

Paul Froese

The Plot to Kill God. Findings from the Soviet Experiment in Secularization

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The subject of Froese's book is the suppression and re-emergence of religion in the former Soviet Union, and its central argument is that religion re-emerged as a consequence of the monopoly position that religious communities had held in different regions. Religion was suppressed under communism; however, religious belief persisted during the time of persecution, and, with the support of state structures, the religious monopolies came to life again after the end of the Soviet regime. Because of the readiness of the monopolistic religious communities to co-operate with the ruling political structures, the significance of their role lies not so much in meeting religious demands, and more in making the link between national and religious belonging.

In order to prove this, Froese, a sociologist of religion, uses insights from sociological research. He limits himself to literature and findings in English (although I do not share his view (p. 14) that there exists "a wealth of data" on the Soviet secularization experiment in the languages of the former Soviet Union – there is a certain amount of research, but few sociological data). After an overview of the history of religion in the Soviet Union, Froese offers a conceptual outline of secularization. He describes the ideological background of Soviet atheism and the measures taken by the regime to suppress religion. In case studies of religious Orthodoxy, Roman Catholicism, and Islam, Froese describes the continued significance of religion and the state's intensive fight against it through the tactic of "shutting off religious supply" (which is the title of chapter 3). After this, Froese deals with the attempt by the Soviet regime to replace religious needs with belief in scientific progress and in the possibility of controlling the world. Here, the organized forms of atheism play a special role. Then Froese deals with the re-emergence of religion after the end of communism and explains this re-emergence through a description of the activities of thousands of engaged pastors; for the phenomenon of renewed religious life, he applies the monopoly theory mentioned above. However, the data used are highly disputable (e.g. in Table 10, exact percentages of religious membership for each Soviet republic in 1970 and in 1995 are given, but without any sources). Froese admits that this theory is hardly applicable to Muslim regions, and that it still requires some expansion. Finally, the book closes with a brief look at other contexts (Western Europe, the USA, and China).

Froese's book offers much information and many insights; unfortunately, though, it also has many shortcomings – conceptual, factual, and formal. On the conceptual level, Froese's intention is not always clear. He presents many facts, but it is not always easy to see a clear line in his argumentation. He deals with the "Soviet experiment", but also writes sometimes about Poland, Hungary and Eastern Germany, cases where the Soviet model cannot simply be applied. His idea concerning monopoly religion is not convincing, especially when areas with complex religious situations (e.g. the Ukraine, Estonia) are not viewed appropriately. He mentions the factor of (national) identity but does not systematically take into account its consequences for religiosity. And, he does not discuss enough the problems of a parallel treatment of Orthodoxy and Islam. Most seriously, though, Froese studies religion almost without considering historical circumstances, path dependencies, and the concrete circumstances of

the region he is working on. It is not appropriate to deal just with the Soviet republics, though they are highly differentiated within themselves. Some facts which might seem strange or difficult to understand can simply be explained with reference to history.

On the level of facts, there are many inaccuracies – not so much major errors, but many minor mistakes. Froese does not mention the law of 1990 (when he discusses the law of 1997); a phrase such as “The Roman Catholic Church also suffered enormously under Soviet rule, especially in the Ukraine, Romania and Eastern Germany” (p. 75) is strange, since it neglects the Greek Catholic Church, and countries like Czechoslovakia and Hungary (if we disregard the fact that, of these countries, only the Ukraine was under Soviet rule); Froese does not take into account the historical circumstances which led to Orthodox churches still functioning in the Ukraine in 1940 (the Western part of the country had belonged until 1939 to Poland, where the Church enjoyed relative religious freedom, and was only then occupied by the Soviet Union, p. 45); it is problematical to characterize the Rerikh movement and the Great White Brotherhood as “new religious groups” that have sprung from (among others) “New Age belief” (p. 145). And what is said about Armenia on p. 151 and especially in note 27 (p. 214) is misleading, to say the least: the “setback” suffered by the Armenian Church was the 1915 genocide, which took place in the Ottoman empire, and not in what was to become Soviet Armenia, while the widespread Armenian diaspora originated much earlier and was due to completely different reasons.

With regard to formal defects, there are many repetitions (the fact that Lithuanians are predominantly/mostly/overwhelmingly/generally Roman Catholic can be found at least on pp. 9, 35, 73 and 107). Sometimes phrases are repeated almost word for word (pp. 49 and 122). The author claims on the same page (p. 78) that, prior to the 1917 revolution, “religion in Russia had been dominated by an extremely weak ... institution” and then, some lines later, that it was “transformed overnight from a powerful extension of the monarchy to a reeling giant”. On p. 146, Froese offers a table of 25 Western missionary organizations in 1995 in the (former) Soviet Union and the number of their respective missionaries. This amounts to 3,190 individuals, and the author mentions in the text on the previous page “over three thousand missionaries”. However, by simply adding the numbers, we come to a figure of 2,979 missionaries. In short, a thorough checking of the text by an editor would have been helpful.

The book, therefore, is both good and bad. While containing many interesting facts and thoughts, it does not present them in a comprehensive way, and the main idea behind the book is not convincing.
