

RELIGION IN THE FORMER SOVIET UNION: ITS MANIFESTATIONS, TRANSFORMATIONS AND ROLES

That the demise of the Soviet Union triggered a religious revival, which has had a profound impact on the region, is no longer news. Even if the research of the last two decades has not nearly filled the vacuum, modern researchers of religion in the post-Soviet space are in a completely different situation from twenty years ago. During this period many scholars from the region participated in international conferences on the research of religion and became members of international academic organisations. The changes also manifested themselves in the education of a new generation of religion scholars in the former Soviet Union. This situation has led to new insights about religious development in the former Soviet Union and its comparison with other societies of Central and Western Europe.

This special issue of RASCEE invited young scholars working on religion in the former Soviet Union to contribute and suggest new approaches to religion in this area.

One common trait among the contributions is a dismissal of a strong secularisation thesis. All the contributions address the observation, taken from qualitative as well as quantitative data, that religion is not disappearing. Whether the focus is on an individual level, as with Ekaterina Grishaeva and Anastasiya Cherkasova's study of religion among university students in Russia, on the group level as with Marika Laudere's study of Buddhist groups in Lithuania, or on the societal level as with Andrea Filetti's study of the connection of religion and politics in Azerbaijan and Georgia, the conclusion is that religion in general and its role in particular is changing through the modernisation processes, rather than disappearing.

Another common trait of these contributions is an awareness of how the history (and not just recent history) of the region has shaped the religious life and worldview of the region. The references to Soviet history and the restrictions of religious freedom at the societal level, together with the preservation of individual religious practices, are evident from these contributions.

A final common trait is that the conclusions of the articles depict a post-Soviet region, which is part of the European hemisphere when patterns of religions are analysed. On the one hand there is the same strong affinity between nationality and religion as seen in the rest of Europe; while on the other hand, the traditional religions are under pressure, as individualised religious practices and a multiplicity of religious movements take root in the former Soviet Union.

This special issue contains three contributions. Starting at the individual level, Ekaterina Grishaeva and Anastasiya Cherkasova analyse the religiosity of Russian university students and describe how secularisation processes affect their religious views and behaviours. The authors' research is based on interviews with students at universities in Ekaterinburg between 2010–11. In their study Grishaeva and Cherkasova found a pattern of religion, comparable with what similar studies in Western Europe show: For the larger group ("formally practising" and "spiritual"), religious worldviews are fragmented, individualized, consumer-oriented and eclectic, even though the group mainly self-identifies as Orthodox

Christian. For the smaller group (“actively practising”), religion is an active choice where the tenants and practices of Russian Orthodoxy are studied and lived exclusively. However in Russia the specific traits of recent history, where the religious socialisation was broken for two generations, has had an impact on the religious worldview of the Russian students today, since formal religiosity—but not religious traditions—have been passed on to this generation, thus affecting the internalisation of the religion.

Continuing on a group level, based on fieldwork in Lithuania between 2012–13, Marika Laudere mapped the historical development of Buddhism in the region. In her article she describes the development of the Buddhist groups present in Lithuania—Zen, Kagyu, Gelugpa, and Nyingma. She concludes that Buddhism in Lithuania was already present, although subdued, in Soviet times and notes that it is comparable with the development in the West. Even though some adherents of Buddhism are connected to the regional schools, a substantial part of the adherents are uninterested in Asian culture, but are attracted to the culturally detached religious philosophy and spiritual experience.

Finally Andrea Filetti explored the relation between religion and political attitudes in Georgia and Azerbaijan. In his article he assesses the hypothesised double impact of religion in South Caucasian political attitudes. He builds on the notion of Bloom and Arikan (2012) of religion as a “two edged sword”. On the one hand it has a negative impact on support for democracy because of the inherent contrast between religious and democratic values. On the other hand it has a positive impact on society because a greater engagement in religious practices encourages political and social activism, and hence social capital. In doing this, its influence on both overt and intrinsic support for democracy is tested. Using material from the Caucasus Barometer on questions regarding attitudes toward democracy, trust in parliament/president, voting behaviour, gender issues and tolerance towards sexual minorities, Filetti questions the claim that religion necessarily is an impediment (or an impetus to democratic development). Instead he advocates taking into account of how religion has historically been employed in a given region, and thus discover which possible attitudes are connected with that particular religion.

Instead of offering a conclusion, we would like to say that this special issue should be seen as an invitation for religion scholars from various countries to forget the invisible theoretical boundaries that were created between Eastern and Western Europe, and to see the region of the former Soviet Union as a field for study of religious development through the modernisation process.

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