type of belief be classified? The response in the hall was laughter. “You laugh, but for practical work this [calls for] tears,” challenged Iarygin. “Until you determine a theoretical typology of believers and the practical application of this typology, you will not find the correct scientific approach and method, so give us, practitioners, the opportunity to work with believers and provide us with material.”⁸³⁰ What is most apparent from the Institute’s discussions about atheist education—as the confrontation between Iarygin, a local cadre, and the atheist elite makes evident—is that there were clear tensions between the goals of theorists and the needs of agitators, between the general desire to establish theoretical clarity and the urgent necessity for practical methodological advice.

Yet again, cadres found that what presented a researcher with an analytical obstacle—such as the contradictions between religious beliefs and religious practices—were often easily reconciled by their subjects in their everyday lives. Evgraf Duluman provided telling evidence for this. At an Institute discussion on typologies of believers and criteria of religiosity, Duluman pointed out that, “Above all, criteria of religiosity [...] are necessary not only to ‘separate the goats from the sheep,’ but also in order to know with whom we must conduct our work. Here we are not yet able to give an explanation of how to classify people.” In an effort to function as a mediator between theorists and practitioners, Duluman described his own experiences in the field that illuminated the “concrete, real reality” that researchers and propaganda workers encountered on the ground.

A group went to the village Beloozer’e in the Cherkassy region. I moved into the home of a young believer/ I was told that he was a believer/ but I did not say that I was an atheist. I am not conducting atheist work, but I see that here there is not even a trace of religiosity. In the evening they sit and play cards under the icons. I endured this for three days—in the sense that I do not see the relationship between cards and God—and then ask: “why do you play cards under the icons?” And they answer: “Because we are very comfortable there!” And I say, but what about God, who is painted there? And the owner says: “Oh, [the icons] are used to it by now!”

/Laughter in the hall/

They say that they do not believe in God. I ask: “So do you go to church?”

They answer: “Everybody goes and we go!”

--“Did you baptize your child?”

--“Everyone baptized and we baptized!”

So I start to read a lecture—that this is savage, that savages conduct such rituals and so forth. The owner listened attentively and said that what I was telling him

⁸³⁰ Ibid., 29-30.

was very interesting, but then he declares, “Everyone is a savage and I am a savage” (*Vse dikari, i ia dikar*’).

/Laughter in the hall/

I knew he did not like the priest and so I ask him, how much did you pay the priest? And he says that the priest is a parasite, that everything goes in his pocket, that when he baptized his child he paid three rubles to the bank and two to the priest. So I say: “you gave five rubles to a freeloader (*darmoed*).” And the owner says: “I hope he chokes on them!”

I start appealing to parental feelings—meaning, how did you allow your child to be dipped in cold water? The owner answers: “But we made an agreement with the priest and he warmed the water!” I continue on that this is not hygienic, that there are bacteria in the water, that you are subjecting your child to danger, that [the child] might fall ill, catch something, but he asks me: “Were you baptized?”

I answer: I was.

He declares: And so was I. All of Mother Russia was baptized and look at how fine she turned out!

/Lively animation, laughter/

And alongside this, people go to church, give money, support it. This is why it is difficult to determine whether they are believers or unbelievers.⁸³¹

Duluman’s example illustrates the complex and dynamic reality atheists were trying to transform, as well as the inadequacy of their conceptual tools. Duluman argued that the influence of people who do not believe in God and yet perform religious rituals continued to be significant. And yet participating in rituals was insufficient evidence by which to categorize a person as a believer. There were atheist students at his university, for example, who nonetheless tried to make it home for Easter in order to partake in the festive atmosphere. “And so, after all, what are the signs, what kind of person can we call religious?” Duluman asked. “That person, whose actions are religiously motivated,” he stated, answering his own question. “But here the same question arises: what is a religious motive?” The discussion had come full circle.⁸³²

Nevertheless, by the end of the 1960s, a qualitatively new element emerged in discussions about typologies of belief, and that was the call to develop typologies of its opposite: unbelief. Atheist theorists agreed on a spectrum that covered degrees of religiosity: on one side were the “religious fanatic” and the “convinced believer”; occupying the middle were the “doubter” and the “unreligious”; while, on the opposing side, stood the “unbeliever” and the “convinced atheist.”⁸³³ While the traditional approach had been to target believers in atheist

⁸³¹ Ibid., 53-56.

⁸³² Ibid., 56.

⁸³³ Ibid., 19.

work, some now suggested that it was perhaps more productive to focus efforts on the middle of the spectrum: to transform doubters and the unreligious into convinced atheists. But just as it was unclear what constituted a believer, there was also confusion about what defined an atheist. What did it mean to be an atheist—asked a Moscow instructor—and urged atheists to articulate the ideal towards which they aspired.⁸³⁴ “An atheist is one who is absolutely not subject (*ne podverzhen*) to any supernatural tendencies,” he proposed. These included not only religion in the conventional sense, but also various forms of “mysticism.” To illustrate what he meant, he provided the example of his 68-year-old mother, asking where cadres would place her on their spectrum:

My mother was an exceptionally fanatical believer. While living in Moscow, she broke with religion (*otoshla ot religii*) as a result of the objective conditions of our life (*ob’ektivnym khodom nashei zhizni*)—she does not attend church, she does not participate in religious rituals, and even criticizes all of this in her own way.

But, imagine, yesterday she was at her dacha, and suddenly she had a dream that we were in trouble. She very much wanted to stay at the dacha, but she left for the city in order to find out what happened to us.

For her, fortune-telling [and] various kinds of incantations exist in every way.

Today I would describe her as an unreligious (*nereligioznom*) person: she is not an atheist, she is not religious. And we need to work with such unreligious people, because their mystical consciousness is extremely developed.⁸³⁵

Another researcher proposed an even more troubling finding. He argued that the category whose growth was most notable, especially among the youth, was “indifference.” Atheists, he proposed, had to be distinguished not just from believers, but also from the unreligious and indifferent.⁸³⁶ Since the fate of the atheist enterprise was closely tied to the worldviews of the youth, Duluman insisted that the next generation needed to be brought up “as convinced atheists.” For this reason, he put forth, “atheist work with them has to be conducted differently than with believers.”⁸³⁷ Atheists agreed that the different categories of belief that they identified in their work required their own specific approaches.

Elevated Words and Atheist Tears

Information gained through sociological and ethnographic studies of Soviet religiosity transformed atheists’ understanding of the Soviet religious landscape and clarified the ideal towards which atheist work aspired. Over the course of the 1960s, a certain consensus began to form about the function of religion in individual and social life, the crucial role played by the family, and the importance of psychological, emotional, aesthetic, and ritual elements. “There was a time when the accepted point of view was that religion was the product of a purely epistemological idea, and questions of psychology had nothing to do with it. Of course from this

⁸³⁴ Ibid., 88.

⁸³⁵ Ibid., 88-89.

⁸³⁶ Ibid., 17.

⁸³⁷ Ibid., 64.

position, it is impossible to conduct successful atheist work,” V. I. Evdokimov stated at a meeting of the working group he headed on “Forms and methods of atheist propaganda.”

Our critics [...] sometimes say the following: you atheists keep in mind young, healthy, happy, serene people, but such people do not exist. [The people who do exist] are people who experience various kinds of disorders, who suffer in our [Soviet] conditions. Today this problem is not taken off the roster. Things are considerably more complicated. Our religiosity does not just have an epistemological nature; it is not the product of subjective factors, or of the influence of foreign propaganda, or of the activities of the clerics. It has some kind of social and emotional-psychological roots in our conditions.⁸³⁸

The strength of religion in contemporary society was that it was very well adapted to “satisfy the interest of a person in himself,” suggested M. S. Briman, an atheist agitator from the Komi republic. “We need to realize that a greater interest than the interest of a person in himself does not exist.”⁸³⁹ By way of evidence, Briman described an experiment conducted by *Red Banner*, the small newspaper for which he worked in the town of Syktyvkar. In February of 1967, the newspaper organized an “unusual contest” where readers were asked to keep a diary for one month, and then to send the diary to the newspaper. “When this undertaking was just being born, there was a terrible discord among us,” Briman reported. “Some said that no one would write with any sincerity, others said that, in the best case scenario, we would get six to ten diaries. Our experience with such appeals showed that they were limited to 15-20 letters maximum, with the exception of answers to crossword puzzles, when we received 30-40. And here we have a diary, the most intimate thing of all, it would seem.” Contrary to expectations, though, the staff was “amazed” to receive eighty-one diaries. According to Briman, their content followed a certain characteristic pattern: the diaries began with attempts to “please” the editors, but after the first two or three days people “gradually became captivated and began to speak about themselves: about intimate issues, their loneliness, their illnesses, and so forth.”⁸⁴⁰ From the point of view of Marxism-Leninism, Briman’s observations, which centered on the emotions of the individual, were peculiar, yet other participants concurred. If agitators really looked at believers, another expert put forth, they would see that religion depends more on emotions than on the intellect.⁸⁴¹ All of this created the emerging consensus that religion was not so much a system of views, as a “system of feelings.”⁸⁴²

Emotions and psychology play a “colossal role in the religious complex,” Evdokimov argued at a meeting of the Institute’s Scientific Council.⁸⁴³ “We must constantly keep in mind that religion is not just ideology—if religion were only an ideology, only a worldview, our task would be easier. Religion is an ideological and emotional complex, it is a ceremonial complex which is closely tied to everyday life, which pierces *byt*, and all of this, of course, complicates our task.”⁸⁴⁴ Evdokimov urged atheists to consider the “moral and aesthetic satisfaction

⁸³⁸ RGASPI, f. 606, op. 4, d. 67, l. 62.

⁸³⁹ *Ibid.*, 31.

⁸⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 33.

⁸⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 21.

⁸⁴² *Ibid.*, 35.

⁸⁴³ RGASPI, f. 606, op. 4, d. 75, l. 10.

⁸⁴⁴ *Ibid.*

(*udovletvorenie*), the emotional and aesthetic richness (*nasychshennost'*) of religious experiences, the emotional satisfaction of visiting a church or a meeting of the [religious] community, of prayer (*molitvy*), [and] of the commandments (*zapovedi*).⁸⁴⁵ He summed up this position by quoting one of the subjects of sociological research, who informed her interviewer that “love of God is necessary for us, not for God (*liubov' k bogu nuzhna ne bogu a nam*).”⁸⁴⁶ At a 1967 all-union conference on the atheist education of youth, Evdokimov again criticized atheist propaganda for continuing to appeal to reason. Instead, he suggested, it was necessary to “break through to reason through emotions.”⁸⁴⁷ Atheists had to find a way into the hearts of Soviet citizens, Evdokimov insisted. “We have to strike emotions with emotions.”⁸⁴⁸

Several atheists also pointed out that the “greatest mass [of believers] were those whose belief manifested itself in the “habit of performing rituals, [which was] mainly a psychological habit rather than a logical one.”⁸⁴⁹ This was said to be well known, and well-employed, by the clergy, who concentrated their attention on awakening religious emotions through moving sermons, the aesthetic arrangement of services, and rituals in gilded churches. Religious experiences, atheists acknowledged, could bring congregations to tears. Atheist propaganda, on the other hand, was criticized for its anemic content and feeble delivery. Since atheism’s loss was religion’s gain, atheists underscored the urgency of improving atheist content and forms. One theorist put forth that, in order to have more emotional power, atheist content had to connect the “harm” and “bankruptcy” of religious survivals to moral concerns.⁸⁵⁰ But what worried cadres was that content was only half the issue. In order to be effective, atheist content had to be tied to brilliant forms and powerful delivery.

M. M. Persits, a prominent scholar of religion and atheism, suggested that the success of a lecture depended, above all, on the lecturer. Priests, for example, received specific instructions never to read from their notes, whereas some lecturers who always read from notes would be better off inviting actors to read their lectures for them.⁸⁵¹ In order to reach the audience, the lecturer had to be:

distinguished by his [...] emotionality, should experience some kind of feeling rather than chew the cud. With us [atheists] it often happens like this: it’s all the same to the [lecturer] whether he reads a lecture on atheism or a lecture on the benefits of kefir to elephants at the zoo. He absolutely does not think about what he is reading [and] is completely indifferent to the questions that make up the subject of his [lecture]. As a result, [it] is completely unsatisfying.⁸⁵²

Persits’ observation was supported by Iu. D. Krasovskii and E. F. Riumin, two researchers who studied the role of emotions in atheist propaganda, and presented their results to the Komsomol leadership. Krasovskii and Riumin noted that a radio show sounds better if the text is read by a

⁸⁴⁵ Ibid., 13.

⁸⁴⁶ Ibid.

⁸⁴⁷ RGASPI-m, f. 1, op. 34, d. 129, l. 63.

⁸⁴⁸ Ibid.

⁸⁴⁹ RGASPI, f. 606, op. 4, d. 67, l. 21.

⁸⁵⁰ Ibid., 22-23.

⁸⁵¹ Ibid., 39.

⁸⁵² Ibid., 41.

professional lecturer or an actor, a person “capable of controlling his voice.”⁸⁵³ But they also stressed that ideological work was most effective when it employed audio-visual components: “The emotional effect of lectures and conversations is made many times stronger if the propagandist uses visual aids (*nagliadnye sredstva*), if he not only tells, but shows.”⁸⁵⁴ Naturally, the authors suggested that radio, and especially television, were ideal yet underused media for presenting atheist material. Krasovskii and Riumin concluded that “visual information (*obraznaia informatsiia*) had to become the primary principle of scientific atheist propaganda. The main objective of an atheist propagandist is to skillfully fill the ideological and emotional-psychological ‘vacuum’ that forms in the consciousness of believers after religious conceptions and emotions are destroyed.”⁸⁵⁵ Atheists agreed that educational work had to strive towards the union of the rational and the emotional, and as many began to claim, socialist holidays and rituals had, more than anything else, the best potential to achieve such a union.⁸⁵⁶

Finally, some argued that research of religious psychology revealed that believers’ ties to religion could not just be explained away by social pressures, customs, and traditions, although these factors were certainly important. But, as Evdokimov pointed out, believers also sought something personal in religion, “something elevated [and] spiritual” that helped them transcend the confines of earthly interests and concerns.⁸⁵⁷

Without fearing “elevated words,” one can say that a believer seeks in religion the ideal of the beautiful and exalted, seeks the meaning of his life on earth [and] Truth and Justice. [...] What can we offer in place of the powerful emotional influence that, having formed over the course of centuries, is today used by the church? How deeply are we re-ploughing the untrodden expanses of the virgin lands that have been left to us after many years of inactivity?⁸⁵⁸

The implication, of course, was that scientific atheism did not. The point was supported by M. S. Briman, who described how, after hearing his lecture on the meaning of life and death, believers approached him and said, incredulously, “You [atheists] also think about such things? It turns out, you, atheists, also think about death. How very strange.”⁸⁵⁹

In effect, atheists were again returning to issues that had haunted their work from the beginning, though with time their questions became more refined, and their awareness of the problem more informed and acute. Some began to suspect, moreover, that failures in atheist education were both the symptom and the cause of failures in ideological work in general.

⁸⁵³ RGASPI-m, f. 1, op. 34, d. 131, ll. 32-40. Iu. D. Krasovskii and E. F. Riumin, “Emotsional'nost' ateisticheskoi propagandy” (1967). On atheist methods in general, and the use of visual aids in particular, see Sonja Christine Luehrmann, “Forms and Methods: Teaching Atheism and Religion in the Mari Republic, Russian Federation,” (Ph.D. dissertation, University of Michigan, 2009).

⁸⁵⁴ RGASPI-m, f. 1, op. 34, d. 131, l. 40.

⁸⁵⁵ RGASPI-m, f. 1, op. 34, d. 131, l. 40.

⁸⁵⁶ This point was made widely. For example, see the Komsomol conference on socialist rituals in the Novgorod region. RGASPI-m, f. 1, op. 34, d. 530, l. 85.

⁸⁵⁷ RGASPI, f. 606, op. 4, d. 67, l. 9.

⁸⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 9-10.

⁸⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 31. Soviet atheists did, in fact, attempt to grapple with life’s “final question.” For example, see I. D. Pantskhava, *Zhizn', smert' i bessmertie* (Moscow, 1966).

...what concerns me in our practice is not only that [people] do not shed tears during lectures about the origins of religion, but that [people] also do not shed tears during lectures on patriotism [or] on the love of humanity. With us, people do not shed tears at any lectures at all. Which is why [...] we should be talking about the fact that our atheist emotional stock (*ateisticheskii emotsional'nyi fond*) is simply a continuation and a reflection of our general emotional stock (*nash obshchii emotsional'nyi fond*).⁸⁶⁰

These issues were critical because, by the end of the 1960s, atheists had come to the realization that it was not enough to destroy religious belief, and that creating an unbeliever was not the same as creating an atheist. “Indifference” became a new category with which to evaluate belief, and as a number of atheists were alarmed to point out, it was the fastest growing category on the spectrum.

Conclusion: We demand cheerfulness!

The response of the Soviet atheist establishment—philosophers and sociologists of religion, party representatives, and ordinary propaganda cadres—to the call for improvements in atheist education provides an illuminating perspective on how ideologists understood the war between two opposing worldviews. More importantly, it also reveals their awareness about the limitations of scientific atheism and their attempts to grapple with its shortcomings. Undoubtedly, the Institute’s labors over the course of the 1960s were considerable and not without results. The information the ideological elite received on Soviet religiosity from ethnographic studies was greater in quantity, and higher in quality, than ever before. Atheist education was theorized and applied on an unprecedented scale, and some systematization in ideological work allowed a more accurate evaluation of its effect, which in turn called for revisions in both theoretical approaches and in policies. Cadres trained at the Institute of Scientific Atheism went on to prestigious, and often long, careers in education, cultural and enlightenment work,⁸⁶¹ academic and research positions, and political administration. And naturally, a great number of graduates moved into state and Party organs—both in the central apparatus and on the local level across the Soviet Union.⁸⁶² Inasmuch as their Institute training informed their work, it influenced religious policy in the final decades of the Soviet period. Finally, many of the sociologists, historians, and philosophers trained at the Institute continued to shape the study of religion in the post-Soviet period, as well as influence the confessional politics

⁸⁶⁰ RGASPI, f. 606, op. 4, d. 67, l. 29.

⁸⁶¹ For example, graduates went on to head the Departments of Political Enlightenment in regional Party organs in Buriat autonomous republic, Krasnodar region, and Kazakhstan and to hold top positions in republican organs of the “Knowledge” Society. See RGASPI, f. 606, op. 4, d. 231.

⁸⁶² A significant number of graduates came from, and ended up in, Ukraine. The Institute also trained cadres who went on to work in Party organs across the country. The Institute also prepared several instructors in the Propaganda Department of the Central Committee among whom are: Vil'ma Mikhailovna Kuvneva, G. N. Plechev, N. M. Puchkov, S. S. Slabodianiuk, V. A. Saprykin. For an insider's account of ideological work in the field of religion, see the interview of Nikolai Mitrokhin with V. A. Saprykin, “Obydennoe soznanie liubit prostye resheniia...”: Beseda Nikolaia Mitrokhina s Vladimirom Aleksandrovichem Saprykinym,” *Neprikosnovennyi zapas* 3, no. 59 (2008): 135-147.

of the Russian state.⁸⁶³ Yet whether Soviet atheist education produced results, and whether those results were the ones desired by the producers, are two distinct questions. Could the efforts of atheists be considered successful on their own terms? Why, for example, was indifference so troubling to atheists?

Over the course of the 1960s, the explicit goals of atheist education evolved: while initially success was measured by decline in religiosity (for instance, by decreasing amounts of religious rituals), by the end of the 1960s the landscape of Soviet belief had changed. “Indifference” emerged as a qualitatively new phenomenon that precipitated a reconsideration of the categories used to understand religion. Moreover, alongside indifference, atheists also encountered diverse and eclectic forms of Soviet religiosity and spirituality. All of this forced Soviet atheists to articulate their ideals and reconsider their goals. If the objective of Soviet ideologists were secularization—an institutional separation between politics and religion, as well as the loss of religion’s authority in the private worldviews of individuals—then “indifferent” subjects should have been considered a sign of success. Yet, on the contrary, some suggested that indifferent citizens were even more problematic than believers. In part, this was because the ultimate aim of Soviet atheism did not stop at the destruction of religion’s institutional and philosophical authority. Rather, scientific atheism sought to fill the “empty spaces” produced by antireligious measures with a Soviet cosmology and Soviet values?. Recognizing the power of religious emotions and practices—a power especially concentrated in religious rites—atheists tried to offer Soviet people an “emotionally saturated” atheist worldview and captivating socialist civic rituals.

Through the rest of the Soviet period, atheists struggled at this task, and continuously tried to understand why their work did not produce the desired effect. Yet as early as the late 1960s, certain voices among the Soviet ideological elite began to articulate the suspicion that the very foundations of Soviet scientific atheism were flawed. At an all-union conference on the atheist education of youth, for instance, I. I. Brazhnik, the deputy chairman of the Council on Religious Affairs, shared a story about his own experiences in the atheist campaign that had become “engraved into his memory for life.”⁸⁶⁴ Local authorities in Checheno-Ingushetia had brought to his attention that “sectarian children” were getting transferred from one school to another, and asked Brazhnik to inquire into the situation. When he asked the local Council representative why the children were now on their fifth school, he was told, “These children are reserved (*zamknuty*), they do not socialize with other children, they avoid participating in social organizations and do not join the pioneers, whereas the school demands cheerfulness (*trebuet ot nikh zhizneradostnosti*).” When the conference participants laughed in response to his story, Brazhnik simply replied, “Your laughter shows that there is nothing further to explain.”⁸⁶⁵

⁸⁶³ RGASPI, f. 606, op. 4, d. 231. Prominent graduates and researchers of the Institute include, among others, E. G. Filimonov, V. I. Garadzha, N. M. Gordienko, G. M. Kerimov, R. A. Lopatkin, A. G. Maslova, G. A. Nosova, and Iu. P. Zuev. A number of the Institute’s graduates now work at the Department of State-Confessional relations of the Russian Academy of State Service (RAGS) under the President of the Russian Federation (*Kafedra gosudarstvenno-konfessional’nykh otnoshenii Rossiiskoi akademii gosudarstvennoi sluzhby pri Prezidente Rossiiskoi Federatsii*).

⁸⁶⁴ RGASPI-m, f. 1, op. 34, d. 130, l. 35.

⁸⁶⁵ Ibid.

Epilogue

Questions Without Answers

On June 22, 1965, at a conference that gathered the directors of atheist institutions from across the Soviet Union, a representative from Leningrad shared a story with fellow atheists. In the small village of Lisii nos, located on the northern shore of the Gulf of Finland, a worker at a local factory passed away. The worker, a veteran laborer, was reputedly an unbeliever, therefore the factory directors and the representatives of the local Party committee and labor union (*profsoiuz*) agreed that he would have a civil funeral (*po-grazhdanskii*), with a civic gathering (*s grazhdanskim mitingom*) and a memorial (*panikhidoi*) at the local cemetery. The wife of the deceased informed the factory leadership that she would make arrangements to get the coffin to the cemetery. By the time the factory collective arrived at the cemetery—the Leningrad atheist informed his colleagues—the priest of the Lisii nos church, Oleg Bekarevich, was performing a religious service over the grave of the deceased. The factory collective waited for the service to conclude, but when it did, they began to “bicker” (*prepirat'sia*) amongst themselves about who would give a speech about their deceased comrade. And while they continued to bicker, Oleg Bekarevich decided to diffuse the situation, which was naturally becoming uncomfortable, “displaying how well he had mastered what he had been taught at the theological academy.” Bekarevich was intimately familiar with the life of the deceased, and—the Leningrad atheist added—probably much more so than his comrades or the factory leadership. Bekarevich spoke about how the deceased had been a family man; about the kind of children he had raised, listing all of them by name; about how wonderfully he had kept the small plot of land attached to his house (*priusadebnyi uchastok*); and about how he had been a good neighbor. He finished by telling those gathered that he would not speak about the deceased as a worker, since if he had not been a good worker, so many people would not have gathered to send him off. After such a speech by the priest—the atheist concluded—“neither the comrades, nor the labor union committee, nor the directorship of the factory—no one dared to open their mouth.”⁸⁶⁶

The story told by the cadre from Leningrad points to the predicament of Soviet scientific atheism. The religion that atheists fought, largely through press and lecture propaganda, was not, as they insisted, an opponent of progress, enlightenment, and humanity, but, as atheists themselves came to acknowledge, a complex, dynamic and modernizing phenomenon. Moreover, while atheists believed that the Soviet experiment had largely marginalized religion in public life, stories like the one of the Lisii nos funeral forced them to concede that it continued to play a crucial role in people's private lives. In particular, the Leningrad atheist told the story to

⁸⁶⁶ Rossiiskii gosudarstvennyi arkhiv sotsial'no-politicheskoi istorii [henceforth RGASPI], f. 606, op. 4, d. 37, ll. 76-77.

highlight that religion concentrated its attention on precisely those areas that had been overlooked by atheism—on the home, the family, and on the rituals that helped order people’s lives. Atheists were often lost when faced with everyday difficulties, whereas religious representatives were trained to satisfy the spiritual needs of the communities they served. “The art of preaching is meticulously taught in the theological academy,” the Leningrad atheist observed, and Oleg Bekarevich, the priest of Lisii nos, demonstrated how well he knew not just the deceased, but the members of his family and all of their affairs.⁸⁶⁷ He showed how he could “adapt to the circumstances.” Such adaptability, many atheists observed when they became familiar with the Soviet religious landscape, could be noted about religion in general. The Leningrad atheist proposed that, in response to the pressures of modernity, religion concentrated its energies, above all, on “keeping believers in the church”—and it achieved this with rituals that gave meaning to life and, of course, death.⁸⁶⁸ What answer could Soviet atheism offer to life’s questions, and especially to life’s final question?

The Trouble With Religion

In the early 1970s—almost two decades since the regime had again raised the religious question in the Khrushchev era, and almost a decade after the failures of Khrushchev’s antireligious campaign had precipitated a revision of atheist approaches and the creation of the Institute of Scientific Atheism—Soviet atheism again became the subject of the Party’s attention. As the Party struggled to contain the fallout from the 1968 events in Czechoslovakia, the emergence of the Soviet dissident movement, the stagnation of the Soviet economy, and the fatigue with ideology that began to be observed among the country’s citizens, it became increasingly evident that the construction of Communism would not take place on the timeline proposed by Khrushchev in 1961.⁸⁶⁹ As a result, after a period of relative neglect of ideological issues in the mid-late 1960s, the Brezhnev regime consolidated its own program of “developed socialism,” and called for an intensification of ideological work.⁸⁷⁰ Using the familiar formulation, Brezhnev’s vision of ideological renewal, put forth at the 24th Party Congress in March 1971, was concentrated on the formation of the new Soviet person whose “communist morality and outlook are consolidated in constant and uncompromising struggle with survivals of the past.”⁸⁷¹ In an unpublished Central Committee resolution that shortly followed the congress

⁸⁶⁷ Ibid.

⁸⁶⁸ Ibid., 86.

⁸⁶⁹ Vladislav Zubok, *Zhivago’s Children: The Last Russian Intelligentsia* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2009); John Anderson, *Religion, State and Politics in the Soviet Union and Successor States* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 74-75. “As the more conservative tendency came to dominate from late 1965 onwards public discussion of the religious question lessened. Yet the nature and development of the Brezhnev leadership ensured that debate would not entirely cease. In part this stemmed from a lack of a strong ‘ideological’ impulse comparable to that of the Khrushchev era, an absence which served to reduce the pressure on the anti-religious community to toe a single line. But it also stemmed from the more incremental style of policy making during the 1960s and 1970s which inclined to fine tuning in response to problems as they emerged. Such an approach to decision making increasingly allowed for a greater degree of consultation and provided more opportunities for various ‘lobbies’ to canvas their views.” Anderson sees this as evidence of “nuances and differing emphases that suggest conflicts beneath the surface.”

⁸⁷⁰ See Mark Sandle and Edwin Bacon, eds. *Brezhnev Reconsidered* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2002).

⁸⁷¹ *The 24th Party Congress of the CPSU—Documents* (Moscow, 1971), 100-101. Quoted in Anderson, 75.

on 16 July 1971, “On the intensification of atheist work among the population” (*ob usilenii ateisticheskoi raboty sredi naseleniia*) again criticized those in the Soviet ideological establishment for their unmilitant attitude towards religion. In particular, the Party drew attention to the intelligentsia’s reluctance to participate in the atheist project and their ambivalent stance on religion, evident in their “idealization” of religious culture and customs in the spiritual history of the country, and to the persistence of communist participation in religious rituals. As the resolution stressed, the abandonment of the “administrative excesses” prevalent in the Khrushchev era did not mean an abandonment of the battle against religion—of tenacious traditions and practices and unscientific worldviews.⁸⁷²

If these concerns sound frustratingly familiar, it is because they were, and indeed were recognized as such at the time by the Soviet atheist establishment. But finding themselves again at the center of the Party’s attention and as the subject of the Party’s criticism forced atheists in general, and the Institute of Scientific Atheism in particular, to take stock of their work.⁸⁷³ By the 1970s, Soviet atheists had gathered an unprecedented amount of data on Soviet religiosity, yet the picture revealed by the statistics and sociological studies compiled by the Council on Religious Affairs and the Institute of Scientific Atheism was troubling. Despite decades of administrative and propaganda campaigns against religious organizations and believers, and even efforts to offset the influence of religion with “positive” atheist measures, religion continued to remain an integral part of Soviet life. Atheists saw evidence of this in, among other things, the continued vitality of the church, and the fact that religious ritual observance remained high in many parts of the Soviet Union and in some areas was even on the rise.⁸⁷⁴ As Aleksandr Okulov, the director of the Institute of Scientific Atheism observed at an Institute meeting with the Moscow regional Party committee, “Millions of people still are still drawn to religion (*tianutsia k religii*). In Moscow *oblast’* every other newborn is baptized. In certain regions this percentage is higher and growing. We need to make sense of this, because this is a big, serious problem for government and dialectics.”⁸⁷⁵ Forced to again evaluate their work, atheists had to acknowledge that most of their assumptions about religion, and most of their approaches to atheist education, were flawed. After more than fifty years of Soviet power, many questions remained unanswered.

Taking stock of their educational efforts, atheists recognized that sociological studies provided vast amounts of empirical data, but that the time had come to move beyond the “simple gathering of facts” and “naked empiricism,” in order to make general conclusions.⁸⁷⁶ Nevertheless, while they continued to debate about how to interpret their findings, atheists made numerous valuable observations about the Soviet religious landscape, and perhaps even about the dynamics of modern religiosity in general. To begin with, sociological materials compiled by the

⁸⁷² Anderson, 110. Anderson proposes that these questions came up at the beginning of the 1970s as part of Brezhnev’s effort to consolidate a distinct ideological program. This is when the phrase “developed socialism” comes into use.

⁸⁷³ RGASPI, f. 606, op. 4, d. 104. 12 November 1970 Central Committee resolution “On the Academy of Social Sciences of the Party Central Committee” criticized the work of the Institute of Scientific Atheism in particular.

⁸⁷⁴ Rossiiskii gosudarstvennyi arkhiv sotsial'no-politicheskoi istorii-m (formerly Tsentr khraneniia dokumentov molodezhnykh organizatsii) [henceforth RGASPI-m], f. 1, op. 34, d. 129, l. 22. Statistics showed that, in 1965, 23.8 per cent of children born in the Soviet Union had been baptised, and in many areas, the numbers were much higher (such as Ukraine and Moldova where baptisms were at 51.5 and 57 per cent, respectively). In Central Asia, 90 per cent of Muslim boys were circumcised.

⁸⁷⁵ RGASPI, f. 606, op. 4, d. 106, l. 104.

⁸⁷⁶ RGASPI, f. 606, op. 4, d. 103, l. 12.

Institute and its local bases definitively confirmed the troubling suspicion that the Soviet population was far more religious than the Soviet leadership had supposed, a revelation that undermined the customary vision of religion as a phenomenon in decline, a “survival” of the past.⁸⁷⁷ Instead, in 1968 Okulov cited statistics compiled by the Council on Religious Affairs which showed that “despite the intensification” of atheist work, religiosity was on the rise in as many as 30 regions in the country, including Moscow. Religion, moreover, remained vital and continued to attract believers and educate clergy, with 560 theological dissertations defended in Russian Orthodox institutions between 1958-1968. “The Church is not laying down its arms and not leaving the field of battle,” Okulov warned, and atheist cadres, therefore, could not to “fall into a state of anabiosis.”⁸⁷⁸ By 1971, the situation only seemed to get worse. In even the most developed regions in the country, as many as 40-50 per cent of newborns were being baptized—Moscow, Gorky, Kharkov, Penza, Kursk, among others—yet, as Okulov acknowledged, “we are unable to give serious, concrete recommendations that could significantly enrich our propaganda. And there are many such questions.”⁸⁷⁹ Thus, after almost a decade of atheist efforts, the Institute’s leadership was again asking why it was that there were such high levels of religiosity in such a “cultured and politically developed (*politicheski zreloi*) country.”⁸⁸⁰

In part, of course, the problem was in the question itself, and some began to note that familiar Marxist formulas failed to explain Soviet patterns of religiosity. Soviet believers, atheists observed, were young as well as old; men as well as women; educated and even members of the intelligentsia, as well as the “unenlightened” masses. They were also party members and exemplary laborers, as well as socially marginal elements like alcoholics, “parasites” (*tuneiadtsy*), and fanatical “sectarians,” and urban residents living in central Soviet cities, as well as rural folk and inhabitants of the country’s distant peripheries. Some observed, moreover, that not only was religion not “dying out” with the construction of the country’s material base, but it seemed to have a generally unpredictable relationship with economic development. Some suggested that whereas Marxist formulas presented religion as a product of poverty, perhaps spiritual needs did not decline, but in fact *grew*, with the rise of material well-being. A cadre from Moldova, for instance, reported that religiosity seemed to be highest in rich villages: “Comrades! What is going on here? We attempted to study economic markers of the village, and came to the conclusion that with the rise in the well-being of Soviet people, with high levels of material satisfaction, with the improvement of the quality of life (*uslovii zhizni*), [Soviet people’s] spiritual needs (*dukhovnaia potrebnost’*) also rise, and we must satisfy them.”⁸⁸¹

What exacerbated the atheist predicament was that such observations did not just pertain to villages in Moldova, but were also noted in the country’s center. A. Plekhanov, the Moscow

⁸⁷⁷ This observation appears repeatedly in the archives of the Institute of Scientific Atheism, and is confirmed by Iu. P. Zuev, who sees these conclusions as “critically important” (*printsipial’no vazhnykh*), in his article on the Institute of Scientific Atheism. Iu. P. Zuev, “Institut nauchnogo ateizma (1964-1991),” *Voprosy religii i religiovedeniia. Antologiiia otechestvennogo religiovedeniia* 1 (2009): 9-34. http://religio.rags.ru/journal/anthology1/a1_1.pdf (last accessed September 18, 2010). For the complete overview of the Institute of Scientific Atheism-Institute of Religious Studies, see *Voprosy religii i religiovedeniia. Antologiiia otechestvennogo religiovedeniia* 1-4 (2009): <http://religio.rags.ru/journal/archive.php> (last accessed September 18, 2010).

⁸⁷⁸ RGASPI, f. 606, op. 4, d. 72, ll. 76-77.

⁸⁷⁹ RGASPI, f. 606, op. 4, d. 103, ll. 13-14.

⁸⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, 14.

⁸⁸¹ RGASPI, f. 606, op. 4, d. 105, ll. 77-78.

city representative of the Council on Religious Affairs, reported that between 1971 and 1976, more than 400,000 religious rites—baptisms, marriages, and funerals—had been registered in the city of Moscow alone.⁸⁸² These figures, moreover, did not include those Muscovites who managed to avoid registration of ritual observance, or who performed rituals in other regions in order to avoid detection and repercussions in their native city.⁸⁸³ It also did not factor in, Plekhanov observed, how many people were exposed to religion through witnessing and participating in others' religious rites. If one counted just four people as participants in every religious rite, the minimum number required for a religious baptism or marriage, then 80,000 people could be assumed to have participated in religious rituals in Moscow between January and September of 1976 alone.⁸⁸⁴ And rituals were not the only manifestation of religiosity. Plekhanov also reported that an inspection of atheist work in Moscow's Krasnogvardeiskii district turned up several "holy wells" in the city's Kolomenskoe park, to which believers would make "pilgrimages" from the center of the city in order to procure "holy water."⁸⁸⁵ In light of such observations, atheists had to concede that despite their efforts to depict religion as a "survival" that occurred amongst uncivilized peoples on the edges of modernity, religion was not, in fact, a phenomenon that took place "elsewhere." Rather, it was a vital element of Soviet life that manifested itself in complex ways, even at the very center of the socialist Soviet Union.

The Trouble with Atheism

As Soviet atheists tried to move beyond "naked empiricism," make sense of sociological findings, and gauge the overall effect of atheist measures, one thing became clear: everyone involved was frustrated with atheist work. The Party leadership was frustrated because while atheist work continued to produce questionable results, atheists themselves continued to spin their wheels. As Emil' Ivanovich Lisavtsev, the Central Committee Propaganda Department member in charge of religious questions, complained at a 1971 meeting of the Institute of Scientific Atheism, atheists were, in effect, asking the same questions over and over, yet offered no resolutions.⁸⁸⁶

The atheist elite, on their end, was frustrated because the very foundation of their work continued to remain unclear. Indeed, as the Institute gathered to discuss the direction of atheist work in light of Party criticism, it became evident that there was not even agreement on the most fundamental question of all: what constituted atheism?⁸⁸⁷ Everyone generally agreed that, in theory, atheist work was made up of two component parts—religion and atheism—which they characterized as "negative" and "positive" respectively, but when pressed on the issue, few could articulate what this meant in practice. The prominent Soviet philosopher of religion Dmitrii Modestovich Ugrinovich,⁸⁸⁸ for instance, suggested that atheism was more than just the criticism

⁸⁸² Tsentral'nyi arkhiv goroda Moskvyy [henceforth TsAGM], f. 3004, op. 1, d. 101, l. 166.

⁸⁸³ *Ibid.*, 51-52. Just to give an example, between January and August of 1975, 26 children from Moscow were baptized in Gorky region.

⁸⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, 166.

⁸⁸⁵ TsAGM, f. 3004, op. 1, d. 104, ll. 202-204.

⁸⁸⁶ RGASPI, f. 606, op. 4, d. 103, ll. 80-81.

⁸⁸⁷ RGASPI, f. 606, op. 4, d. 103.

⁸⁸⁸ D. M. Ugrinovich (1923-1990) was a professor of Philosophy who concentrated on the sociology of religion at Moscow State University. He also completed his undergraduate and graduate studies in the Philosophy Faculty of

of religion, and urged atheists to distinguish the “negative” criticism of religion (what Ugrinovich referred to as “religious studies” (*religiovedenie*)), from atheism’s “positive” components.⁸⁸⁹ But even as cadres insisted on the need to emphasize positive over negative components, the positive content of atheism continued to remain vague.⁸⁹⁰ There was significant discord in universities, for instance, about whether scientific atheism should be part of the higher education curriculum, and if so, how it could best be incorporated: as part of the philosophy department, in the social sciences, or as an independent discipline?⁸⁹¹ In summarizing the dilemma, Il’ia Diomidovich Pantskhava,⁸⁹² the chair of the department of the Theory and History of Atheism at Moscow State University, quoted Teodor Il’ich Oizerman, professor of Philosophy at Moscow State University, who argued against incorporating atheism into the Philosophy department: “Scientific communism, sociology, ethics, aesthetics, atheism are not philosophical disciplines. With regards to atheism, the profile of this discipline is completely unclear to me. If you take away the conclusions of dialectical and historical materialism, then the only thing that remains of it is history.”⁸⁹³ On the other hand, in light of the fact that atheist measures did not seem to produce results, some cadres insisted that the Institute need to continue to focus on religion, in order to understand why it persisted and come up with measures to “overcome” it. This emphasis on religion, atheists began to realize, put them in a peculiar predicament, the nature of which was pointed to by Lisavtsev, who complained that the Institute had to “seriously rework” its research plan for the next decade, “so that it becomes the plan of the Institute of Scientific Atheism, and not the Institute of Religious Studies.”⁸⁹⁴

Researchers who studied religion and atheism were also frustrated. As they gathered material, they began to note that perhaps they had been asking the wrong questions, which had in turn led them to ineffective approaches. These concerns became evident, for example, in a sociological study conducted in Penza region that investigated “the process of secularization in conditions of socialist society.” Conducted over the course of two years (1967-1969) by the Institute of Scientific Atheism and the Penza regional Party organs, and led by INA deputy director P. K. Kurochkin, the Penza study was the most ambitious Soviet sociological project to date, becoming a model for future projects.⁸⁹⁵ Researchers examined prerevolutionary and early Soviet historical and ethnographic materials about religious life in the region, and surveyed the

Moscow State University. For a brief overview of his professional career, see A. P. Alekseev, A. M. Korshunov, P. A. Rachkov, “Kafedra filosofii gumanitarnykh fakul’tetov: Itogi 50-letii i novye zadachi,” *Vestnik Moskovskogo universiteta. Filosofii* 7, no. 6 (2003): 3-20.

⁸⁸⁹ RGASPI, f. 606, op. 4, d. 103, l. 15.

⁸⁹⁰ *Ibid.*, 43. The historian M. P. Gapochka, for instance, called for the entire emphasis of the Institute’s work to be on the positive side of atheism, “on the issue of forming a scientific worldview in developed socialist society.”

⁸⁹¹ RGASPI, f. 606, op. 4, d. 62, ll. 8-15.

⁸⁹² I. D. Pantskhava (1906-1986) formed the department of the History and Theory of Atheism in the Philosophy Faculty of Moscow State University in 1959. Pantskhava spent more than twenty years as a professor at Moscow State University, where he trained several prominent scholars of atheism and religion, such as I. G. Ivanov, V. I. Garadzha, I. N. Iablokov, and V. D. Timofeev. He specialized in the history of religion and dialectical materialism, and of particular interest for this dissertation, also in “worldview” subjects, such as the meaning of life, death, and immortality. For instance, see his *Chelovek, ego zhizn’ i bessmertie* (Moscow, 1967) and *O smerti i bessmertii* (Moscow, 1972).

⁸⁹³ RGASPI, f. 606, op. 4, d. 62, l. 15.

⁸⁹⁴ RGASPI, f. 606, op. 4, d. 103, l. 57.

⁸⁹⁵ For a general background of the Penza project in the context of Soviet sociological studies, see V. Garadzha, “Sotsiologiya religii,” in *Sotsiologiya v Rossii*, 2nd edition, ed. V. Ia. Iadov (Moscow: Izdatel’stvo Instituta sotsiologii RAN, 1998).

contemporary situation by interviewing over 30,000 people. At the conclusion of the project, the results were presented to the Party Central Committee.⁸⁹⁶ Yet as V. G. Pivovarov, one of the core members of the Penza research group, observed, conducting surveys to determine religiosity as well as drawing broader conclusions from such surveys presented cadres with numerous difficulties. “If we determine that the complex of religious consciousness, of religious behavior, is the basis of sociological research, then what do we mean by religious consciousness? We take belief in God, belief in the immortality of the soul. But if this can even be formulated, how do we transfer the meaning of the investigation onto a document, and from a document, to a person’s everyday consciousness?”⁸⁹⁷ Pivovarov also brought attention to another difficulty. Unlike other researchers, atheist sociologists could not approach their subjects directly with the questions that interested them: “We are interested in religion and atheism, but we have to mask this in some way.”⁸⁹⁸ Finally, Pivovarov noted that there was ultimately a disconnect between what atheists were asked to research, and their ability to explain what they actually found on the ground. “Sometimes, what is demanded of a sociological research project is something that the given project cannot provide,” Pivovarov observed. “For instance, in Penza, a report was demanded on the reasons for religiosity. But the *reasons for religiosity* were not studied in Penza (italics mine).”⁸⁹⁹ Instead, researchers in Penza searched for evidence of secularization in order to provide practical advice to atheist cadres about how to produce a “society free of religion.”⁹⁰⁰

Because researchers continued to struggle in their attempts to offer practical advice, local-level atheist cadres were also frustrated, and criticized the atheist leadership for failing to provide guidance. This became evident at the numerous conferences convened by the Institute of Scientific Atheism to discuss atheist work with regional Party organs. Addressing Party representatives, Okulov stressed the centrality of atheist work in the Soviet ideological complex, but observed that more and more, this work centered on overcoming religion as a “psychological complex, a system of actions, culture and ideas,” and the Institute was “increasingly burdened (*naviazivaiut*) with the problem of man, the problem of morality.”⁹⁰¹ Yet local reports revealed that even the most basic issues remained unresolved. N. N. Kryshko, the chairman of the atheist council at Moscow’s “Red Banner” factory complained that while the Institute posed questions and constituted facts, it did not offer answers and practical solutions.⁹⁰² Another cadre responsible for atheist work in the Moscow regional Komsomol organs pointed to questions that continued to remain answered: “From the point of view of Marxism, religion stems from poverty and ignorance (*nishchety i nevezhestva*), but today we are rich and live relatively well, but people continue to go to God (*idut k bogu*).”⁹⁰³ The youth, he noted, continued to be interested in religion, to perform rituals, but atheists did not know what to do when they “encountered this question in practice”: “So we know that the wedding ritual is very necessary and very good, but it is not as solemn and festive (*torzhestvennyi*) as in the church, even if there is some

⁸⁹⁶ RGASPI, f. 606, op. 4, d. 92.

⁸⁹⁷ RGASPI, f. 606, op. 4, d. 114, l. 23.

⁸⁹⁸ Ibid., 26.

⁸⁹⁹ Ibid., 28.

⁹⁰⁰ The findings of the Penza study were published as *K obshchestvu svobodnomu ot religii (Protseess sekularizatsii v usloviakh sotsialisticheskogo obshchestva)* (Moscow, 1970).

⁹⁰¹ RGASPI, f. 606, op. 4, d. 106, ll. 10-11.

⁹⁰² Ibid., 27.

⁹⁰³ Ibid., 45.

emotionality and solemnity in it. And what about other rituals? It should not be just atheists who work on these issues.”⁹⁰⁴ Meanwhile, G. S. Orlova, the principal of a Zagorsk school who also served as an atheist lecturer, reported that atheist education in schools was stagnant. “Take a plan from ten years ago, and you will see the same points that appear in current plans,” Orlova noted. “Why? Because people do not know what to do, or rather, they know *what* to do, but they do not know *how* [to do it].”⁹⁰⁵ At another meeting, Ch. S. Varich of the Moscow regional Party committee called on scholars to determine criteria of religiosity, which continued to remain unclear. Was religiosity to be measured by church income—he asked—by rituals, or the presence of icons?⁹⁰⁶ An atheist from Estonia called for new atheist material, complaining that lectures from the early-mid 1960s were unusable.⁹⁰⁷ But it was Orlova who summed up the general sentiment of Party cadres involved in the atheist project: “Life demands concrete answers to concrete questions.”⁹⁰⁸

Finally, everyone was frustrated with the Party leadership, because as atheist work approached religion from different angles, the Party’s position continued to oscillate, oftentimes leaving local cadres behind. One cadre complained, for instance, that atheists on the ground had no clear guidelines on which to base policy. Atheists in his region had persecuted a “religious fanatic” in court, but when the party line changed they were suddenly held accountable for “violating freedom of conscience.”⁹⁰⁹ The deputy director of the Institute of Scientific Atheism, V. I. Evdokimov, meanwhile, relayed that after a recent meeting of the Institute’s Scientific Council convened to discuss the principles of atheist education, one cadre exclaimed in frustration that if before at least the general direction of atheist work was “more or less clear,” then “now nothing [was] clear at all (*teper’ voobshche nichego ne iasno*).”⁹¹⁰

The Trouble with the Ritual Question

The area where things were especially unclear—and that reveals the atheist predicament more than anything else—was rituals. Underneath stern pronouncements, even the position of the Soviet leadership was not straightforward. On the one hand, Soviet propaganda was consistent in criticizing participation in religious rituals as a sign of ideological passivity. This was especially when those taking part were Party or Komsomol members, as indeed, over the course of the Khrushchev campaign and after, the leadership had to continue to devote considerable effort to disciplining Party cadres themselves. The 16 July 1971 Central Committee resolution on the intensification of atheist work drew attention explicitly to the conciliatory attitude of party and enlightenment cadres to religious beliefs and practices, seeing evidence of this, above all, in communists’ participation in religious rites and the intelligentsia’s ambivalence about being involved in the atheist project, which the Party leadership saw in their “idealization” of religious

⁹⁰⁴ RGASPI, f. 606, op. 4, d. 106, l. 42.

⁹⁰⁵ Ibid., 33.

⁹⁰⁶ RGASPI, f. 606, op. 4, d. 72, l. 53-56.

⁹⁰⁷ Ibid., 56.

⁹⁰⁸ RGASPI, f. 606, op. 4, d. 106, l. 37.

⁹⁰⁹ RGASPI, f. 606, op. 4, d. 72, l. 72-73.

⁹¹⁰ RGASPI-m, f. 1, op. 34, d. 129, l. 48.

thought and customs in the country's spiritual history.⁹¹¹ The Soviet public likewise encountered regular *Pravda* editorials that criticized ideological indifference on religious questions, and especially communists who “publicly supported atheism yet behind closed doors participated in religious rites.”⁹¹²

But behind closed doors, the ideological leadership itself had a hard time articulating a firm line on religious ritual participation. This was especially the case over the course of the Brezhnev era, as the Party's position on religion in general became more complicated, in part under international pressure to respect freedom of conscience and believer's constitutional rights. For instance, at a 1967 all-union conference that provided the directors of Houses of Atheism the opportunity to meet with the Party leadership face to face, a local cadre asked M. A. Morozov and E. I. Lisavtsev, the Central Committee Propaganda department cadres who oversaw religious questions, whether it was still permitted to criticize communists and those not in the Party in the local press for participation in religious rites, and asking “how to best handle such a delicate affair.”⁹¹³ “With regards to this delicate issue there is a directive from Lenin,” Lisavtsev answered. “He is for expelling those who participate in religious rituals from the Party. As for publications, we have never shied away from openly criticizing our own deficiencies. This speaks of our strength, not of our weakness.”⁹¹⁴

Yet while Lisavtsev and Morozov had a consistent stance in both public pronouncements and internal discussions, others in the antireligious establishment were more hesitant on taking a hard line.⁹¹⁵ Faced with a similar question at an all-union seminar on the atheist education of youth, I. I. Brazhnik, the deputy chair of the Council on Religious Affairs provided a more nuanced response.

I can cite many examples where Komsomol cards are presented [at a baptism] because there is no other document, whereas one must present documents at a baptism so as to be sure that the baptism is being performed with the permission of both parents, so that the rights of the parent who does not want to baptize are not infringed upon (*ushchemlialis*). And such baptisms exist, because grandmothers, grandfathers, mothers-in-law baptize despite the protests of the parents. There are many incidents of unreligious parents baptizing children, the reasons [behind this] are varied, and responses in such incidents should likewise be varied. There is one level of demands and punishment for communists and Komsomol members, and another for those not in the Party.⁹¹⁶

⁹¹¹ Anderson, 109-110. The intelligentsia's ambivalence about the atheist project was a consistent complaint within the atheist community, as even writers who had once supported the atheist cause, like Vladimir Tendriakov, backed away from their involvement in Soviet atheism. See “Ob oshiboch'nykh otsenkakh religii i ateizma v nekotorykh proizvedeniakh literatury i isskustva” in RGASPI, f. 606, op. 4, d. 98, ll. 9-21.

⁹¹² *Pravda*, 15 September 1972. Quoted in Anderson, 110, 115-116. As Anderson points out, the return of the Party's interest to religion and atheism in 1971 precipitated a sharp rise of topical propaganda articles in the press, as well as in the amount of lecture propaganda.

⁹¹³ RGASPI, f. 606, op. 4, d. 68, ll. 4-8.

⁹¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 8.

⁹¹⁵ Morozov and Lisavtsev, for instance, co-authored a *Pravda* editorial on the Party's position on religion and atheism on 12 January 1967. Quoted in Anderson, 109.

⁹¹⁶ RGASPI-m, f. 1, op. 34, d. 130, l. 52.

But then another local Komsomol cadre asked Brazhnik a further question: “If a Party member’s elderly mother or father is a believer, and before dying, the mother or father asks the son to bury them with a priest, should a communist fulfill this last request?” Brazhnik answered, “I think that he should.”⁹¹⁷ What this exchange points to is that the problems Soviet atheism encountered in the ritual sphere had both a political and a practical significance.

And as a practical problem, rituals affected everyone, from ordinary citizens who needed to bury their deceased in the village of Lisii nos, to representatives at the very top of the antireligious establishment itself. As A. Plekhanov, the Moscow representative of the Council of Religious Affairs reported to Vladimir Alekseevich Kuroedov, the Council’s chairman, in 1974, a prominent employee of the Council arranged a religious funeral for his deceased father in Moscow’s Troitskaia church, and several other Council members were in attendance.⁹¹⁸ Again and again, then, it was made clear to atheists that when the occasion called for it, people were lost without the order provided by the religious worldviews, rituals and officials.

For the Soviet regime, rituals, and especially rituals connected to death, were not just a political or a practical problem, but a philosophical dilemma that went to the heart of the contradictions that plagued Soviet ideology. “We cannot ignore such a natural law (*prirodnoi zakonomernosti*)—that we are powerless to change [and] that leads to the tenacity of religion—as human mortality,” observed V. I. Evdokimov at the same all-union seminar on the atheist education of youth where Brazhnik drew attention to the problem.⁹¹⁹ In light of this, Soviet atheists continued to make optimistic pronouncements affirming their commitment to satisfying spiritual needs in general, and ritual needs in particular. As A. F. Okulov wrote in *Voprosy nauchnogo ateizma*,

All aspects of man’s spiritual life have, in the past, been tied, in one way or another, with the Church and religion. And the main thing is that religion gave a concrete, all-encompassing worldview (*opredelennoe, vseokhvatyvaiushchee mirovozzrenie*), even if an antiscientific one. Overcoming religion, in this sense, is not just simply the rejection of it (*ee otritsanie*). It is replacing an antiscientific worldview with a scientific one, [it is replacing] conservative traditions with new ones, freeing healthy folk (*narodnykh*) traditions and customs (*privyчек*) from their religious casing (*obolochki*).⁹²⁰

Indeed, as Okulov’s emphasis makes clear, Soviet atheists saw the effort to fill sacred space with “positive” Soviet content to be the determining factor in the war against religion, and the distinguishing characteristic of Soviet atheism. Above all, as atheists recognized the crucial importance of rituals in the continued vitality of religion, they concentrated their energies on the project of replacing religious rites with socialist rituals.

And pronouncements like Okulov’s did not just appear in publications intended for external consumption, but were also present in closed internal discussions. For instance, at an INA meeting, the historian of religion Vladimir Filatovich Zybkovets noted that “communist

⁹¹⁷ Ibid..

⁹¹⁸ TsAGM, f. 3004, op. 1, d. 99, l. 56.

⁹¹⁹ RGASPI-m, f. 1, op. 34, d. 129, ll. 34-35.

⁹²⁰ A. F. Okulov, *Voprosy nauchnogo ateizma* 4 (1967): 449-450. Quoted in Zuev, 28.

atheism can be distinguished from bourgeois or other kinds of atheism in that it is a positive atheism. We do not just battle against religious rituals, but, in rejecting religious rituals, we also propagandize and strengthen communist unreligious customs, since we cannot do without such customs. People died and will continue to die, and they must be buried. People were born and will continue to be born. I am speaking about civic rituals, without which society cannot manage.”⁹²¹ Yet there were numerous obstacles to resolving the ritual problem, not least of which had been suggested by I. A. Galitskaia, who, pointing to the ways in which religion offered solace and order in the face of chaos, grief, and death, asked: “But what kind of solace is there, when they say that you are mortal but matter is eternal?”⁹²² What kind of answer could atheists give to this question in light of their war against not just religion, but all reference to the supernatural. Even as they stressed the need to address the “ideological vacuum” produced by their battle against religion, in practice Soviet efforts to articulate a “positive” atheism (which rested on their ability to solve the problem of death and rituals) continued to falter. What Galitskaia’s question suggested was that perhaps atheist “truth” offered no solace, which, as in *Lisii nos*, left Soviet people speechless and disoriented—without an answer to life’s final question.

Questions Without Answers

By the early 1970s, religion—or, more concretely, the persistence of religiosity in the center of world socialism—began to be seen as a barometer of ideological conviction that pointed to unwelcome trends, and in particular, to the decay of the Soviet ideological cosmos. What had merely been suggested by a local cadre in the mid-1960s—that religion was “a form of scepticism [...] a vacuum that is formed out of disillusionment with our ideological values”—was increasingly, though still mostly tacitly, acknowledged.⁹²³ Soviet atheists, and the ideological establishment in general, observed “indifference” spreading among the population. They charged sociologists with making sense of this undesirable phenomenon, and enlightenment cadres with making it disappear, largely through what began to be spoken about as the “cultivation of conviction” (*vyrabotka ubezhdennosti*).⁹²⁴ As B. N. Konovalov reported to the leaders of the INA local bases in 1971, “Atheist education cannot just be reduced to work among believers. It carries broader functions, the whole population needs it, and it seems that we should include [within it] the cultivation of atheist conviction.”⁹²⁵

But for atheists, one of the problems that continued to present itself was that indifference was observed not just in the population at large, but within the atheist camp itself. Indeed, as Konovalov suggested, the two problems were of course related. He noted that in evaluations of

⁹²¹ RGASPI, f. 606, op. 4, d. 14, l. 104. V. F. Zybkovets (1908-1973) was one of the most prominent historians of religion in the Soviet period to have participated in atheist education. He worked at the Institute of History of the Soviet Academy of Sciences, and had numerous publications, including, *O cherno i belo magii* (Moscow: Politizdat, 1963), *Chelovek bez religii* (Moscow, 1967), *Proiskhozhdenie npravstvennosti* (Moscow, 1974), and *Natsionalizatsiia monastyrskikh imushchestv* (Moscow, 1975).

⁹²² RGASPI, f. 606, op. 4, d. 12, ll. 35-36.

⁹²³ RGASPI-m, f. 1, op. 34, d. 108, l. 14.

⁹²⁴ See, for example, I. U. Gurov, ed. *Molodezhi—ateisticheskuiu ubezhdennost’: sbornik* (Moscow: Molodaia gvardiia, 1977).

⁹²⁵ RGASPI, f. 606, op. 4, d. 105, l. 10.

cadre training conducted at local bases, central cadres discovered that despite the “enormous amount of energy and resources” devoted to training atheists, only 30-50 per cent actually went on to conduct atheist work. More generally, Konovalov observed that atheist work on the local level was not taken seriously, and to illustrate his point, described what happened during central atheists’ survey of local Party work: “They come to the party organization and ask who is responsible for atheist work? They name Ivan Ivanovich. And why him, and not someone else? Oh, because if you assign organization work to Ivan Ivanovich, he will mess it all up (*ee zavalit*). If you give him party enlightenment [tasks], he will also mess it up, but here there is nothing to do, so that is why we assigned it to him.”⁹²⁶ A representative from the Institute’s local base in Stavropol’ outlined the problem in greater detail.

We are missing criteria for atheist conviction. Why are we all atheists? A person says, “I do not believe in God,” and is considered an atheist. But can a person be considered a convinced atheist (*ubezhdennym ateistom*) if he think that atheist work in our country is not an urgent issue (*ne aktual’na*), that religious issues are the lot of just a few people. People who say, “You know what, atheism can wait, we have more urgent matters.”

Can we really consider such people convinced atheists?! From such views there is but one step to actions like baptizing a son or daughter, or having [a son] circumcised, and when you ask [them], how could this have happened, then you hear in reply that this “atheist” was on a business trip, and the child was taken to the village and everything was done without his agreement. And it is possible to find thousands of such excuses. And this is what the degree of atheist conviction consists of, so that such things could never happen. [...]

And in this way you get a paradoxical situation [...] when a famous writer or literary figure does something like this. But how many are there who are not famous and who have such opinions and in certain circles expound the view that the issue of atheism is not particularly urgent.⁹²⁷

Or, as another cadre noted, “[Local cadres] say, what is religion, no one will particularly criticize for this (*osobenno rugat’ ne budut*), whereas for something else they will.”⁹²⁸

Complaints also began to be heard among atheists that local indifference was the result of central negligence. Okulov noted that despite mentioning the importance of cultivating a scientific worldview, the 24th Party Congress did not place emphasis on atheist topics.⁹²⁹ This in turn signaled to local organs that atheism was no longer a priority, and V. Shteyn, the leader of the Institute’s local center in Kazakhstan lamented that in 1971, it was “much more difficult for our questions to be heard (*probivat’ nashi voprosy*) than in 1964.”⁹³⁰ By the early 1970s, the

⁹²⁶ RGASPI, f. 606, op. 4, d. 105, l. 13.

⁹²⁷ Ibid., 25-26.

⁹²⁸ Ibid., 89.

⁹²⁹ Ibid., 98.

⁹³⁰ Ibid., 64. John Anderson likewise notes this paradox of propaganda activation and declining emphasis: “Most of the educational and propaganda programmes developed during the Brezhnev years had their roots in Khrushchev’s anti-religious campaign. [...] Despite this continuity there is some evidence to suggest that the drive and enthusiasm declined once the centrally directed campaign came to an end. An increasing number of specialists were working in this field, yet the 1971 Central Committee resolution could complain of a general weakening of effort in educational

frequency of observations like these made atheists realize that they were in a curious predicament. The same Party that had assigned them their mission seemed to be backing off from direct confrontations with religion, and therefore, from support of atheist work.

Yet just as the Party seemed to become increasingly hesitant in its pursuit of the antireligious agenda during the late Soviet period, atheists, on their end, grew ambivalent about the relationship between their work and the Party's political program. By the late 1970s, sociological research revealed that the population's religiosity was not declining, and indeed, in some areas, continuing to increase; that the number of males in religious communities had increased; and that believers on the whole had gotten younger and more educated. Atheists also observed that religiosity was not only the product of the inertia of social pressure, custom, and tradition, but also "manifested in a deeply considered (*gluboko osoznanaia*) and actively defended (*aktivno otstaivaemaia*) worldview."⁹³¹ In light of such trends, some among the atheist elite began to reconsider the relationship between their scholarly and political interest in religion, as well as their own role in the political program of the Party. In 1979, during a discussion of Institute's Scientific Council on "The direction of scientific atheist education in contemporary conditions" (*O postanovke nauchno-ateisticheskogo vospitaniia v sovremennykh usloviakh*), the Institute's leadership asked whether the "connection of Party organizations to atheist issues and [the problem of] overcoming religion did not appear too rigid and simplistic (*slishkom zhestkoi i priamolineinoi*)" and wondered how atheist propaganda could overcome this harshness that "over-emphasiz[ed]" (*vyiachivaniia*) the religious question.⁹³² Certainly, alongside the influences of sociological findings and political trends, Soviet atheists must have also been led to reconsider their work by their own encounters with the lived experience of Soviet spiritual life (broadly defined). These experiences raised questions to which Soviet atheists still struggled to provide answers, and this predicament increasingly seemed to undermine their commitment to the atheist mission. As the executive editor of *Science and Religion*, Olga Brushlinskaia reflected fifty years after the founding of the journal, an atheist pursuing the enlightenment of the masses also had to be "certain that the believer, who becomes an atheist thanks to you, will be happier for it."⁹³³ And that, of course, remained an open question.

Finally, with the onset of reforms under Mikhail Gorbachev, Soviet atheists themselves began to abandon Soviet atheism. In light of the transformations in Soviet public life underway during perestroika, the Party and the atheist establishment had no choice but to revise their position on religion, but the approaching millennium of Christianity in Rus' in 1988 also provided the occasion to reconsider the meaning and future of religion in the Soviet Union. In April 1988, shortly before the millennial celebrations, Gorbachev met with the Holy Synod of the Russian Orthodox Church, and in December 1988, the Institute of Scientific Atheism hosted

institutions and instruct the relevant ministries to remedy this." Anderson, 113.

⁹³¹ Zuev, 21.

⁹³² RGASPI, f. 606, op. 4, d. 224, ll. 3-4. In his historical overview of the Institute's work, Iu. P. Zuev draws attention to this same discussion, although it seems to me that Zuev's emphasis on liberalization is slightly misleading, since the language used by the Kurochkin, the Institute's deputy director, implied that the main concern was whether the connection of the Institute and the Party did not "appear" (*vygliadit*) too "straight-forward," something that Kurochkin noted was of particular concern in the international arena.

⁹³³ On the journal's transformation from a Soviet propaganda organ into a forum for discussion, see the interview with Olga Brushlinskaia in Mark Smirnov and Pavel Krug, "V zashchitu svobodomyслиa: Ispolnilos' polveka zhurnalu 'Nauka i religii,'" *Nezavisimaa gazeta*, 21 October 2009, http://religion.ng.ru/events/2009-10-21/2_magazine.html (last accessed September 7, 2010).

a round table on “Problems of freedom of conscience in conditions of the democratization of Soviet society.” Gathering together representatives of all major confessions in the Soviet Union, the round table discussed the equality of believers and unbelievers in the Soviet Union, the legal status of religious organizations, and the “equality of atheist and religious propaganda” in light of the “pluralism” advocated during *glasnost*.⁹³⁴ In October 1990, the Soviet regime adopted a new All-Union Law on Freedom of Conscience.

Ultimately, then, the story of Soviet atheism is deeply ironic. As the Soviet experiment wound down, the primary atheist mass publication, *Science and Religion (Nauka i religiia)*, became a source of information about the country’s religious history and customs, and in turn a mechanism of religious revival.⁹³⁵ In 1990, after extended discussion, the section of “scientific atheist propaganda” of the RSFSR “Knowledge” Society changed its name to the section of “religious studies and free thought (*religiovedeniia i svobodomyслиia*).”⁹³⁶ Some of its members insisted atheists needed to reject “those stereotypes that we ourselves created,” while others insisted that they needed to determine exactly what of their “heritage” they should reject (*ot kakogo nasledstva my otkazyvaemsia*).⁹³⁷ Everyone discussed what function the section would serve in the country’s future and how the political transformations under way might influence the focus and the content of atheist work. Some even debated whether a scientific atheist section—indeed scientific atheism itself—needed to exist at all.⁹³⁸ “It is now clear to everyone that we never had socialism, and that the system in which we exist is itself the reason that religious issues have become so strained (*obostreniia religioznykh voprosov*),” one member suggested.⁹³⁹ Gradually, scientific atheists turned into historians, sociologists, and philosophers of religion. In July 1991, the Institute of Scientific Atheism became—in spite of Lisavtsev’s objection—the Institute of Religious Studies (*Institut religiovedeniia*), and by November 1991, it officially ceased to function—along with the Party’s Academy of Social Sciences (AON) and, of course, the Soviet Communist Party itself.⁹⁴⁰

⁹³⁴ For an overview of the liberalization of Soviet confessional politics, see Anderson, 137-200. On the round table organized at the AON, see Iu. P. Zuev, “Doklad: Institut nauchnogo ateizma,” Vserossiiskaia konferentsiia v RAGSe, <http://www.rusoir.ru/2009.php?action=view&id=486> (last accessed September 18, 2010).

⁹³⁵ Olga Timofeevna Brushlinskaia, interview with author, Moscow, Russia, 7 December 2008. Brushlinskaia began her career with the journal in 1970 as a correspondent and is currently its executive editor. For an insight into the ways the Party influenced the journal’s work, including the ideological oversight of the journal by E. I. Lisavtsev, see “Dva chlena redkollegii zhurnala byli rabotnikami TsK KPSS’: Beseda Nikolaia Mitrokhina s Ol’goi Timofeevnoi Brushlinskoi,” *Neprikosnovennyi zapas* 3, no. 59 (2008), <http://magazines.russ.ru/nz/2008/3/dv15-pr.html> (last accessed September 9, 2010). On the role of *Science and Religion* in the revitalization of religion in contemporary Russia, see Kira V. Tsekhanskaia, “The Icon in the Home: The Home Begins with the Icon,” in *Religion and Politics in Russia: A Reader*, ed. Marjorie Mandelstam Balzer (New York: M. E. Sharpe, 2010), 18-30. On the journal’s transformation from a Soviet propaganda organ into a forum for discussion, see the interview with Olga Brushlinskaia in Mark Smirnov and Pavel Krug, “V zashchitu svobodomyслиia: Ispolnilos’ polveka zhurnalu ‘Nauka i religiia’,” *Nezavisimaia gazeta*, 21 October 2009, http://religion.ng.ru/events/2009-10-21/2_magazine.html (last accessed September 7, 2010).

⁹³⁶ Gosudarstvennyi arkhiv Rossiiskoi Federatsii [henceforth GARF], f. A-561, op. 1, d. 3178.

⁹³⁷ GARF, f. A-561, op. 1, d. 3178, l. 4.

⁹³⁸ *Ibid.*, 17.

⁹³⁹ *Ibid.*, 4.

⁹⁴⁰ Discussions about changing the name and orientation of the Institute’s work began in the late 1980s, and culminated in the 4 July 1991 Central Committee order that officially changed the institute’s name to the Institute of Religious Studies. When the Institute officially ceased to exist, many of its functions (and researchers) were

The story told in this dissertation suggests that perhaps the failures of Soviet scientific atheism are intimately connected with the failure of Marxism-Leninism. It also suggests that, as a result of their experience with Soviet religiosity and their efforts to replace religion with a “positive” atheism, atheists became aware of the bigger implications of their failures. By the end of the Soviet period, the atheist elite itself outlined the nature of these failures. As S. A. Kushinskii, the director of the Leningrad Museum of the History of Religion and Atheism, one of the country’s most important atheist institutions, shared with his colleagues on January 20, 1989:

Issues such as good and evil, conscience, justice, and retribution found a reflection in the historical mission of religion.

There were no other forms in which [these issues] manifested themselves. Religion, in potentiality (*v potentsii*), promises to solve the problem of humanity (*problemu cheloveka*). One cannot reproach the Church for not answering these questions. Religion positioned itself as the conferrer of rewards (*stoiiala v poze otlichitel'ia*). This is why it keeps to this position for 1000 years and people do not grow tired of it.

Marxism also presented itself as a general theory of humanity, a new civilization, the image of the new man. The bid was certainly serious (*zaiavka byla ser'eznaia*), but the results do not correspond to the claim. Life revealed its problems. All the reproaches that are made about socialism-communism found their reflection in the authority and standing of atheism. Atheism is the new civilization’s calling card.⁹⁴¹

Atheists struggled to fill “sacred space” with Soviet content, but they gradually lost confidence in their efforts, and finally lost faith in the mission itself. They also realized that their failures revealed a crucial flaw in the foundation of Soviet ideology: its neglect of spiritual concerns, both in existential terms and in everyday life. Ultimately, neither scientific atheism nor Marxism-Leninism could make death irrelevant, and the regime could not figure out how to properly bury the dead.

transferred to the Department of State-Confessional relations of the Russian Academy of State Service (RAGS) under the President of the Russian Federation (*Kafedra gosudarstvenno-konfessional'nykh otnoshenii Rossiiskoi akademii gosudarstvennoi sluzhby pri Prezidente Rossiiskoi Federatsii*). see Iu. P. Zuev, “Doklad: Institut nauchnogo ateizma,” Vserossiiskaia konferentsiia v RAGSe, <http://www.rusoir.ru/2009.php?action=view&id=486> (last accessed September 18, 2010).

⁹⁴¹ GARF, f. A-561, op. 1, d. 3163, l. 9.

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Kyïv

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