

Jenny Vorpahl and Dirk Schuster (eds.)

Communicating Religion and Atheism in Central and Eastern Europe

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This book contains articles analysing how the Marxist sociology of religion and scientific atheism influenced the production of knowledge about religion in the communist countries of Eastern Europe and its post-1989 remnants. According to the editors, the scope of the book was “to extract characteristics of the legitimization processes and changes emerging in the religion-related discourses actually operating in these societies” (1). The individual articles are case studies describing various social institutions or processes from Eastern Germany (five articles), the Soviet Union, Croatia (each two), Romania, Czechoslovakia, Hungary, and Poland (each one).

Most of the texts (8 out of 13) concern the pre-1989 period, analysing how the attachment of ordinary people (often workers) to religion was dealt with scientifically and politically. The religiosity of ordinary people in the communist states was more than a social problem; it placed in question the credibility of Marxist doctrine and the legitimacy of the state. Marxism was not only the ideology of the socialist countries, but aspired to be a science that discovered the objective laws governing societies. One of these laws asserted that people’s attachment to religion was due to capitalist oppression; hence, if this oppression disappeared, the conditions pushing people towards religion would disappear and religion itself would dissolve. Capitalism was overthrown, yet people’s attachment to religion did not dissipate at the expected pace. This posed a dilemma for Marxists: either the theory or the reality was mistaken. The ultimate choice is well known. The book contains texts showing in detail how, in practice, various measures were taken to match the social reality to the doctrine and give a new scientific and political sense of religion.

The chapters by Dirk Schuster („The rise and fall of the ‘Marxist sociology of religion’ in the GDR”), Johannes Gleixner („Beginnings of a Soviet sociology of religion and the (anti-) religiosity of Muscovite workers [1925–1932]”) and Kseniya Kolunova („Rejected but not forgotten: Scientific atheism’s concepts in contemporary Russia”) show the reluctance of Marxist scientists to admit that full atheisation, at least in the short term, was not possible, and that visible religiosity was being replaced by „vague religiosity,” as Gleixner describes it using Nipperdey’s term. This did not change people’s beliefs; instead, the value of empirical research was questioned. Both texts – one concerning the GDR and the other the Soviet Union – show how, while succumbing to terror or political pressure, scientists hid survey results containing uncomfortable data in their archives, abandoned empirical research, and became promoters of the atheistic worldview.

In the following texts, the authors describe how the communist state gave up the pursuit of rapid forced secularisation and adopted a strategy that promoted atheistic and scientific worldviews as the functional equivalents of religion, creating various social institutions to advertise these ideologies. The text by Johann E. Hafner („From indoctrination to testimonials: The book gifts for Jugendweihe in the GDR and reunified Germany”) contains an analysis of the *Jugendweihe* in the GDR, the rituals associated with it, and the content of the books concerning it. Jenny Vorpahl (in „Proletarian culture does not fall from heaven: Patterns of legitimation in the reception of ritual traditions in the GDR”) analyses secular weddings.

The attitude towards religion is changing. The Marxist doctrine defining religion as the opium of the masses remains valid, but religion is inscribed in new contexts—on the one hand, to legitimise its presence in socialist states and, on the other, to neutralize its transcendent codes. Manuela Möbius-Andre („Christian heritage in the art policy of the German Democratic Republic“) observes, using the concepts of tradition and heritage in art, how religious content is inscribed in a cultural context, in which its fundamental importance is weakened and humanistic and aesthetic values are brought to the fore. A similar process of transforming religious meanings is illustrated by Daniel Schmidt in his text „Distancing, defamation, criminalisation: Religion-related vocabulary in GDR dictionaries“. The author analyses philosophical encyclopaedic dictionaries and reconstructs different strategies for neutralising religious content through decontextualisation and historicisation. Zdeněk R. Nešpor, in the text „(Un)willing fellow or enemy? The public discourse on religion in Czechoslovakia in the first two decades of communist rule and the divergent responses of the churches“, takes a broad view and conducts a content analysis of opinion-leading newspapers and journals over two decades (1945-1969), following the transformation of the Czechoslovakian state doctrine towards religion (especially the Catholic Church and wider religious institutions) in public discourse. The author shows how the communist authorities used traditional Czech anti-clericalism to discredit religion.

The last five articles deal with the period after the fall of communism and study various consequences of blurring the boundaries of religion in post-communist countries. Alexandra Coțofană's „The Importance of a meaningless 1989: Romanian political theologies and the religious left“ enquires how left-wing politicians combined socialist and religious identities. Anna Vancsó („Religion in the public and private sphere: Changes in religious knowledge in Hungary since 1945“) reconstructs the interpenetration of politics and religion in Hungary. Both texts show that one legacy of communist times was (or still is) the blurred meaning of religion, which makes it susceptible to various interpretations to support short-term political purposes.

The final three chapters (Ankica Marinović, „Transfer of knowledge about atheism and new religious movements: An analysis of religious instruction textbooks in public schools in Croatia“; Nikolina Hazdovac Bajić, „Science as an alternative symbolic universe among members and organisations of non-religious people and atheists in Croatia“; and Marta Kołodziejska, „Religious knowledge as the common ground: The case study of atheists on Catholic online forums in Poland“) analyse the meanings that atheism has acquired in Croatia and Poland. Both these countries – Catholic and with strong links between religion and national identity – offer, for the authors, an opportunity to analyse the entanglement of contemporary atheists in debates that are surprisingly similar to those of the past. Non-religiosity is defined from the perspective of the past and has a normative character, representing an anomaly in such officially religious countries.

This book discusses a wide range of topics and historical periods. Contrary to the editors' statements in the introduction, it is difficult to discern a common theoretical perspective and methodology in the individual texts; however, this is not a shortcoming. One of the unquestionable advantages of the book is the enrichment of the approach to the development of religious studies and the sociology of religion from the perspective of the sociology of knowledge. From a historical perspective, this issue has been thoroughly described – in the case of science and philosophy in the work of Loren Graham, and regarding the sociology of religion in the Soviet Union by Sonja Luehrmann (2015). Against this background, the originality of the book *Communicating Religion and Atheism in Central and Eastern Europe* lies in the fact that the individual texts show how the development of religious research was entangled in the paradoxes of Marxist doctrine and Communist state policy.

The book also provides a great deal of new information for those interested in the secularisation process in Central and Eastern Europe. Individual texts show that it is impossible to describe the politics of communist countries simply as brutal forced secularisation. No doubt, this took place in the initial stages of the implementation of the Soviet system in certain countries, but was usually followed by a modification of the policy and an adaptation of the communist apparatus to the specifics of each country. Individual states applied, at different times, a mix of police and ideological pressure, ignoring religion or trying to replace it with an acceptable substitute.

REFERENCE

Luehrmann, Sonja. 2015. *Religion in Secular Archives: Soviet Atheism and Historical Knowledge*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
